Uzbekness and Islam: A Survey-based Analysis of Identity in Uzbekistan

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Abstract

The article ascertains orders of preference in Uzbek identity by interviewing just over 200 citizens of Uzbekistan belonging to traditionally Muslim ethnic groupings. While almost everyone considers himself or herself a Muslim, the great majority perceive themselves above all as citizens of Uzbekistan. Moreover, their Islam is not reflected primarily in Islamic practice but rather in a somewhat nebulous Islamic traditionalism. They think, too, that the state should incorporate some minimal Islamic features. In the international arena, they tend to prefer Muslim over non-Muslim peoples and communities, but not necessarily as designations for labor migration. Finally, the focus of their interest is manifestly directed toward other post-Soviet successor states.

Keywords

Uzbekistan – identity – Islam – ethnicity – Uzbekness

Uzbekistan came into being as an independent nation-state with the break-up of the Soviet Union toward the end of 1991, retaining the boundaries of the

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Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. Unlike some of the USSR's 15 successor states, Uzbekistan – like its four Central Asian neighbors – had not had a meaningful national movement through the 1980s. The few nationalistically inclined groups and parties, such as Erk and Birlik, that surfaced in the second half of the decade had put forward nationalist platforms in an attempt to provide an alternative to the established hierarchy that ruled the Uzbek union republic. They had, however, no significant constituency and stood little chance against the well-oiled and politically experienced establishment that took over the new state framework.

Inevitably, one of the tasks of the old-new rulers was to provide the new state with an ideology or collective value system and identity that would supplant the defunct Marxist-Leninist framework.1 This was essential in light of the much-publicized threat of an Islamist takeover such as was imminent in neighboring Afghanistan, where Islamist opposition factions had engulfed the country in civil war, and seemed at one point likely to jeopardize Tajikistan. The Uzbek SSR's Communist Party First Secretary, Islam Karimov, became independent Uzbekistan's first – and so far only – president. Early in the independence era, he encountered a single pocket of serious resistance to his rule, in Namangan in the Fergana Valley. Throughout the Soviet period, the Ferghana Valley had been the main center of popular, non-institutionalized Islam and had from time to time been a major headache for the Communist regime. After a few compromises and concessions, Karimov was able to establish control over that restive area.

Karimov, with his sharp political acumen, opted for a path that was grounded neither in Islam nor in ethnic nationalism. His credo was wholly secular, although he paid lip-service to Islam when creating a new Uzbekistani national identity. While focusing on the Uzbeks, who comprised the over- whelming majority of his citizenry, and on the Uzbek tongue, which became the state language,2 this new identity highlighted the new state's historical heritage as the region's leading body politic, heir to the great Timurid Empire

1 Upon acquiring independence, the Soviet Union's fourteen non-Russian successor states had to embark on nation-building, a process that became caught up "in a form of identity politics … designed to produce and reproduce nationally defined contours of community and to reflect nationally defined interests and values predicated on fulfilling a normative concept of state-hood in which nation and statehood should be spatially congruent." Graham Smith, Vivien Law, Andrew Wilson, Annette Bohr, and Edward Allworth, *Nation-Building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 2.

2 Uzbek officially became the state language of the Uzbek SSR as of 1989; the 1995 version of the Law on the State Language further promoted its status.

of Timurlane.3 Indeed, Timurlane has been adopted as a – if not the – father of the Uzbek nation, "the embodiment of Uzbek national identity."4 He is joined by other illustrious medieval scholars and writers who lived in Central Asia, not necessarily even in the territory of modern Uzbekistan, and have been similarly and anachronistically "annexed," like al-Khwarazmi, al-Farabi, and Ibn Sina (Avicenna).5

To ensure the success of his enterprise, Karimov suppressed the Islamic resurgence of the first half of the 1990s, closed down most of the *madrasas*, or seats of Islamic learning, that mushroomed in this period, as well as a large number of mosques, instituting draconic legislation on the registration of prayer-houses of all faiths. As the great majority of these prayer-houses were mosques, the Muslim faith was necessarily the most affected by these laws. Forum 18, a Norwegian-based human rights organization dedicated to promoting religious freedom and recording religious persecution in the Common- wealth of Independent States (cis) and a number of other countries, reports periodically cases of persecution of Muslims (and adherents of other faiths) in Uzbekistan, mostly on the pretext of Islamic "extremism." At the same time, Karimov incorporated a number of Islamic customs into his new ethos; for instance, he made both Ruza Hayit (`Id al-Fitr) and the first day of Qurbon Hayit (`Id al-Adha),6 the two main Muslim festivals, official national holidays. Adeeb Khalid has shown how even in the Soviet period, when ideologically the two concepts were mutually contradictory, being Muslim was not counterposed by Central Asians to being Soviet, but it meant something specific, "belonging to a local community. … Islam was not a political threat to the Soviet order" but was "subordinated to the terms of public debate." It was therefore not a far-fetched transformation to "co-opt Islam, while controlling it."7

The present article evaluates how much the country's population has internalized Karimov's message and teaching. We hope to be able to gauge the

3 Annette Bohr, "Uzbekistan: Politics and Foreign Policy" (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1998), 20–22. See also Islam Karimov, *Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century: Challenges to Stability and Progress* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997).

4 Elena Paskaleva, "Ideology in Brick and Tile: Timurid Architecture of the Twenty-First Century," *Central Asian Survey*, 34, no. 4 (December 2015): 418.

5 This trend had evolved in the late Soviet period, when "Uzbeks tended to claim the entire heritage of the region as their own," contending that figures such as Abu Rayhan Berumi, Ibn Sina, Alisher Navoiy, and Mirza Ulughbek were all Uzbeks. See Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press: 2007), 96.

6 The festival, in fact, lasts three days. Id al-Fitr is a one-day occasion.

7 Khalid, *Islam after Communism*, 98, 106–107, 115, and 118.

overlap in Uzbekistan of what has been called "imagined" and "real" nation-building.8 We believe that this is a legitimate exercise although we appreciate that the ways in which states – and other organizations – "classify and identify their subjects, citizens, and clients have profound consequences" for their self-understanding.9 In summer 2015, 24 years after Uzbekistan achieved full sovereignty, we conducted a survey among just over 200 citizens in Uzbekistan's various regions to gauge the sense of citizens' self-perceptions on the collective level.

In a previous article, written in 2007 and published in 2009, we surveyed Islamic practice in the Soviet Union's five Central Asian successor states.10 The purpose at the time was to establish which practices the region's inhabit- ants observed with the greatest strictness. We found that the observances that attracted them most were those that were ethnically and socially meaningful. This indicated, as we pointed out, that Central Asians tended to perceive Islam as a basic component of their collective identity even though they did not strictly observe its precepts.

By focusing on Uzbekistan, the region's most populous country with about 30 million inhabitants (including an estimated five million working abroad), and using a very different questionnaire, we hope to understand the place of Islam and ethnicity in the identity of its citizenry.11 We assume that today, as a result of globalization and multi-culturalism, group identity is a very complex and composite phenomenon that allows, even presupposes, a variety of components that need not – but often do – include faith and/or ethnicity. Undoubtedly, the two frequently co-exist, yet, as has been pointed out, given "the multi-dimensional nature of social identification, the salience of particular categories varies under different contexts."12 Islam and "Uzbekness,"

8 Rico Isaacs and Abel Polese, "Between 'Imagined' and 'Real' Nation-Building: Identities and Nationhood in Post-Soviet Central Asia," *Nationalities Papers*, 43, no. 3 (May 2015): 371–372. Unfortunately, this special issue devoted to this topic does not have an article on Uzbekistan.

9 Rogers Brubaker, Mara Loveman, and Peter Stamatov, "Ethnicity as Cognition," *Theory and Society*, 33, no. 1 (2004): 35.

10 Yaacov Ro'i and Alon Wainer, "Muslim Identity and Islamic Practice in Post-Soviet Central Asia," *Central Asian Survey*, 28, no. 3 (September 2009): 303–322.

11 Our study addresses these issues only regarding residents of Uzbekistan. No study has as yet surveyed the level of ethnic and Islamic identification among the country's labor migrants.

12 Brent Hierman, "Central Asian Ethnicity Compared: Evaluating the Contemporary Social Salience of Uzbek Identity in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 67, no. 4 (June 2015): 521.

therefore, are not presented here as dichotomous values or identity components, but as different components of social identity that are understood both by us and our respondents as being mutually compatible. In the words of a social anthropologist, complex identities are formed that may include seemingly contradictory components. In this way, for instance, in Soviet times, people even declared themselves to be simultaneously Soviet, Muslim, and Uzbek.13 We use the term identity in much the same way as it is described by Perry London and Alissa Hirschfeld, "a person's sense of self in relation to others, or … the sense of oneself as simultaneously an individual and a member of a social group."14

We also hope to reveal some of the less conformist or even non-conformist views and positions that can be found in Uzbek social networks. While in more open societies, social networks like Facebook and its Russian counter- part, *Odnoklassniki* (classmates), serve mainly a social purpose, for the younger generation in Uzbekistan, they also serve as a source for information that cannot be obtained through official channels and a forum where non-official views on such taboo topics as Islam can be expressed.15 In the last three or four years, we have seen many posts promoting Islamic virtues such as helping people in need – i.e., the practice of *sadaqa*, charity – and praising Allah for "all the good he has bestowed upon us."16 Facebook is also a stage for expressing Islamic solidarity, especially with the fate of the Palestinians, perhaps because this topic has no local or regional implications.

The Sample

Our sample includes 203 respondents over the age of 18; 118 of them male and 85 female. Some 167 (81.2 percent) are between 18 and 45 years old. There

13 Peter Finke, *Variations on Uzbek Identity: Strategic Choices, Cognitive Schemas, and Political Constraints in Identification Processes* (Oxford, uk: Berghahn Books, 2014), 11.

14 Perry London and Alissa Hirschfeld, "The Psychology of Identity Formation," in David Gordis and Yoav Ben-Horin (eds), *Jewish Identity in America* (Los Angeles: Wilstein Institute, 1991), 33.

15 The Uzbek regime monitors internet traffic and does not allow access to non-censored websites and other content, including even some search terms that are blocked on Google's search engine. Therefore, social networks like "Facebook", which are harder to monitor and also provide a space for interaction between Uzbek citizens and people from other countries, have become an outlet of unofficial information.

16 Most of these posts do not originate in Uzbekistan but come from other Islamic coun- tries; they are frequently "liked" or "shared" by Uzbek citizens.

are 173 people (85.2 percent) defining themselves as Uzbeks, corresponding approximately to the percentage of Uzbeks in the population as a whole, 21 as Tajiks,17 the country's second largest traditionally Muslim group, and eight as Tatars (the sole remaining respondent is a Kabardin). Citizens of Uzbekistan who are not members of a traditionally Muslim ethnic group were excluded from the sample a priori. Respondents come from different parts of the country, with over one-third (76 in all) living presently in Tashkent. Fifty-four of these Tashkentis were born elsewhere, particularly in the Ferghana Valley; residential permits, except for purposes of study,are granted almost solely to inhabitants of either the Ferghana Valley or Khorezm. Of our respondents, 47 reside currently in the city and province of Samarkand, 33 in the Fergana Valley, 24 in Khorezm Province, 20 in Bukhara,and 3 in Navoi.

Before analyzing the responses we received to our set questionnaire, it behooves us to emphasize that a rather large number of people whom we approached refused outright to respond in any way. This refusal to take part in our survey was explained as an unwillingness to answer a questionnaire that somehow related to Islam. Islam is a taboo topic that just cannot be addressed, even though prospective respondents were assured that the answers would remain anonymous. Indeed, we did not ask them their names or require any other identifying data. Be this as it may, the consequence has been that our sample was dictated to a considerable extent not by our choice or by a careful selection so as to match the country's demography, but rather by a not unexpected subjective circumstance. In 2007, we encountered similar difficulties in implementing our survey although at the time our main problem was that respondents simply evaded addressing questions they perceived as unduly sensitive; nobody refused to be interviewed altogether.

There is, of course, another possible explanation for refusing to be included in the survey, namely that it was not motivated by fear of reprisal, but rather the opposite. It cannot be ruled out that those who agreed to participate believed that their views coincided more or less with those of the regime and therefore had little ground for apprehension, whereas citizens who held differing opinions did not wish to divulge them for fear of exposing themselves. Without doubt, there are dissidents in Uzbekistan whose perception of Uzbek identity presents an alternative narrative. This was made evident by the popularity of the poems condemning the massacre in Andijan in May 2005 – "What

17 At least some of those who gave their identity as Uzbek and may indeed be so registered in their documents, are in fact Tajiks who, for a variety of reasons, prefer identifying as Uzbeks.

have you done, you wretches?"; "Blood in Andijan," and "There was a massacre in Andijan."18 Be all this as it may, those who agreed to take part in our survey were basically people who considered it safe because they knew us or our interviewers personally.

Whatever the reasoning behind balking at the idea of being interviewed, even in an anonymous survey, we have to make do with what appears feasible and are knowingly presenting findings that are based on a sample that rep- resents neither the geographical distribution of the population nor its level of education, nor even a full spectrum of standpoints. Thus, for example, our sample has over one-half (54 percent) of respondents who have either completed academic studies or are in the process of studying at an institution of higher learning, these being by and large the people who were prepared to beinterviewed.19

We are, of course, aware that respondents are prone to answer differently to different surveys, but this is a handicap that all surveys have to cope with, not just in autocracies, and we saw no reason to believe that our respondents were less trustworthy than those addressing survey questionnaires in other circumstances. We did, in fact, tell them that the survey was being conducted for academic research outside Uzbekistan; we were told that had they thought the survey was intended for Uzbek academics, they would have refused to answer altogether, for fear of reprisals.20

The interviews were based on a set questionnaire with 22 questions addressing sundry aspects of the respondents' collective identity, in particular the measure of its Islamic component. The questionnaire was written in Russian as we were informed by Uzbek citizens is customary for sociological surveys in Uzbekistan, since Uzbek does not lend itself to many of the subtleties required for addressing some salient points. Frequently, the questions needed to be explained orally to respondents, not a few of whom had little or no knowledge of Russian. All questions provided the interviewee with a choice between two

18 For this poetry and its significance, see Sarah Kendzior, "Poetry of witness: Uzbek identity and the response to Andijon," *Central Asian Survey*, 26, no. 3 (September 2007): 317–334.

19 There has been no official population census in Uzbekistan since the last Soviet population census in January 1989. We are therefore unable to provide any reliable data either for the population's age distribution or its level of education. We are confident, however, that the percentage of those who are studying in institutions of higher learning or have completed such study is well under 54.

20 For some of the problematics of survey research in Central Asia, see Timur Dadabaev, "Introduction to Survey Research in Post-Soviet Central Asia," *Asian Research Trends: New Series*, no. 3 (2008): 45–69.

to four answers. We believe that the data furnish us with a rather good idea of how the inhabitants of Uzbekistan perceive themselves – insofar as they allow themselves to think of such issues. Wherever we found marked differences between age groups or sex, we have specified this; in other responses the differences were insignificant.

Perceived Identity

The three opening questions ask specifically about the respondent's perception of his or her identity. Almost 99 percent (200) said they are Muslims, yetjust 154 (75 percent) consider themselves believers, 46 "believers to a degree," and 3 non-believers (see Figure 1). This is similar to a 2012 Pew Research Center survey of religious commitment throughout the Muslim world that found that in Uzbekistan 97 percent of Muslims believe in God and Muhammad – the*shahada,* the first of Islam's Five Pillars.21

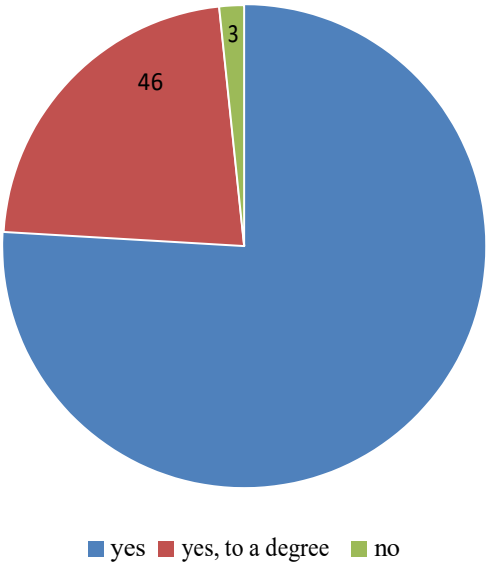

Figure 1
Do you consider yourself to be a believer?

21 "The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity," *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life* (Washington dc: Pew Research Center, September 8, 2012), 7.

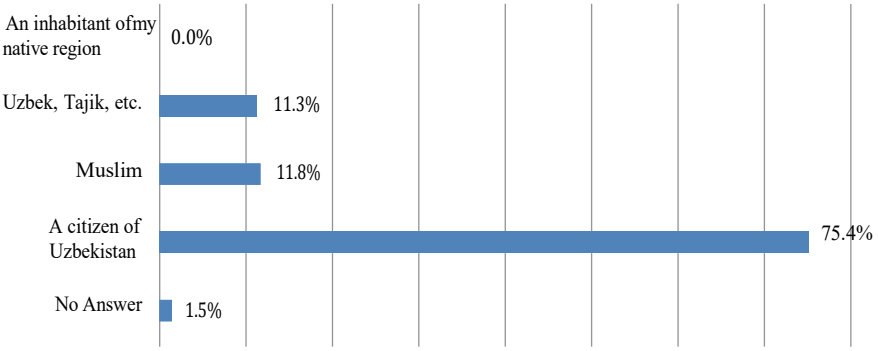

Figure 2 *What do you consider yourself in the first place?*

As shown in Figure 2 above, when asked about the most important element in their collective identity (see Figure 2), 24 (11.8 percent) said Muslim;22 23 (11.3 percent; 21 of them Uzbeks) gave their ethnic affiliation; none opted for the third choice, their regional affiliation (Tashkent, Samarkand, etc.); and 153 – 75 percent – stated they are above all citizens of Uzbekistan (3 did not answer). On the face of it at least – that is, insofar as our respondents felt free to answer truthfully – this is manifestly a victory for Karimov's "nation- building" program.23

We were somewhat surprised that not a single respondent opted for his or her regional affiliation, since the literature has traditionally indicated the importance of localism or regionalism in Uzbek politics. One possible explanation is that a distinction needs to be drawn between the identity of the private citizen and that of the ruling elite, which has been the subject of much of the research and has tended to resort to regional affiliation as a factor or instrument of mobilization for building ruling networks. Another might be that many of our respondents had migrated from their native region to Tashkent. Internal migration in order to receive higher education and/or

22 The Pew survey asked different questions; one of them, however, inquired whether religion was very important in their lives, to which 30 percent answered positively in Uzbekistan. This is a very low percentage compared to other "Muslim" countries, higher only than Albania (15 percent) and Kazakhstan (18 percent). In Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, for example, the figures were 50 percent and 49 percent respectively, *Pew Forum on Religionand Public Life*, 8.

23 See Karimov, *Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century*, especially chapters 8 and 9.

find employment is becoming increasingly common among younger Uzbek citizens.24 A third one may be of not wanting to discuss the regionalism issue with foreigners.

At least one major study of Uzbek identity, however, that appeared in 2014 seems to flatly contradict our finding, attributing major significance to regional variations, particularly in Khorezm. However, this study analyzes differences in the essence of Uzbekness in the various regions, which is a totally disparate perspective.25 A second study, based admittedly on research done in 2003, likewise stresses the importance of localism in social life in addition to "elite mobilization through localism" as "a significant determining factor in the political or professional career of elites."26 Our findings do not refute the significance of localism, but indicate that people do not consider it the most important component of their collective identity.

Islamic Practice

The next two questions inquired about observance of two religious practices. The first asks about mosque attendance (see Figure 3); here we have clearly to distinguish between males and females as in most parts of Uzbekistan women do not attend mosque. Not one respondent reported going to the mosque daily, 21 – 10.3 percent all males go every Friday,27 99 – 48.8 percent – attend

24 One study on Uzbek youth in the 16–17 age bracket contends that a transformation of traditions and actual regional ties is taking place, especially if people live for an extended period outside their region of origin, and goes on to argue that young people in Uzbekistan are prepared to do "anything, anywhere" in order to get out of the cotton fields. "Diora Ziyaeva, "Changing Identities among Uzbek Youth: Transition from Regional to Socioeconomic Identities," Seattle, WA, National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), June 2006.

25 Finke, *Variations on Uzbek Identity*. Moreover, Finke corroborates the main thesis of our study, namely that "The nation state … serves as an extension of the regional focus. On a larger scale all citizens of Uzbekistan become Uzbek – both in a national as well as ethnic or cultural sense." See "Central Asian Attitudes towards Afghanistan: Perceptions of the Afghan War in Uzbekistan," in Robert L. Crawfield, Gabriele Rasuly-Paleczek (eds), *Ethnicity, Authority, and Power in Central Asia: New Games* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 69.

26 Timur Dadabaev, "Post-Soviet realities of society in Uzbekistan," *Central Asian Survey*, 23, no. 2 (June 2004): 148–149.

27 The Pew finding is not meaningfully different – 9 percent (1 percent who go more than once a week and 8 percent who go every Friday) – *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*, 130.

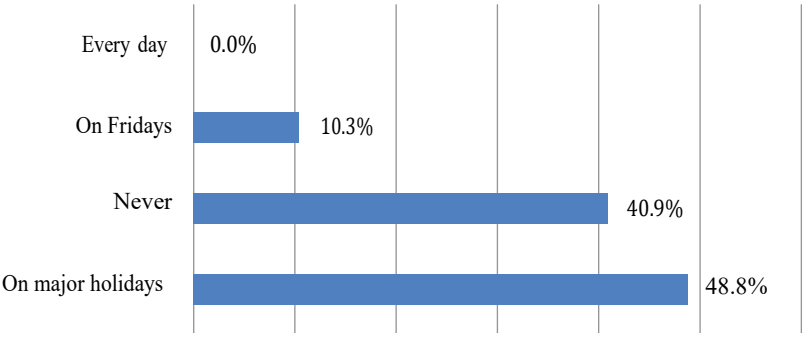

Figure 3 *How often do you attend Mosque?*

mosque "several times a year, on major festivals," and 83 never go. Here there are meaningful differences between age groups and between men and women: while 38 percent of those aged between 18 and 25 go to the mosque several times annually, 60 percent of those above 55 do. Whereas 17.8 of the males at-tend mosque every Friday, 58.5 several times a year, and 23.7 never go to the mosque, the corresponding percentages for females are 35.5 percent who go to mosque on major festivals and 64.5 who do not go at all.28 The percentage for female attendance at the two festivals seems questionable; we were told that throughout Uzbekistan women do not attend mosque at all, except apparently in Bukhara, where in recent years the authorities – representatives of the law enforcement bodies, clergy and *mahalla* (neighborhood) committees – have been urging women to cease attending mosque.29 It seems most probable that female respondents who claim that they attend mosque for festivals are referring rather to shrines and "holy places" which, indeed, according to many testimonies, women tend to visit during the festivals. Were we to have asked specifically about shrine visitation, we would presumably have scored much higher, especially as men, too, perform the *ziyarat* (visitation).30

The second question in this category relates to observance of the fast of Ramadan (see Figure 4), where we found no meaningful difference between the sexes. Thirty-two – a mere 15.8 percent – observe the fast fully,31 110

28 The Pew survey, however, found that 39 percent of males and 93 percent of females never attended mosque. *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*, 48.

29 "Uzbekistan: Women in Bukhara Are Prohibited to Go to Mosques," Ferghana News, August 17, 2009, http://enews.fergananews.com/news.php?id=1324 (accessed October 19, 2015).

30 Our previous survey registered 70 percent of Uzbeks as visiting shrines – 60 percent of the women and 76 percent of the men.

31 Out of the 32 people who say they observe the fast fully, 30 also state that they are "believers"; the other two state that they are "believers to an extent."

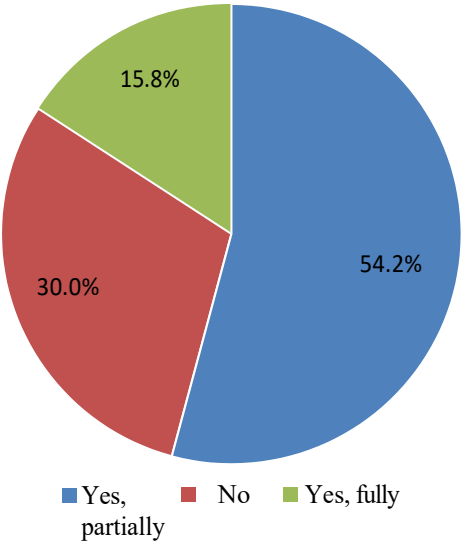

Figure 4
Do you observe the Uraza fast?

(54.2 percent) do so partly ("as much as I can"), and 61 (30 percent) do not observe it at all,32 a figure that includes all those who consider themselves believers to a degree and some who consider themselves believers – without reservation.33

Both these questions are almost identical to questions we asked less than a decade ago. A comparison between the responses we got for Uzbekistan on the first round indicates that then some 20 percent went to mosque every Friday, and more than 30 percent never went at all. As for the fast, we see an oppo- site tendency with only 60 percent observing the fast.34 We asked about these Islamic practices in order to provide a framework of reference. We are well aware that for many young people Islam boils down to giving charity, heeding and respecting one's parents, and "preserving the tradition."

32 Here again the Pew finding is rather different, but so was the question. The survey did not break down the degree of observance of the fast, asking simply whether people fasted or not. Some 50 percent said they observed the fast. We have found that people in Uzbekistan tend to say they observe the fast even if they do so partially or resort to ingenious methods of observance. For example, some of those interviewed in 2007 said they observed the fast by not drinking alcohol and refraining from going out to restaurants and bars during the Uraza. Apart from that, they ate and drank as usual.

33 Forty-four of the 62 who "do not fast on Uraza" consider themselves "believers" without reservation.

34 We have, however, to note that in the previous survey we did not distinguish between complete and partial observance. Nevertheless, it seems more than likely that those who fasted only partly will state that they observe the fast.

Attitude to Islam within Uzbekistan

We asked three questions relating to citizens' understanding of how the state should treat Islam among the population. As noted, Islam's two major festivals have been accepted as official state holidays, on which people do not go to work and schools do not open.

The first two questions relate to the official working day. To the question, should people who read the *namaz*, that is who pray five times a day as required by Sunni Islam, be permitted to do so during working hours, nearly 90 percent (89.2) replied in the affirmative. On the other hand, when asked whether the working day should be curtailed for those who observe the fast, the Uraza or Ramadan, just 22 respondents (10.6 percent) think it appropriate. The reasoning behind the apparent contradiction is probably purely practical: of the five daily prayers, only two fall during regular working hours, and one during the lunch break, so that enabling people to pray at work is justa question of five minutes per day, whereas shortening the workday during the month of the fast would disrupt work completely and cause a variety of complications.

The third question in this bracket addressed Islamic tuition in state schools(see Figure 5). Some 28.6 percent of respondents think there should be no teaching whatever of Islam in the official school system. At the other extreme,those who consider that a sizable part of the school curriculum should be devoted to Islamic studies comprise a negligible proportion of the population –a mere 2 percent opted for between 10 and 20 hours per week and only 4.9 percent for 5–10 hours a week. The majority of respondents – 64.5 percent
– chose a middle path, namely that Islamic tuition should take up one to five hours a week of their children's education. This appears to be the one issue on which our survey found a major break with state policy, for there is no Islamic tuition whatever in any of the regular state schools – except for the handful of *madrassas* still permitted to function – so that opting even for a minimal Islamic tuition indicates a measure of dissatisfaction with the status quo.

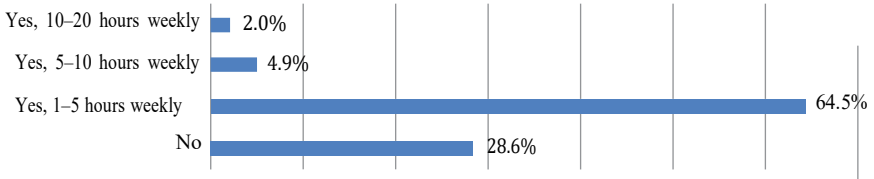

Figure 5 *Do you feel Islamic tuition should be allowed in schools?*

Islamic Solidarity

Our next category moves beyond Uzbekistan's borders and discusses the way our respondents regard the issue of Islamic solidarity. We asked how they felt regarding Muslims in other countries and to what extent they identified with them as a collective.

The first question was whether the respondents were more concerned by the lot of Muslims in countries such as Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Egypt – than by that of inhabitants of countries like Germany, China and India. Here 56.6 per- cent answered positively, and 39.4 percent replied in the negative. There also were significant differences in the various age groups: 71 percent of those aged over 45 answered positively and 21 percent negatively. The 18–25 age group also deviated somewhat from the mean: below it among those who gave a positive reply and above those who answered negatively.

We then asked whether our respondents were more concerned by the lot of Muslims in other countries and regions of the former Soviet Union – Tajikistan, Tatarstan, Chechnya, Azerbaijan – than by that of non-Muslim inhabitants of Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia. Replies corresponded to those in the previous question, with 57.6 answering positively and 37.4 negatively. Again there were meaningful digressions in the different age groups. In this instance, both the youngest and the oldest cohort were much more concentrated in the first bracket – 69 and 71 percent, respectively – and considerably under-represented in the second, 24 and 16 percent, respectively, answering negatively.

Our third question in this group asked whether respondents had ever donated money to their Muslim brethren in other countries when they were faced with a crISIS or disaster. An overwhelming majority, 99.5 percent, had never given any money – some of them stated specifically that they had no money to give, so that the question was not pertinent. At the same time, we should remember that charity, *sadaqa*, is the most widely observed of Islam's practical precepts – 77 percent in our previous survey; yet, charity manifestly begins at home, where there are no end of people in dire economic straits. One single individual had given money – to Iran. Prior to receiving their comment regarding their lack of means, we asked, if they were in a position to donate money to people inhabiting zones where hostilities were occurring, would their first preference be to the civilian population of Iraq, to Russians and Ukrainians in Eastern Ukraine, or to the inhabitants of Yemen (see Figure 6). Some 40.3 percent opted for the second choice, while 56.6 percent replied "none of the above."

Indeed, the protests and government crackdown that shook Ukraine in late 2013 received considerable attention in the Uzbek media – Russia's following actions were less publicly discussed. On visits to Uzbekistan in 2014 we found

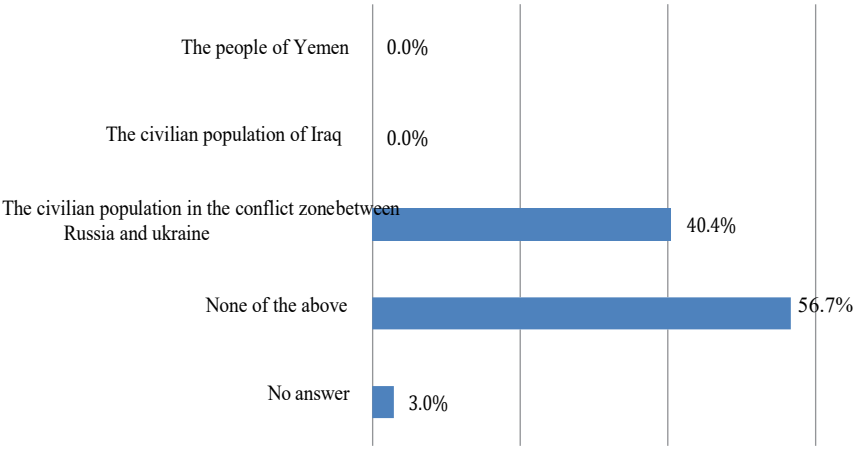

Figure 6 *If you had the means to help people living in a war zone, whom would you prefer to help?*

widespread sympathy for the Euromaidan movement among people withwhom we talked. In addition, the apparently insignificant independence movement in the Karakalpak Autonomous Republic was reportedly encouraged to assert its demands in the wake of developments in Ukraine.35 We pressed this issue, going on to ask: if they had the money to give to people in need (see Figure 7), would their first preference be the Iraqi civilian population, the Palestinian inhabitants of the Gaza Strip, or Uzbeks inhabiting the region of Osh in neighboring Kyrgyzstan? No less than 86.7 percent said they would give their money to Uzbeks in Osh, while 11.3 percent would not give to any of these groups. The empathy felt by large sectors of the Uzbek population with their co-ethnics in Southern Kyrgyzstan – most specifically in Osh and Jalalabad – was given expression in spontaneous acts of assistance to the 100,000 or so refugees who fled to Uzbekistan following the outbreak of ethnic violence in Osh in June 2010. This help was rendered despite the very limited information in Uzbekistan's media on the topic, reportedly intended to keep Uzbek passions in check and to reduce the chances of Uzbek retaliation.36 There are, however, online posts in support of Muslims in other conflict areas. For example, we

35 "Uzbekistan Separatist Movement Threatens Ancient Culture," *The Guardian*, February 5, 2015.

36 Here, Peter Finke's findings again seem incompatible with ours. He says that Uzbek nationals living in Uzbekistan show little interest in the Uzbek diaspora, although he admits that the attitude to those living in former Soviet republics "is somewhat different." Finke, "Central Asian Attitudes," 68–69. Also see "Uzbekistan's Karimov Treads Cautiously

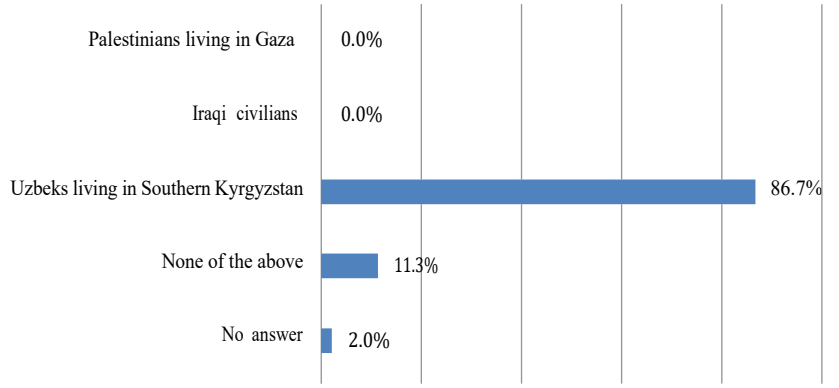

Figure 7 *If you had the means to help people in need, whom would you help first of all?*

have seen posts upholding the position of the civilian Palestinian population during the military conflict with Israel in the summer of 2014. Nevertheless, these posts were not of a political nature and were relatively tame, merely identifying with the suffering of innocent civilians.37

Our final question touching upon Islamic solidarity asked whether states where the greater part of the population professes Islam should assist one another. Here we received an overwhelming majority of positive replies – 75.4 percent as against 24.1 percent. We refrained from using the term "Islamic countries," which in the Uzbek political and social discourse has a connotation of countries living under Shari'a law. Even though the question was as apolitical as we could make it, still nearly a quarter answered "no," probably because the very implication of Islamic unity might be considered subversive. To quote one of our Uzbek friends: had the question been "should the countries of the world work together and help each other?" 100 percent of the participants would have agreed.

Religion, and Islam Specifically, under Soviet Rule

Two questions address the situation of Islam under Soviet rule. Our intention here was to touch upon something that is not directly affected by Karimov's

in Response to Southern Kyrgyzstan Violence," Eurasia Net, June 17, 2010, http://www.eurasianet.org/node/61333 (accessed October 23, 2015).

37 One particularly popular post was a picture of a crying Palestinian baby with attached text reading, "You do not have to be a Muslim to identify with his suffering – you simply have to be human."

policy, although he refrains from denouncing Soviet-era policy in any respect, and to try to indirectly measure people's empathy with Islam. We asked whether the Soviet regime repressed religious faiths and believers – 76.3 answered in the affirmative (69 percent in the 18–25 cohort who had had no direct experience of Soviet rule and 82 percent of those above 45 who had experienced Soviet rule as adults) while 23.6 percent rejected the suggestion, 31 percent in the youngest age bracket and just 18 percent in the over 45s.

Yet, when asked whether the Soviet Union had treated Islam and Muslim believers worse than other faiths and believers, the responses were very different and somewhat unexpected: 45.8 agreed, while 53.7 dismissed the idea – 63 percent of those who had not known Soviet rule and just 34 percent of the oldest cohort who, of course, had. This latter result may mean that these older Uzbeks wish to excuse themselves for not having taken up cudgels against their Soviet rulers, or perhaps it is designed to indicate that they did not identify with Islam at the time and therefore had no reason to register any protest, the implication being that they do not identify with Islam at the present, either. Timur Dadabaev provides a very insightful study of the "hybrid discourse on the concept of religion" that developed in Uzbekistan in the Soviet period and "is demonstrated by the multiple means of evaluating Soviet religious policies" among elderly citizens of post-Soviet Uzbekistan. "The public remembers policies initially shocking but eventually accepted as positive because they assisted the modernization policy," in that they liberated the women and facilitated their entry into public life and introduced modern education and general literacy.

> In the post-Soviet context, such positive memories regarding certain religious policies of the past … shed light on the process of reevaluation and the redefinition of new boundaries of religiosity during the post-Soviet period. People's recollections thus provide useful insights … into how they understand their past experience on the basis of their current position. In many cases, memories are an indication of the public's attitude towards their present understanding of religiosity, in which their past is the material against which their present conceptualisation of religion is tested and corrected.

In his conclusion, Dadabaev writes that "differentiation in the evaluation of past policies can also be connected to the ways in which ordinary citizens adapted to ideological constraints."[38]

38 Timur Dadabaev, "Religiosity and Soviet 'Modernisation' in Central Asia: Locating Religious Traditions and Rituals in Recollections of Anti-religious Policies in Uzbekistan,"

The Nature of Islam

We also asked our respondents whether in their opinion Islam is a stricter and more demanding religion than others (see Figure 8). Here 8.9 percent replied in the affirmative – among the youngest cohort, just 4.5 agreed, while among the oldest bracket, no less than 31.5 concurred. This would seem to confirm our understanding that those above 45 were the least ready to demonstrate any Islamic identity, or actually do not identify with the Islamic way of life, although it is not clear whether we can draw conclusions from this regarding the general Uzbek population – it is possible that only those who had reservations regarding Islam were prepared to answer our questionnaire, those with what might seem an undue commitment to Islam preferring not to stick out their necks. This was the question that drew a large percentage of "Don't knows" – 39.9 percent, although just 21 percent among the oldest cohort.

We then asked whether, in the view of our respondents, non-Muslims perceived Islam as a religion that is spread by force. Approximately one-third (36.5 percent) agreed and 63 percent demurred. Yet, when asked whether they

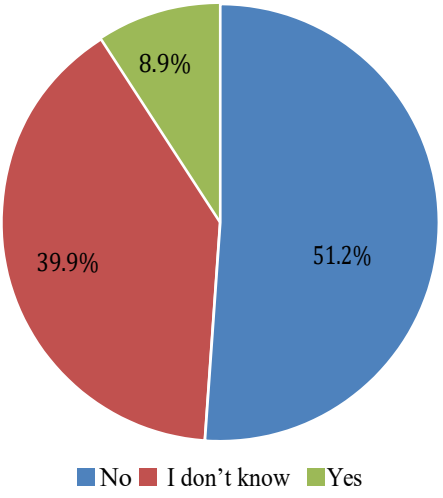

Figure 8
Do you think Islam is stricter and more demanding than other religions?

Religion, State, and Society, 42, no. 4 (December 2014): 328–353. In another paper that focused on Soviet ethnic policies, Dadabaev shows that those among the indigenous population who adapted successfully to Soviet reality emerged in post-Soviet Uzbekistan as "a new group of Russophile[s]." See Timur Dadabaev, "Recollections of Emerging Hybrid Ethnic Identities in Soviet Central Asia: The Case of Uzbekistan," *Nationalities Papers*, 41, no. 6 (November 2013): 1026–48.

themselves accepted this postulate, a mere 14.8 percent agreed and a full 85.2 percent rejected it. The gist was clearly that those who favor using, or resort in practice to, force violate the message of Islam and one of Islam's basic values.39

Moving on to a question regarding the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), we appreciated we were touching upon a very sensitive topic. The authorities in Tashkent have for some time been visibly anxious about a possible ISIS threat in Uzbekistan, especially since the effective termination at the end of 2014 of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghani- stan and the announcement by the Afghan interior minister in February 2015 confirming the presence of ISIS militants in his country. In November and December 2014 arrests had been carried out of Uzbek citizens, alleged members of ISIS and the IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which in mid-2015 pledged allegiance to ISIS), charged with having undergone military training in Pakistan and returning home to recruit young people for ISIS. In February 2015, Tashkent's chief imam condemned ISIS on Uzbek tv, urging Uzbeks not to join its ranks and denouncing the organization as having "nothing to do with Islam." In April 2015, a Tashkent-based political analyst stated that Uzbekistan's law-enforcement bodies were undertaking several approaches to assess and counter the ISIS threat, with a special program for meeting returning Uzbek citizens.40

This, then, was the backdrop against which we posed the following question: Do you think that ISIS represents Islamic values? To this, just one individual answered in the affirmative, 53.2 answered negatively (44.5 among the 18–25s and 42 percent among the over 45s). Not surprisingly, given that ISIS is an unmentionable, no less than 46.3 percent replied "Don't know" (including 55.5 percent among the youngest bracket and an almost identical 56 percent among the oldest cohort). On Facebook, however, one can see posts by Uzbek citizens addressing the topic of ISIS and fellow terrorist groups. Most posts regarding ISIS are humorous and tend to make fun of the extremist Islamic

39 In informal conversations, we found that many Uzbeks think that Islam suffers from a reputation of being a violence-propagating religion due to the actions of Islamic extremists, who misrepresent the true values of Islam. Many Uzbeks told us that their elders taught them that violence and the use of force are banned by Islam and that hurting another human being is the worst crime one can commit.

40 Interfax Azerbaijan "V Uzbekistane est' "osobaia" programma vstrechi zhitelei strany vo-evavshikh na storone IG-politolog" (Uzbekistan has a "special" program for Uzbek citizens returning home after fighting in the ranks of ISIS- a political analyst says), 13/04/2015, http://interfax.az/view/636926.

organization; yet some of them condemn its actions outright. Out of several hundred posts reviewed, we were unable to find any posts supporting ISIS.

The World Outside

Our very last question was:41 If you were offered a job abroad and the pay were identical, would you prefer to work in a Muslim or a non-Muslim country? We found that a minority – 36.5 percent – would prefer to work in a Muslim country and 62.5 in a non-Muslim one. Both extreme-age cohorts were even more decisive in their preference for a non-Muslim country – 73.4 percent among the 18–25s and 74 percent among the above 45s, whereas women were more evenly split: 42.5 percent would prefer a Muslim country and 55 percenta non-Muslim one. The 62 percent who chose the non-Muslim option divided up as follows: 41 percent said outright that they have a clear preference for a secular and democratic state; to be precise, their answer was "because I (want to) live in a democratic country," thereby simultaneously renouncing the idea that Muslim countries could be democratic and echoing regime propaganda regarding Uzbekistan's democratic nature; 11 percent said that non-Muslim states treated Uzbeks well; and 10 percent vindicated their preference by saying that life in non-Muslim states was easier.

Of the 36.5 percent who preferred a Muslim state, only 10 percent gave their reasons: 5 percent said that the way of life and culture in those states were closer to their own; 4 percent opined that Muslim states respected Uzbeks more; while a mere one percent – two individuals – stated simply that they preferred the Muslim option because they themselves were Muslims. These statistics reflect well the current migration flows: the great majority of Uzbek citizens who are working abroad – their official number is somewhere between four and five million although the grapevine speaks about as many as eight million – are to be found in Russia, with some also in Ukraine, Belarus, and South Korea; a rather small minority has found employment in the United Arab Emirates, especially in Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

41 In fact, we posed two questions in this category, but had to disqualify one that asked whether our respondents believe that Western countries misunderstand Islam. We received very few replies, apparently because respondents did not fully comprehend the options we put to them that demanded a certain amount of sophistication. All, therefore, that we could learn on this score was that survey questionnaires have to keep to straight-forward questions that require simple replies.

Conclusion

We can draw a number of conclusions from our findings. In the first place, the citizens of Uzbekistan seem to identify by and large with their President's message. Their primary identity is with Uzbekistan as a state, and a state, more- over, in which neither the titular nation's ethnic culture nor Islam receives major emphasis, although both have been partially subsumed in the country's "national" ethos. At the same time, we would like to suggest that the general acceptance of a regime that is manifestly repressive emanates in the first place from an understanding or a sense that the stability and security provided by the current authorities are infinitely preferable to the chaos they see in neigh-boring countries – in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, not to speak of Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan's inhabitants perceive their ethnic and Islamic affiliation as givens that play an inherent role in their collective identity. They perceive them-selves as Muslims and believers. Yet, when speaking of Islam, they do not mean a strictly orthodox Islam, but rather customs and traditions, almost folklore or appurtenances. These cannot be shaken off but are to be retained as symbols and their children should perhaps become acquainted with them as part of their official education. Conforming to this understanding, the Uzbek state has made the Qurbon Hayit and Ruza Hayit official national holidays, as it has the Nowruz, the traditional Persian New Year celebrated on the March equinox, which was unofficially reinstated in some parts in the latter Soviet period. Islam is basically not an issue that features in the national discourse and rarely also in the media, but is generally played down, with the notable exception of the occasional denunciation of "Islamic extremism" both in the domestic and in the international context. The population, accustomed from the Soviet period to taking its cue from what has remained essentially a heavily censured state, is inclined to go along with the menu it is offered.

The perception of the state as the primary focus of identity means, too, that citizens of Uzbekistan no longer see in their local or regional affiliation their paramount source of identity. This does not mean that they refute this affiliation, but that it maybe takes a lower place in the composition of their collective self-perception. In this connection, it is surely relevant that close to thirty percent of our respondents are internal migrants. Finally, an Islamic-grounded solidarity seems to appear threatening to Uzbek citizens who aspire basically to live in a secular and "democratic" state, namely the antithesis of a body politic dominated by Islamic norms and standards. Insofar as they sense solidarity with the world outside, their predominant orientation is toward states or nations that share a Soviet socio-cultural heritage, more than toward the rest of the *Ummah*.