The "Personality Cult" Problematic: Personalism and Mosques Memorializing the "Father of the Nation" in Turkmenistan and the UAE

Accepted version of an article published in *Central Asian Affairs*:
Koch, Natalie. " The "Personality Cult" Problematic: Personalism and Mosques Memorializing the "Father of the Nation" in Turkmenistan and the UAE", *Central Asian Affairs* 3, 4 (2016): 330-359.

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Abstract

This article analyzes the role of mosques dedicated to the "father of the nation" under two personalistic authoritarian systems: Saparmurat Niyazov in Turkmenistan and Sheikh Zayed in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Critiquing "cult of personality" narratives as Orientalist and analytically weak, I emphasize the constructed nature of charisma, asking how such personalistic regimes produce the image of a coherent figurehead—and to what end. As a discursive device, the personalistic leader-as-icon appears in a range of authoritarian regimes, and it is materially inscribed in the sym- bolic landscapes to create the impression of unity among elites and the masses. To illustrate how this works, I draw on research in Turkmenistan and the UAE from 2012 through 2014, including landscape analysis of two mosques memorializing the coun- tries' founding fathers: the Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque in the outskirts of Ashgabat, and the Sheikh Zayed Mosque, in the outskirts of Abu Dhabi.

Keywords

personalism – cult of personality – charisma – mosques – symbolic landscapes – authoritarianism – nationalism – Turkmenistan – United Arab Emirates

Introduction

Like any proper tale, nationalist storylines invariably have a beginning. Set in a particular time and place, this origin story typically involves the "founding fathers" as the central protagonists—or perhaps only one "father of the nation"

doi 10.1163/22142290-00304002

as the singular hero. In conforming with the universal grammar of nationalism,[1] these heroes come to operate within nationalist discourses as icons, a personified image of the nation. Inscribed in history books and countless other nationalist texts, these narratives are also produced materially—literally written into the landscape.[2] Although a great deal of scholarship in geography and related fields has sought to account for the way nationalist practices are per- formed in and through the built environment, little attention has been given specifically to how founding fathers are nationalistically remembered. This is important in any context, but doubly so in authoritarian states where the "father of the nation" figure is often a touchstone for leaders seeking to legitimate a more centralized political configuration. Therefore, in this article, I consider how the image of the "father of the nation" gets written into built landscapes in two such countries: Turkmenistan and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

I specifically analyze mosques memorializing President Saparmurat Ni- yazov (Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque) and Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan (Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque) (*see Figures 1–2*). Both mosques are situated in the outskirts of their countries' respective capital cities, Ashgabat and Abu Dhabi, and also host the two leaders' mausoleums. President Niyazov and Sheikh Zayed are both framed as national "founding fathers" in their countries, which are today characterized by authoritarian political configurations of the distinctly personalistic variety. Although outside observers often describe these two leaders and their regimes as fostering "cults of personality," I challenge and problematize this designation as both Orientalist and inaccurate. I instead advocate for a more nuanced approach to examining the practices and sites involved in constructing charisma and "sacred authority."[3]

By focusing on the Turkmenbashi Ruhy and Sheikh Zayed mosques, my goal is to highlight how political authorities actively construct the "father of the nation" as an *icon*. Memorializing and sacralizing the founding father through these sacred landscapes helps personalistic regimes craft the *image* of a coherent figurehead, to which political legitimacy at all levels is tethered. From this perspective, the two eponymous mosques serve as important sites for monumentalizing particular identity narratives, but also for perpetuating the im- pression that elites and the population are united in how they remember the founding fathers and the values they ostensibly symbolize. As unique venues

1 Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (Thousand Oaks, ca: Sage, 1995).

2 Anssi Paasi, *Territories, Boundaries, and Consciousness: The Changing Geographies of the Finnish-Russian Boundary* (New York: J. Wiley & Sons, 1996).

3 Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

Figure 1 *Sheikh Zayed Mosque. December 2012.*
Source: Author.

Figure 2 *Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque. May 2014.*
Source: Author.

for articulating the founding father's sacred authority after his passing, I argue that they retain discursive significance in legitimating governmental authority and buttress prevailing personalistic and paternalistic regime configurations in Turkmenistan and the UAE today.

Methodologically, this article advocates for a cross-regional comparative perspective on power and politics in Central Asia. This article builds on my wider research into the many connections and flows between Central Asia and the Gulf states of the Arabian Peninsula, as well as nascent efforts to consider new connections between Central Asia and the greater Middle East.4 Following Garth Myers' call for geographers to take more seriously the potential of "unexpected comparisons,"5 I have argued elsewhere that the joint analysis of political dynamics in Central Asia and the Gulf states can be particularly fruitful. The thoughtful pairing of case studies that are not frequently juxtaposed, such as Turkmenistan and the UAE, has the potential to open up new lines of inquiry and shed light on regionally specific phenomena.6

This approach demands that scholars of Central Asia loosen conventional assumptions about what constitutes a "relevant" comparison beyond the obvious "post-Soviet" sphere—a habit that has increasingly mired our scholarship in a form of geographic determinism. Doing so involves moving *away from* comparisons that are fixed in (and fix) places and bounded regions, and *toward* comparisons that examine convergences around specific practices, sites, or relationships (such as building a new capital city, university, free trade zone, church, or mosque). In examining specific sites or practices, scholars are better positioned to both identify and explain the political geographies that underpin cross-regional confluences and divergences.

In analyzing the Turkmenbashi Ruhy and Sheikh Zayed mosques together, I ask what these eponymous mosques can tell us about the nature of political power in Turkmenistan and the UAE. Given the two countries' divergent political geographies, what explains the fact that their first leaders are memorialized in a remarkably similar fashion? And what can the sites tell us about the role of religious or symbolic landscapes under personalistic authoritarian regimes? To answer these questions, I employ landscape interpretation conducted at the memorial mosques in Turkmenistan in May 2014 and in the UAE from 2012

4 See, for example, Sally Cummings and Raymond Hinnebusch, *Sovereignty after Empire: Comparing the Middle East and Central Asia* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

5 Garth Myers, "From Expected to Unexpected Comparisons: Changing the Flows of Ideas about Cities in a Postcolonial Urban World," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 35, no. 1 (2014): 104–118.

6 Natalie Koch, "Exploring Divergences in Comparative Research: Citizenship Regimes and the Spectacular Cities of Central Asia and the GCC," *Area.* 47, no. 4 (2015): 436–442.

to 2014. Primarily informed by political and cultural geography, this approach considers built landscapes as a sort of text or "palimpsest" for political and cultural histories.7 I thus treat the built form of the two mosques, as well as political narratives and practices surrounding them, as a unique but instructive window onto broader power dynamics in personalistic regimes.8 By asking about superficially similar phenomena of monumental mosques commemorating the "father of the nation," this joint case study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of power, symbolic landscapes, and authority in both Turkmenistan and the UAE.

Personalism: Moving beyond "Cults of Personality"

Is personalism a *type* or a *characteristic* of authoritarian regimes? This is a question recently posed by Jeroen Van den Bosch, which gets at the heart of many of the challenges faced by scholars of the post-Soviet space, who have sought to characterize the region's political regimes that revolve around one central leader.9 These have included varied use of Max Weber's definitions of sultanism and patrimonialism, as well as conceptual extensions like "neopatrimonialism."10 Scholars of Central Asian politics have also followed

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7 James Duncan and Nancy Duncan, "Doing Landscape Interpretation," in Dydia DeLyser, Steve Herbert, Stuart Aitken, Mike Crang, and Linda McDowell (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Methods in Human Geography* (London: Sage, 2010), 228.

8 While interviews or surveys with various actors would have added an interesting perspective to this analysis, they were not incorporated into research on this topic. Part of a larger study of capital cities in Asia, my research in the UAE and Turkmenistan comprised a secondary set of cases. These cases did not involve human subject methods for political and ethical reasons, but primarily because of practical limitations of the multi-country study design.

9 Jeroen Van den Bosch, "Personalism: A Type or Characteristic of Authoritarian Regimes?" *Politologická Revue,* 21, no. 1 (2015): 11–30.

10 Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968). See, for example, Steven Eke and Taras Kuzio, "Sultanism in Eastern Eu- rope: The Socio-Political Roots of Authoritarian Populism in Belarus," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 52, no. 3 (May 2000): 523; Shmuel Eisenstadt, *Traditional Patrimonialism and Modern Neopatrimonialism* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1973); Anja Franke, Andrea Gawrich, and Gurban Alakbarov, "Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan as Post-Soviet Rentier States: Re- source Incomes and Autocracy as a Double 'Curse' in Post-Soviet Regimes," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 61, no. 1 (2009): 109–140; Alisher Ilkhamov, "Neopatrimonialism, Interest Groups and Patronage Networks: The Impasses of the Governance System in Uzbekistan," *Central Asian Survey*, 26, no. 1 (2007): 65–84; Rico Isaacs, "Informal Politics and the Uncertain

Henry Hale's characterization of many formerly Soviet states as having a form of "patronal presidentialism," wherein "power resides overwhelmingly in a directly elected presidency and … involves not only formal but immense informal authority based on pervasive patron-client relationships and machine politics."11 Scholars have also used Barbara Geddes' definition of personalist authoritarian regimes as those where "access to office and the fruits of office depend much more on the discretion of an individual leader. The leader may be an officer and may have created a party to support himself, but neither the military nor the party exercises independent decision-making power insulated from the whims of the ruler."12

In these many typological designations—whether personalist authoritarianism, patronal presidentialism, (neo)patrimonialism, or sultanism—the personalistic or charismatic authority of a central leader is a common theme. But as Van den Bosch suggests, if personalism presents in an extremely diverse range of autocratic regimes, it may be better approached as a characteristic of a particular regime rather than a stand-alone type.13 This approach is perhaps best captured in the work on "cults of personality," which generally considers the intense production of a charismatic leader's image-as-icon to be variable

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Context of Transition: Revisiting Early Stage Non-Democratic Development in Kazakhstan," *Democratization*, 17, no. 1 (2010): 1–25; Rico Isaacs, *Party System Formation in Kazakhstan: Between Formal and Informal Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Nicholas Kunysz, "From Sultanism to Neopatrimonialism? Regionalism within Turkmenistan," *Central Asian Survey*, 31, no. 1 (March 2012): 1–16; Marlene Laruelle, "Discussing Neopatrimonialism and Patronal Presidentialism in the Central Asian Context," *Demokratizatsiya*, 20, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 301–324; Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore, md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Lawrence Markowitz, "The Sub-National Roots of Authoritarianism: Neopatrimonialism and Territorial Administration in Uzbekistan," *Demokratizatsiya*, 20, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 387–408; Sébastien Peyrouse, *Turkmenistan: Strategies of Power, Dilemmas of Development* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2012).

11 Henry Hale, "Democracy or Autocracy on the March? The Colored Revolutions as Normal Dynamics of Patronal Presidentialism," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 39, no. 3 (2006): 307. See for example, Laruelle, "Discussing Neopatrimonialism," 301–324.

12 Barbara Geddes, *Paradigms and Sand Castles: Theory Building and Research Design in Comparative Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 51. See, for example, Rico Isaacs and Sarah Whitmore, "The Limited Agency and Life-Cycles of Personalized Dominant Parties in the Post-Soviet Space: The Cases of United Russia and Nur Otan," *Democratization*, 21, no. 4 (2014): 699–721.

13 Van den Bosch, "Personalism," 11–30.

across a regime's life and to be found in a large number of different regimes. In- deed, regional studies scholars have frequently described the nondemocratic leaders in the Soviet successor states as fostering a "cult of personality."14 While I have also used this phrasing, referring to Astana as a proxy for Nazarbayev's "cult of personality,"15 I have long been uncomfortable with the place of this concept in social science research on Central Asia.

The idea of a "cult of personality" has a global circulation, extending well beyond writing about Central Asian leaders and indeed beyond academia. In fact, it is probably appealing to scholars for precisely that reason. However, as with any cliché, it can obscure much more complex political dynamics. When scholars refer to the "cult of personality" of the man at the helm of a personalistic regime, this tends to imply a certain naturalness to the way highly centralized systems operate. This is problematic because the idea of the central, all-powerful leader is necessarily a fiction that personalistic regimes aim to produce. This is masterfully illustrated in research on Italy under Mussolini,16 as well as Ian Kershaw's *The "Hitler Myth"*17 and J. Arch Getty's study of Stalin's Great Purges.18 Kershaw and Getty both show how in the Nazi and Soviet political apparatuses, subordinate leaders actively cultivated the image of Hitler and

14 See for example, Michael Denison, "The Art of the Impossible: Political Symbolism, and the Creation of National Identity and Collective Memory in Post-Soviet Turkmenistan," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 61, no. 7 (2009): 1167–87; Helena Goscilo, *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Slavomír Horák, "The Elite in Post-Soviet and Post- Niyazow Turkmenistan: Does Political Culture Form a Leader," *Demokratizatsiya*, 20, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 371–385; Slavomír Horák, "The Battle of Gökdepe in the Turkmen Post-Soviet Historical Discourse," *Central Asian Survey*, 34, no. 2 (April 2015): 149–161; Abel Polese and Slavomir Horák, "A Tale of Two Presidents: Personality Cult and Symbolic Nation-Building in Turkmenistan," *Nationalities Papers*, 43, no. 3 (May 2015): 457–478; Jan Šír, "Cult of Personality in Monumental Art and Architecture: The Case of Post-Soviet Turkmenistan," *Acta Slavica Japonica*, 25 (2008): 203–220.

15 Natalie Koch, "The Monumental and the Miniature: Imagining 'Modernity' in Astana," *Social & Cultural Geography*, 11, no. 8 (2010): 769–787; after Laura Adams and Assel Rustemova, "Mass Spectacle and Styles of Governmentality in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 61, no. 7 (2009): 1249–76.

16 Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). See also a special issue of the journal *Mod- ern Italy* (1999 vol. 3, no. 2).

17 Ian Kershaw, *The "Hitler Myth": Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

18 J. Arch Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933–1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

Stalin as being all-powerful and infallible. By creating this fiction, authorities sought to legitimate their own actions and use the leader as "front man," whose symbolism was strategically manipulated to downplay internal conflict among the leadership. Kershaw describes this as the "integrative function" of the Hitler myth, which worked in part to counter "the strong centrifugal forces within the Nazi Movement itself," but also to establish a "basis of consensus among German people for those aims and policies identifiable with the Führer."19 He continues to explain that:

> It has been rightly pointed out that the "heroic" Hitler image was "as much an image created by the masses as it was imposed on them." Propaganda was above all effective where it was building upon, not countering, already existing values and mentalities. The ready-made terrain of pre- existing beliefs, prejudices, and phobias forming an important stratum of the German political culture on which the "Hitler myth" could easily be imprinted, provides, therefore, an equally essential element in explaining how the propaganda image of Hitler as a "representative individual" upholding the "true sense of propriety of the German people" could take hold and flourish.20

Likewise, in his book on the Dominican Republic's government under Rafael Trujillo, Richard Lee Turits stresses that "focusing solely on the corruption, brutality, and eccentricity of dictators … leaves largely unexplored the realties of everyday life and the sinews of political power, including a regime's often difficult-to-face appeal for certain groups as well as its hidden vulnerabilities."21 Examining this appeal and how it fits into wider socio-political relations is essential, he suggests, because "however violent, personalistic, and seemingly autonomous from societal constraints, all enduring systems of rule must—and do—foster forms of social acceptance, political constituencies, and effective state institutions in order to extend, deepen, and sustain their control over society."22 In other words, fixating on Hitler, Trujillo, or any other leader at the top risks missing the wider political relationships that structure such a personalistic system, and gives undue emphasis to elite politics. By resorting to clichés about the leader's "cult of personality," scholars, the media, and other

19 Kershaw, *The "Hitler Myth,"* 4.

20 Kershaw, The "Hitler Myth," 4–5.

21 Richard Lee Turits, *Foundations of Despotism: Peasants, the Trujillo Regime, and Modernity in Dominican History* (Stanford, ca: Stanford University Press, 2003), 8.

22 Turits, *Foundation of Despotism*, 8.

observers risk reproducing the regimes' own legitimacy narratives by essentially taking them at face value.

Not only can the "cult of personality" narrative serve as an analytical barrier by diverting attention from the broader socio-political phenomena that give rise to the charismatic leader, but its normative baggage can also hinder more critical analysis. As it is commonly used, the "cult of personality" label for personalistic politics tends to stigmatize and Orientalize places where they are found as "backward" or "irrational." Or as Turits elaborates, "dystopian caricatures" of a singular leader "suspiciously reproduce a long European tradition of projecting the most extreme forms of political despotism and otherness onto non-Western societies and imagining beyond the edges of the European universe oddly passive or irrational peoples who mysteriously accept intolerable regimes."[23] Although nearly all political systems cultivate some degree of charismatic authority (including in more liberal and democratic settings), commentators almost exclusively reserve the language of "cult of personality" for illiberal and nondemocratic settings beyond the Western core. The effect is that the term operates more as a normative judgment than an analytical tool. But when an ideological narrative masquerades as an analytical tool, scholars can easily overlook essential insights, such as Getty found in early Western research on the Great Purges. Noting that because scholars themselves were so "hypnotized by Stalin's cult of personality," they overwhelmingly failed to account for "the political, institutional, and structural milieu" that enabled such a system.[24]

Accordingly, scholars are better advised to leave behind the "cult of personality" language and adopt a more nuanced approach to how charismatic authority is politically constructed and institutionalized by myriad actors. Viewed thus, personalistic regimes can be characterized as staking their claims to legitimacy not in legal or bureaucratic authority, but rather charismatic authority: "resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him [or her]."[25] Political scientists have taken up Weber's path-breaking work on charisma in their discipline's longtime effort to develop regime typologies,[26] but my own reading has been most informed by

23 Turits, *Foundation of Despotism*, 4.

24 Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges,* 205.

25 Weber, *Economy and Society*, 215.

26 See, for example, Juan Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000); Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition*. On charisma in

the work of sociologist Edward Shils27 and anthropologist Clifford Geertz28 to understand how charisma gets constructed in geographically and historically-specific contexts.

While the motivating fiction of personalistic regimes is that the leader is all-powerful, analyzing an autocrat's persona alone is insufficient for under- standing the role of personalism in sustaining the legitimacy of various autocratic polities. As the critical research on personalistic autocracies indicates, broader narratives, relationships, and social conditions are essential to conditioning and shaping the fiction of the leader-as-icon. While these studies have illustrated how this works through a wide range of political networks and institutions, propaganda, and social pressure, one underexplored avenue for regimes to construct the image of a coherent leader is the built environment. Constructed landscapes, such as monuments, architectural objects, and public art, are nearly always contested by their designers and audiences. But in these contestations, we find that differently positioned actors seek to promote a singular vision about the significance of the built environment. This effort to monopolize the symbolic meaning of the material sites as a way to craft the image of a charismatic leader is clearly important for personalistic regimes. To illustrate how this works, this article examines ways that leaders in two differently configured systems—Turkmenistan and the UAE—can harness symbolic landscapes to craft the centralized image of the "father of the nation" and to promote the prevailing nondemocratic order. The following section considers the shape of personalistic authority in the countries more generally, while the subsequent section considers the specific cases of monumental mosques dedicated to Sheikh Zayed in the UAE and Saparmurat Niyazov in Turkmenistan. The final section concludes.

Central Asia, see also Rico Isaacs, "'Papa'—Nursultan Nazarbayev and the Discourse of Charismatic Leadership and Nation-Building in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 10, no. 3 (2010): 435–452; Rico Isaacs, "Charismatic Routinization and Problems of Post-Charisma Succession in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan," *Studies in Transition States and Societies*, 7, no. 1 (2015): 58–76.

27 Edward Shils, "Charisma, Order, and Status," *American Sociological Review*, 30, no. 2 (1965): 199–213; Edward Shils, *The Constitution of Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

28 Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980); Clifford Geertz, "Centers, Kings, and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power," in Clifford Geertz (ed.), *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 121–146.

Paternalism, Personalism, and Constructing Sacred Authority

Due to their symbolic fixation with a central, all-knowing leader, personalistic authoritarian regimes are often also paternalistic. This is clearly visible in the way that they frequently stake their legitimacy in upholding the particular vision of the "father of the nation." As with nationalist discourses about men more generally, this paternalist exemplar comes to represent a "personalized image of the nation," expected to defend its "moral consciousness."29 Research on gender and nationalism amply illustrates how men are imagined (passively and actively) as "defenders" of the nation, whereas women-and-children are seen as those in need of protection.30 This masculinist "protector" ideal is a form of what Foucault terms "pastoral power."31 Pastoral power, he shows, is defined by a relationship between the governor and the governed, which frames "the king, god, or chief as a shepherd of men, who are like his flock."32 The metaphor of the ruler as shepherd, Foucault argues, has a wide historic and geographic reach, but its defining logic is fundamentally beneficent, insofar as "its only *raison d'être* is doing good" and preserving the integrity andhealth of the entire flock.33

The pastoral image of the ruler as a shepherd is closely related to the logic of paternalism, in which individuals or political leaders act as a protective father. Ostensibly "benevolent" in intent, both formulations of political subjects as a flock or children actively remove responsibility and choice from those being controlled or governed.34 In both method and outcome, paternalism and pastoral power are decidedly illiberal and often oppressive. This notwithstanding,

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29 Tamar Mayer, *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 6.

30 Lorraine Dowler, "Gender, Militarization, and Sovereignty," *Geography Compass I,* 6, no. 8 (2012): 490–499; Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Natalie Koch, "Security and Gendered National Identity in Uzbekistan," *Gender, Place & Culture*, 18, no. 4 (August 2011): 499–518; Iris Young, "The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State," *Signs*, 29, no. 1 (2003): 1–25; Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation* (London: Sage Publications, 1997).

31 Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège De France 1977–1978* (New York: Picador, 2007).

32 Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 123.

33 Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population,* 126.

34 On Uzbekistan, see Morgan Liu, *Under Solomon's Throne: Uzbek Visions of Renewal in Osh* (Pittsburgh, pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012).

the very image of the political figurehead's beneficence is central to how personalistic regimes narrate their legitimacy. But the leader's supposedly exemplary pastoral and paternalist care is but one trait among many that rein- force his charismatic authority. In personalistic regimes more generally, the leader is held up as no ordinary man, but one possessing a range of superhuman or extraordinary talents or attributes.35

The legitimacy of the regime is thus tied to the merits of the leader—his wisdom, spirituality, acumen, vitality, and strength (actual and metaphorical). Depending on the confluence of specific cultural, historical, and geographic factors, political systems may stress some values more than others. In pas- toral configurations, for example, Foucault points out that the "reference to pastorship allows a type of relationship between God and the sovereign to be designated, in that if God is the shepherd of men, and if the king is also the shepherd of men, then the king is, as it were, the subaltern shepherd to whom God has entrusted the flock of men."36 The leader's spiritual and moral righteousness—his ability to benevolently lead his flock—thus gains a special emphasis. But if righteousness is only one trait among many that are valorized in the official persona of the central ruler, then why are some positioned as religious exemplars but not others? Essentialist answers to this question have tended to fixate on the specificities of a particular religion or a polity's degree of "modernization," but a more nuanced and critical approach de- mands a brief excursus into how scholars have come to understand the concept of "secularism."

Social scientists today generally agree that the concept of secularism, as a clear separation between religion and politics, is not an objective condition but a social construct.37 As Peter Mandaville explains, contemporary understandings of secularism are "a legacy of the very particular historical experience of political modernity that played out in Europe"—most notably the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which marked a shift in authority being rooted to territorial control rather than religious authority.38 The territorially based order of

35 Kershaw, *The "Hitler Myth"*; Natalie Koch, "Athletic Autocrats: Understanding Images of Authoritarian Leaders as Sportsmen," in Natalie Koch (ed.), *Critical Geographies of Sport: Space, Power, and Sport in Global Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 91–107; Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle*; Paul Veyne, *Bread and Circuses: Historical Sociology and Political Pluralism* (London: Penguin Press, 1990).

36 Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population,* 124.

37 Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, ca: Stanford University Press, 2003).

38 Peter Mandaville, *Global Political Islam: International Relations of the Muslim World* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 7.

Westphalia did not mean that religion was eliminated from politics. Rather, it marked "a process of the state reorganizing, repositioning and co-opting aspects of religious authority."39 With nationalist identity narratives coming to the fore in Europe, religion-based identity narratives started to develop a new position within state-based elites' efforts to claim legitimacy as leaders of their states, territories, and populations.

Nationalisms have a remarkable diversity of expressions, but their rhetorical and material performances around the world are almost always infused with a degree of "religious charisma"—with tropes, ceremonies, and affective atmospheres frequently taking a distinctly religious form and structure. This has been explored at great length in liberal Western and democratic contexts.40 But what about less liberal contexts? How have actors in more authoritarian settings employed religious discourse, and to what end? Scholars adopting an instrumentalist approach to identity have considered how elites draw upon a variety of ethnic, religious, and national symbols to legitimate their authority. Juan Linz, for example, argues that authoritarian regimes often attempt to "fill the emotional vacuum created by secularization with political rituals and liturgies derived from or inspired by religion."41 However, not all authoritarian regimes are inclined to manipulate or "co-opt" religious discourse, some- times being instead characterized by "a fundamental hostility toward existing organized religion, often attempting to either destroy, limit, or manipulate religious institutions."42 Similarly, Mark Juergensmeyer has argued that state- based ("secular") actors sometimes strategically employ religious symbols and discourse to prevent religion from building an "alternative power base" and in order to "provide religious legitimacy for the state."43

39 Mandaville, *Global Political Islam*, 7.

40 See for example, Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus*, 96, no. 1 (1967): 1–21; Carlton Hayes, *Nationalism: A Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1960); Mark Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Mark Juergensmeyer, "Nationalism and Religion," in Gerard Delanty and Krishan Kumar (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Nations and Nationalism* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2006), 295–306; Conor Cruise O'Brien, *God Land: Reflections on Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge, ma: Harvard University Press, 1988); Anthony D. Smith, "The 'Sacred' Dimension of Nationalism," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 29, no. 3 (2000): 791–814.

41 Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*, 23.

42 Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*, 23.

43 Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War*, 35.

The elite-level focus of an instrumentalist approach to identity formation is especially relevant in illiberal contexts, although it has been productively decentered by studies of more "banal" or everyday forms of narrating identities.44 Elite narratives and imaginaries carry special significance in authoritarian systems due to the high degree of control they typically exercise over prevailing discourse.45 By interrogating how and to what end state-based actors employ specific symbols and identity narratives, scholars can thus challenge the motivating fiction of personalistic regimes and work to pry apart local struggles over how to narrate religious, ethnic, or national identities through efforts to craft and imagine the all-powerful "father of the nation." Viewed thus, religious and secular elites are key actors in a discursive politics of legitimacy, variably deploying religious symbols, tropes, and landscapes to advance their varied interests.

When elites draw upon and advance particular religious identity narratives, they ultimately seek to cultivate a form of legitimacy that Eickelman and Piscatori have termed "sacred authority."46 As the authors note, sacred authority is only *one kind* of authority that state actors may employ, among others such as military authority. From this perspective, certain regimes of legitimation may draw more from religious discourses than others, overlapping and intersecting as "groups or states vie to manipulate religious language and symbolism to induce or compel obedience to their wishes."47 A regime's choice to portray a head of state as a religious leader, or at least an icon of spiritual rectitude, is thus only one element of a regime's broader legitimacy-building agenda—and one that is constantly in flux. Religion, after all, "is a field of contestation rather than a stable essence, and struggles over the definition and place of religion can be variably articulated with a national sense of identity that is itself fluid and changing."48

44 See, for example, Billig, *Banal Nationalism*; Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (Princeton, nj: Princeton University Press, 2006); Tim Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (New York: Berg Publishers, 2002).

45 Koch, "Security and Gendered National Identity in Uzbekistan," 499–518; Natalie Koch, "Is Nationalism Just for Nationals? Civic Nationalism for Noncitizens and Celebrating National Day in Qatar and the UAE," *Political Geography*, 54 (2016).

46 Eickelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*.

47 Eickelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, 57.

48 Juan Cole and Deniz Kandiyoti, "Nationalism and the Colonial Legacy in the Middle East and Central Asia: Introduction," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 34, no. 2 (2002): 197.

Symbolic Landscapes in Ashgabat and Abu Dhabi

Like all forms of authority, for sacred authority to carry significance, it must be actively constructed through a range of symbols, rituals, spectacles, and performances. Because of their impression of material solidity and permanence, *symbolic urban landscapes* are a favored means for kings, emperors, and autocrats (and their political apparatuses)—both past and present—to communicate their superiority and authority to their subjects—a trend that geographers and others have documented extensively.49 This rich literature demonstrates that symbolic landscapes take many shapes, though the focus of this article is on monumental religious sites. Mosques are perhaps the most important iconic elements of religious landscapes in the Muslim world and are thus logical sites for fashioning a leader's sacred authority. Political leaders often seek to convey their religious sentiments by simply constructing new mosques or taking care of old ones. But under personalistic regimes—and specifically those of Niyazov in Turkmenistan and Zayed in the UAE—eponymous mosques memorializing the "father of the nation" seem to take this effort to

49 James Bell, "Redefining National Identity in Uzbekistan: Symbolic Tensions in Tashkent's Official Public Landscape," *Ecumene*, 6, no. 2 (1999): 183–213; Pierre Bourdieu, "Social Space and Symbolic Power," *Sociological Theory*, 7, no. 1 (1989): 14–25; Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (London: Croom Helm, 1984); Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels, *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design, and Use of Past Environments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Sally Cummings, *Symbolism and Power in Central Asia: Politics of the Spectacular* (London: Routledge, 2010); James Duncan, *The City as Text: The Politics of Landscape Interpretation in the Kandyan Kingdom* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Benjamin Forest, Juliet Johnson, and Karen Till, "Post-Totalitarian National Identity: Public Memory in Ger- many and Russia," *Social & Cultural Geography*, 5, no. 3 (2004): 357–380; Geertz, *Negara*; Geertz, "Centers, Kings, and Charisma"; Joshua Hagen, "Architecture, Urban Planning, and Political Authority in Ludwig I's Munich," *Journal of Urban History*, 35, no. 4 (May 2009): 459–485; Joshua Hagen, "Architecture, Symbolism, and Function: The Nazi Party's 'Forum of the Movement'," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 28, no. 3 (2010): 397– 424; Natalie Koch, "The Monumental and the Miniature: Imagining 'Modernity' in As- tana," *Social & Cultural Geography*, 11, no. 8 (2010): 769–787; Natalie Koch, "The Violence of Spectacle: Statist Schemes to Green the Desert and Constructing Astana and Ashgabat as Urban Oases," *Social & Cultural Geography*, 16, no. 6 (2015): 675–697; Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Dmitri Sidorov, "National Monumentalization and the Politics of Scale: The Resurrections of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 90, no. 3 (2000): 548–572; Lawrence Vale, *Architecture, Power, and National Identity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992); Veyne, *Bread and Circuses.*

materially inscribe the leader's sacred authority to another level. Turning to these case studies, we can begin to ask what role they play in the prevailing power relations in Turkmenistan and the UAE—a task that requires some briefcontext.

As noted already, President Saparmurat Niyazov and Sheikh Zayed are considered the "founding fathers" of their respective countries. As readers of this journal know well, Niyazov, who called himself "Turkmenbashi" ("Father of the Turkmen"), came to power with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. He led Turkmenistan in his idiosyncratic and strong-fisted manner until he died suddenly in 2006. He was succeeded by Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, a regime insider who has failed to usher in the dramatic changes that international observers hoped would accompany the transition.50 Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan of the UAE was also the first leader of his country. When Britain announced it intended to end its colonial protectorship of the "Trucial States" of the Arabian Peninsula in 1971, Zayed lobbied with regional elites to form a federation of monarchies. He succeeded in uniting seven emirates, which now constitute the UAE, and served as president (the country's central leader but a post held by the Emir of Abu Dhabi, given that Emirate's larger size and wealth in comparison with the other territories). When he died in 2004, Zayed was succeeded by his son, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan.

As the first post-Soviet leader, Niyazov oversaw the radical transformation of Ashgabat as the independent country's capital, giving it a dramatically monumental character with its strictly imposed white marble buildings, wide avenues, new parks and water features, and extensive new statuary—including monuments of Niyazov, his family members, as well as more general nationalist themes.51 Sheikh Zayed similarly presided over the dramatic transformation of Abu Dhabi as the capital of the UAE. Abu Dhabi has generally been overshadowed in both the media coverage and academic research by its neighbor Dubai, but the city has many of the very same features that make Dubai so spectacular: a shining urban skyline, wide avenues, ultra-modern malls (in- door skiing included), and stunning urban landscaping and water features.52

50 Slavomír Horák and Jan Šír, *Dismantling Totalitarianism? Turkmenistan under Berdimuhamedow* (Washington: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 2009).

51 Denison, "The Art of the Impossible"; Koch, "The Violence of Spectacle"; Šír, "Cult of Personality."

52 Brigitte Dumortier, "The Cultural Imperative: Saadiyat Cultural District in Abu Dhabi between Public Policy and Architectural Gesture," in Steffen Wippel, Katrin Bromber, Chris- tian Steiner, and Birgit Krawietz (eds.), *Under Construction: Logics of Urbanism in the Gulf Region* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 171–190; Yasser Elsheshtawy, "Cities of Sand and Fog:

In this respect, the two national founders followed in the well-trod path of world leaders whose personality came to be fused with the transformation of their capitals—from Mussolini in Rome,53 Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin in Berlin and Moscow,54 to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in Ankara.55 In each of these cases, the leaders' urban agendas were not merely didactic with respect to a new political order, but as Malte Rolf puts it, forcefully "reeducative," seeking to reeducate the population "into the system by means of symbols and ideology and suppress all competition."56

With the exception of Atatürk, however, none of these other leaders (Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini) were favorably remembered by their later countrymen and successors—which meant that their architectural visions were largely torn asunder (or at least re-narrated) after their departure. In Turkmenistan and the UAE today, by contrast, the radical transformation of the capital city overseen by the "father of the nation" is still largely cast in a positive light. In the relatively short time since their passing (Zayed in 2004 and Niyazov in 2006), Abu Dhabi and Ashgabat have continued to operate as symbols of their acumen and benevolent rule—urban icons of the enlightened path they set out for the UAE and Turkmenistan as newly independent states. This is not just because of the scope of the urban transformations they oversaw, but largely because the local governments still follow a form of personalistic authoritarianism that roots legitimacy in upholding the nationalist vision attributed to Zayed and Niyazov. Claiming to continue "his" legacy, succeeding leaders have thus made a deliberate effort to preserve certain elements of the leaders' vision for the urban landscapes of their capitals.

Abu Dhabi's Global Ambitions," in Yasser Elsheshtawy (ed.), *The Evolving Arab City: Tradition, Modernity, and Urban Development* (London: Routledge, 2008), 258–304.

53 Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle*; Anna Notaro, "Exhibiting the New Mussolinian City: Memories of Empire in the World Exhibition of Rome," *GeoJournal*, 51, no. 1–2 (2000): 15–22.

54 Herman van der Wusten, "Dictators and Their Capital Cities: Moscow and Berlin in the 1930s," *GeoJournal*, 52, no. 4 (2001): 339–344.

55 Bülent Batuman, "Minarets without Mosques: Limits to the Urban Politics of Neo-Liberal Islamism," *Urban Studies*, 50, no. 6 (May 2013): 1097–1113; Alev Çınar, "Imagined Community as Urban Reality: The Making of Ankara," in Alev Çınar and Thomas Bender (eds.), *Urban Imaginaries: Locating the Modern City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 151–181; Kyle Evered, "Symbolizing a Modern Anatolia: Ankara as Capital in Turkey's Early Republican Landscape," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, 28, no. 2 (January 2008): 326–341; Duygu Kacar, "Ankara, a Small Town, Transformed to a Nation's Capital," *Journal of Planning History*, 9, no. 1 (2010): 43–65.

56 Malte Rolf, *Soviet Mass Festivals, 1917–1991* (Pittsburgh, pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013), 79.

As noted above, mosques are an ideal means to monumentalize the spiritual and moral authority of their benefactors or those for whom they are named. In contexts where many mosques have received state support, those named for the nationalist father figure take on a special significance— effectively serving as monuments to his alleged superior religious sentiment and materially inscribing his sacred authority in the urban fabric. Though the legacy of these projects—as living sites for tourists and worshippers alike— is perhaps more significant than their conception, it is important to note that both Niyazov and Zayed initiated the development of their eponymous mosques. Niyazov saw his through completion in 2004, whereas Sheikh Zayed died three years before his was completed in 2007. Besides being named for the leader, another element lends special status to the Turkmenbashi Ruhy and Sheikh Zayed mosques: their grounds also host the two leaders' mausoleums.

Two Mosques Memorializing the "Father of the Nation"

The Turkmenbashi Ruhy and the Sheikh Zayed mosques both use extensive greenery to lend the sites an oasis image—making them stand out as a particularly spectacular, impressive site, set in stark contrast with the surrounding desert landscape (*see Figures 3–4*). Through the opulent (if wasteful) use of brilliant green grass and extensive water features surrounding the two mosques, the landscaping creates the effect of their being exceptional in both spiritual and earthly respects. It also creates the effect of opulence in the arid contexts where water and waterscapes are indeed a form of luxury.57 Of course, the arid environment alone does not accord greenery and water-filled landscapes the status of spectacle—it must be culturally constructed as something to be valued and indexed as a form of prestige.58

Inside, creating the impression of opulence and splendor is a more general theme pervading many religious sites, whether these are towering gold statues at Buddhist temples, fresco-clad churches, or richly bejeweled mosques. The Ashgabat and Abu Dhabi mosques are no exception to this trend, and they are far and away the most richly adorned religious sites in their respective

57 Natalie Koch, "The Violence of Spectacle"; Pernilla Ouis, "'Greening the Emirates': The Modern Construction of Nature in the United Arab Emirates," *cultural geographies*, 9, no. 3 (2002): 334–347.

58 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Dominance and Affection: The Making of Pets* (New Haven, CT: Yale UniversityPress, 1984).

Figure 3 *Reflection pools in front of Sheikh Zayed Mosque. December 2012.*
Source: Author.

Figure 4 *Water fountains in front of the Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque. May 2014.*
Source: Author.

Figure 5 *Interior view of the Sheikh Zayed Mosque, including the world's third largest chandelier at center. December 2012.*
Source: Author.

countries. Especially in the case of the Sheikh Zayed mosque, the superlative is harnessed as a way to pay homage to the deceased leader and place him above other mortals. With a 40,000-person capacity (in the prayer hall and courtyards), it is one of the largest mosques in the world. And it was certainly among the most expensive: begun in 1996 and completed in 2007, it is estimate to have cost about us$545 million. The stunning interior is both rich and monumental, including extraordinary Swarovski-crystal chandeliers and featuring the world's largest carpet, woven in pieces in Iran and stitched together on site (*Figure 5*).

The exterior marble was sourced from Macedonia, and indeed nearly all the architectural features and accouterments came from different countries of the world—part of the overarching vision of making the mosque a statement for Sheikh Zayed's commitment to internationalism. On the mosque's website, Zayed's vision for the structure is explained through his admiration for Islam as a faith that embraces the diversity of its worshippers:

> The concept of diversity is personified in Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, a majestic marvel that reveals a spectrum of architectural splendors formulating a harmonious unity between different Islamic architectural

> schools. … The late Sheikh Zayed aimed to establish a historical Mosque, personifying the Islamic message of peace, tolerance and diversity. He intended to turn the Grand Mosque into a living reference in modern Islamic architecture linking the past with the present in a harmonious melody.59

Both in terms of the design of bringing together various materials, styles, and even laborers, the mosque has been framed as a "globally unifying" landmark.60 There is insufficient space to fully detail the political significance of this cosmopolitan narrative here, but suffice it to note that Sheikh Zayed's commitment to diversity and internationalism has become a key nationalist narrative in the UAE61—and one that is consistently used to illustrate his extraordinary character as both a leader and a human being. This is further elaborated by the spokespeople at the mosque, who describe his religious ideals thus:

> Zayed adopted a tolerant version of pure Islamic faith far from fanaticism or extremism. Zayed's piousness and purity strengthened his relationship with God, the Almighty. For him, Islam is the main source of instruction and guidance. … Giving priority to moral values, Sheikh Zayed believed that developing a culture of tolerance is a project which deserves attention and concern like any other great initiative. To him, tolerance is the evidence of a nation's vitality and proof of its ability to achieve more advancement and progress. Understanding human nature, Sheikh Zayed seeks to promote a culture of tolerance able to reconcile the entire hu- man race through the emphasis on the common bonds that link man- kind together.62

As this excerpt and the one above illustrate, the image of Sheikh Zayed is carefully curated in relation to the mosque. By interpreting its many architectural components, visitors are instructed in the contemporary nationalist ideals of the UAE. In contrast to "fanaticism or extremism," the text highlights "peace,"

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59 SCGMC, "Sheikh Zayed and the Grand Mosque," *Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque Centre,* 2016. Available at: http://www.szgmc.ae/en/sheikh-zayed-and-grand-mosque (accessed March 14, 2016).

60 Sangeetha Swaroop, "The World's Largest Carpet: An Ode to Creativity and Exemplary Workmanship," *Al Shindagah* (2008), available at: http://alshindagah.com/shindagah83/culture_2.htm (accessed January 24, 2016).

61 But see Koch, "Is Nationalism Just for Nationals?"; Neha Vora, *Impossible Citizens: Dubai's Indian Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

62 SCGMC, "Sheikh Zayed and the Grand Mosque."

"tolerance," "diversity," "piousness," "purity," "progress," and the "nation's vitality" as traits and values exemplified by Sheikh Zayed and his vision as the UAE's founding father. The injunction that all Emiratis should share these values goes unstated here; the majestic splendor of the mosque and sacralization of Zayed's image in its every accouterment does that rhetorical work alone.

Monumentality is also a significant feature of the Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque. Although diminished in both size and cost by the mosque in Abu Dhabi, monumentality and spectacle are always relative to the context in which they are embedded. Thus, for Turkmenistan, Niyazov's mosque with a 10,000-person capacity and reported cost between us$100–150 million is truly spectacular.63 Built in Kipchak, a village on the outskirts of Ashgabat where Niyazov was born, it is truly a monument to his personalistic rule and a material testament to the politics of the leaders' self- and regime-promoted aggrandizement. As Jan Šír has noted, "mosques enjoy a special status in

63 Space restrictions limit further elaboration, but it is important to note that this mosque fits into a broader trend across Central Asia and the Caucasus of building monumental mosques, while the government has simultaneously clamped down on religious practice at the smaller scale (see Felix Corley, "Turkmenistan: 2004, The Year of Demolished Mosques," *Forum 18 News,* 2005, available at: http://www.forum18.org/archive .php?article_id=481 (accessed March 14, 2016)). In Azerbaijan, for example, the recently opened Heydar Aliyev mosque is said to be the largest in the Caucasus, the new Hazrat Sultan mosque in Astana was designed to be the largest in Central Asia located—both surpassing the Kocatepe Mosque of Ankara, which was originally touted as the largest mosque in Central Asia when it opened in 1987. These monumental building projects are also importantly tied to wider networks of elite financial scheming and patronage politics that cannot be detailed at length here (but see Halonen, "Shadow of the Holy Book"; Nata- lie Koch and Anar Valiyev, "Urban Boosterism in Closed Contexts: Spectacular Urbanization and Second-Tier Mega-Events in Three Caspian Capitals," *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 56, no. 5 (September 2015): 575–598; Josh Kucera, "Turkmenistan: WikiLeaks Shows French Firm Indulging Berdymukhamedov's Penchant for Grandiosity," Eurasian- et.org, December 13, 2010, available at: http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62567 (accessed May 15, 2014)). But suggestive of these practices, the Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque, for example, was built by a subsidiary of the French firm Bouygues, which has notoriously suspicious business practices in Turkmenistan (David Garcia, "The desert kingdom of Bouyguestan," *Le Monde Diplomatique (English Edition),* 2015, available at: http:// mondediplo.com/2015/02/11bouyguestan (accessed 14 March 2016); Halonen, "Shadow of the Holy Book"; Bradley Jardine, "Offshore Turkmenistan: 'Sultanism' in the Construction Industry," *The Diplomat,* 2015, available at: http://thediplomat.com/2015/09/offshore -turkmenistan-sultanism-in-the-construction-industry/ (accessed March 14, 2016)). Bouygues' website curiously lists the funding client as the Moroccan Interior Ministry ("Kipchak Mosque," *Bouygues Building Canada,* 2016, available at: http://www .bouyguesbuildingcanada.com/en/content/mosque-0 (accessed March 14, 2016)).

Figure 6 *Entry arch at the Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque, reading in Turkmen: "The Ruhnamais the holiest book – the Quran is the book of God". May 2014.*
Source: Author.

monumental art and architecture of Turkmenistan," with state officials alleging that they help "revive the spiritual values of the Turkmens," but also buttressing Niyazov's own image project as the leading spiritual figure in Turkmenistan.64 Perhaps the best known aspect of this agenda is his spiritual "guidebook," the *Ruhnama*, that students were forced to study and recite. Treating his text as a form of scripture, he even instructed youth to read the spiritual guide three times a day "in order to secure a place in heaven."65

Verses from the book were in fact engraved on the walls of the Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque, itself an act deemed blasphemous by Muslims around the world, but taken to the extreme with one particularly incendiary quotation on the entry arch of the mosque, which reads: "The Ruhnama is the holiest book—the Quran is the book of God" (*Ruhnama mukaddes kitapdyr—Gurhan Allanyn Kitaby*) (*see Figure 6*). Defending the decision upon the opening of the

64 Šír, "Cult of Personality," 217.

65 Murat Sadykov, "Turkmenistan: Schools to Scrap Late President's Holy Book," Eurasianet.org, August 2, 2013, available at: http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67336 (accessed May 15,2014).

mosque in 2004, Niyazov told the media that "his words on the walls would become 'guiding stars' for current and future generations of Turkmen citizens," adding that "it was sensible to have inscriptions ordinary Turkmens could understand."66 As with the official narratives about the symbolic and ideological significance of the Sheikh Zayed mosque's features, we see an effort to infuse the mosque's architecture with Niyazov's personal ideals and nationalist spirit. In both cases, the public persona of the leader is written into the building's features, as if this very act both illustrates and constitutes his superior spirituality and moral righteousness—in short, his spiritual authority.

The act of writing these ideas and assertions into the symbolic landscape at their memorial mosques also has the effect of concretizing their particular visions with respect to religion and its political significance for their "pastorate," to return to Foucault's framing. But of course, these fatherly shepherds' visions were and continue to be controversial, both locally and among global observers. But as with any monumental site, the message being sent is just as important as the fact that it is intended to be a unidirectional form of communication, not open to contestation or debate.67 In the end, Niyazov's justifications for the *Ruhnama* inscriptions may have won few supporters. This notwithstanding, they clearly evince an overarching image of the late president, which conforms to the prevailing paternalist and pastoral image of him as a shepherd—not only in life, but also in death, guiding "future generations" to come. As with the abundant gold statues of him throughout Turkmenistan, the Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque aims to "stabilize the landscape and temporally freeze particular values in it"68—those claimed by the personalistic regime with Niyazov as its figurehead. The theme of the leader's legacy in the afterlife is most clearly displayed in the mausoleums at the Turkmenbashi Ruhy and Sheikh Zayed mosques. By placing the mausoleums adjacent to the eponymous mosques, the two leaders and their adherents seek to cultivate a sacred aura around the specific personality of the deceased. Like so many great leaders and national heroes elsewhere in the world, who are laid to rest in their nation's most prestigious sacred sites, the final resting ground of the "father of the nation" becomes a special place in the nationalistically imagined "homeland."69 In this respect,

66 BBC, "Vast Mosque Opens in Turkmenistan," *BBC News*, 2004, available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/3946035.stm (accessed March 14, 2016).

67 Koch, "The Monumental and the Miniature," 779.

68 Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 6.

69 Lily Kong, "Cemeteries and Columbaria, Memorials and Mausoleums: Narrative and Interpretation in the Study of Deathscapes in Geography," *Australian Geographical Studies*, 37, no. 1 (1999): 1–10.

Zayed and Niyazov's mausoleums operate as monuments, clearly at the top of the hierarchy of memorial sites commemorating the founding father. In their effort to monumentalize the nationalist father figure, both mausoleums have certain commonalities with Lenin's Mausoleum on Red Square in Moscow, as well as Atatürk's monumental mausoleum (Anıtkabir) in Ankara.70 Although they are not visited in the same fashion as those two sites, where citizens, local politicians, and foreign dignitaries alike attend plentiful solemn wreath-laying ceremonies, high-ranking international visitors do in fact visit the Sheikh Zayed and Turkmenbashi Ruhy mosques (naturally many more in the UAE than Turkmenistan given that country's comparative openness).71 Although the ad- joining mausoleums are not the major focal point of the sites, they quietly but- tress the image of these leaders as spiritual figures. Like the statues considered by Katherine Verdery, the mausoleums-as-monuments alter "the temporality associated with the person, bringing him into the realm of the timeless or thesacred, like an icon."72

This search for the sacred thus makes it significant that the mausoleums are located on the grounds of and adjacent to their eponymous mosques, representing an explicit claim to the leader's sacred authority. But as I have just noted, the fusion of religious discourses and those valorizing the distinct persona of the leader means that they can begin to look like megalomania. This has certainly been a common interpretation of Niyazov's mausoleum, which he shares with his family members (*Figure 7*). Like the mosque itself, the mausoleum was built by the French construction firm Bouygues. It is no coincidence that it is modeled on that of Napoleon: a two-tiered complex with visitors looking down on the tombstones below. Like Sheikh Zayed's mausoleum, which also sits adjacent to the Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi, photographs are prohibited—although I have found an image of the interior of Niyazov's on the Bouygues website (*see Figure 8*).73 The regulation barring photography may seem minor, but it nonetheless furthers the planners' effort to lend the symbolic sites a hallowed air and, in so doing, sacralize the image of the "father of the nation."

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70 Aygen Erdentuğ and Berrak Burçak, "Political Tuning in Ankara, a Capital, as Reflected in Its Urban Symbols and Images," *International Journal of Urban & Regional Research*, 22, no. 4 (1998): 589–601; Benjamin Forest and Juliet Johnson, "Unraveling the Threads of History: Soviet-Era Monuments and Post-Soviet National Identity in Moscow," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 92, no. 3 (2002): 524–547; Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives!: The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, ma: Harvard University Press, 1997).

71 Unfortunately, visitation figures are not publicly available for the two sites considered here.

72 Verdery, The Political Lives, 5.

73 Bouygues, "Kipchak Mosque."

Figure 7 *Saparmurat Niyazov's mausoleum adjacent to the Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque. May 2014.*
Source: Author.

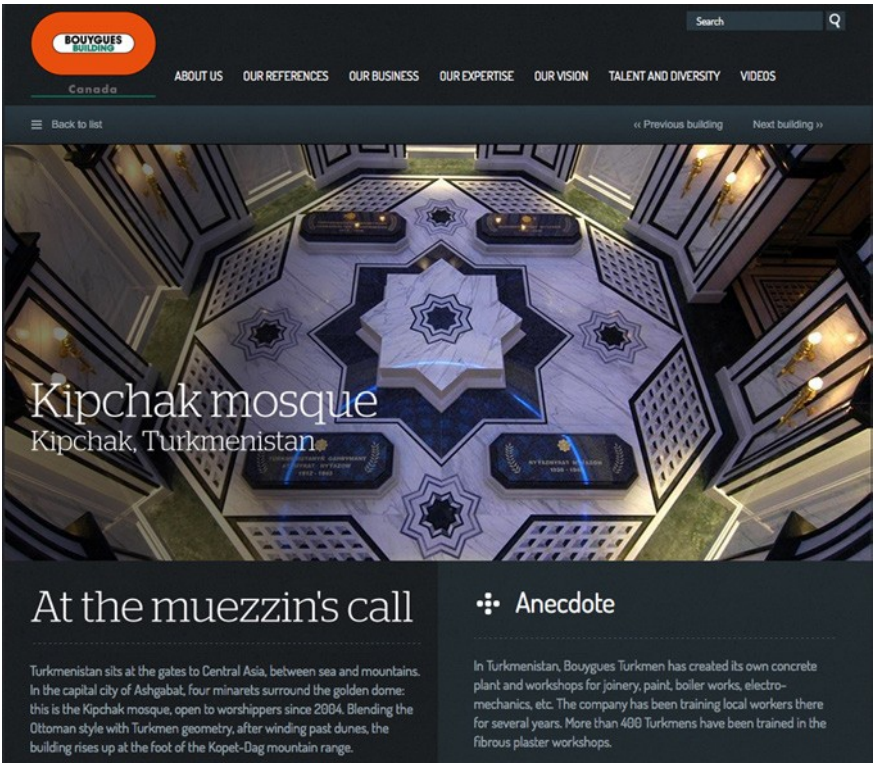

Figure 8 *Screenshot from the interior of Niyazov's mausoleum from the Bouygues website.*
Source: Fair Use.

Discussion and Conclusions: The Political Lives of Dead Leaders

This article began with a critique of the common narrative about personalistic regimes as being defined by a "cult of personality" of the leader. I argued that this designation is not only Orientalizing, but it can obscure the more com- plex political dynamics that go into producing the image of a faultless and exceptionally endowed leader. The risk of all clichés is that they discourage critical reflection: observers seem to already "know" what political relation- ships are at play when they can tap into a preexisting set of assumptions about how cults of personality work. But in considering the two mosque complexes in Turkmenistan and the UAE, it becomes abundantly clear that despite the many similarities around the image of the "father of the nation" of Niyazov and Sheikh Zayed, there are also many political geographic differences that need to be considered to explain the convergence around these symbolic landscapes.

A great deal of effort and material resources must go into developing them and, then, transforming them into a popularly revered site symbolizing the father figure's spiritual affinities. This is no easy task—as we see in the UAE, where Sheikh Zayed's mosque has the distinct feel of a mass packaged-tour destination rather than a hallowed site to remember the leader. Or in the case of Turkmenistan, on the first anniversary of Niyazov's death, which had been named the "First President Saparmurat Niyazov Turkmenbashi the Great Memorial Day," the state media tried to illustrate an outpouring of commemoration at the mosque—but instead showed a deserted site and a forgotten leader. These issues notwithstanding, if the two leaders and their regimes had chosen to develop a more secular monument to their figurehead leaders, like Anıtkabir or Lenin's mausoleum, it would have been much more difficult to cultivate their sacred authority: ready-made religious discourses and symbols—in this case, the Islamic mosque—made it much easier to sacralize the image of Zayed and Niyazov.

In the independence era, governments in both countries have stressed the importance of a strong-hand leadership style, with a focus on stability. This conservative impulse is not the result of one power-hungry leader at the top, as we are often led to believe by popular media coverage of authoritarian regimes. Rather, it is the result of a wider political culture of elites jockeying not simply to advance their position and gain more power, but perhaps more often, not to lose the immunity and improved quality of life that comes with being an insider. This need to constantly balance political opportunity and risk is similar to how Stephen Kotkin describes the Stalin-era "urban milieu of Magnitogorsk,"

where "every urban inhabitant knew, even if only instinctively, what he or she needed to do in order to live. The urban inhabitants knew how to make the best of their lot; they knew what should be avoided and which rules could be bent under what circumstances and which could not."74 Some of these individuals might interpret their actions as genuine or disingenuous—or not consciously reflect on them at all. But by continuing to pay homage to the figure of the "father of the nation" in post-Niyazov Turkmenistan and the post-Zayed Emirates, subjects of those states can stay safely within the rules that continue to structure political discourse today.

As noted at the outset, sacred authority is but one form of authority that regimes may employ. What makes it particularly useful in Turkmenistan and the UAE after the founding fathers have passed is the flexibility it affords elites to legitimate their privileged status within the prevailing rules of the discursive environment set up under the first leader. The troublesome twist, of course, is that the regimes' figurehead has passed and his successors, Sheikh Khalifa in the UAE and President Berdymukhamedov in Turkmenistan, cannot claim the same status of "father of the nation." But by reducing Zayed and Niyazov to an iconic founding father—a spiritual and moral *symbol*—the newly con- figured elite apparatuses can begin to re-narrate the values he is said to rep- resent. Sacralizing the father of the nation is ultimately a claim to the right to define the meaning and significance of his legacy. So while Niyazov may have liked to think that his *Ruhnama* inscriptions would be "guiding stars" for future generations, and Sheikh Zayed may have wished his Grand Mosque to be a "living reference" for the virtues of tolerance and peace, symbolic landscapes are inherently unstable. So too are political systems. In describing the removal of monuments in postsocialist Europe in *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*, Verdery writes:

> Tearing down and erecting statues goes on all over the world, in times past as well as present; there is nothing specifically postsocialist about it. Because political order has something to do with both landscape and history, changing the political order, no matter where, often means changing the bronzed human beings who both stabilize the landscape and temporally freeze particular values in it.75

74 Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 154.

75 Verdery, *The Political Lives*, 6.

While the Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque and the Sheikh Zayed Mosque may represent the regimes' efforts to "temporally freeze particular values" in the urban landscape, their symbolic orders have already begun to change.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Turkmenistan. Despite a collective moment of anticipation on the part of international observers, who seemingly expected a complete transformation of the country's system the morning after Niyazov's death in 2006, business appeared to go on as usual. And yet, changes have been underway in Berdymukhamedov's "Era of Might and Happiness."[76] In Ashgabat, these changes have included the slow removal of statues of Niyazov or their relocation to the city's periphery. But because legitimacy in Turkmenistan was so tethered to the image of Niyazov, this has been a slow process indeed. With Berdymukhamedov as the new figurehead, the elites in the reconfigured personalistic system cannot attribute his legitimacy to being the "father of the nation," but only as a steward of his legacy as the paternalist shepherd of the Turkmen people. But as the government continues to transform the country's symbolic landscapes and increasingly move away from the idiosyncratic policies laid out under Niyazov, an iconic site like the Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque in fact affords the new leaders leeway to make changes running counter to his particular vision, while still claiming to uphold it. A monument (which is precisely what the eponymous mosques are) is just as much a device for forgetting as it is remembering, in that it allows political actors to state their commitment once and move on, rather than constantly narrating their deference. When that deference is called into question, it is easily deflected by pointing to the monument's persistence: a visible indication of those values temporally and spatially "frozen" in the urban fabric.

A similar dynamic is at work in the Emirates, under Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan. The new government continues to discursively legitimate its authority from its claims to upholding the founding vision of Sheikh Zayed, despite relying much more heavily on its repressive apparatus- es, especially in the wake of the 2010 Arab Spring uprisings, both through in- creased local censorship and internal surveillance, as well as participating in a range of regional military operations in support of the us anti-ISIS campaign,

76 Eurasianet, "The Slow Fading of Turkmenistan's Former God," Eurasianet.org, January 4, 2013, available at: http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66337 (accessed May 15, 2014); Horák, "The Elite"; Horák and Šír, *Dismantling Totalitarianism?*; Sadykov, "Turkmenistan."

among others.77 Reference to the spiritual authority of Sheikh Zayed, then, takes on more significance in this period of political change, which is undoubtedly controversial and could easily be critiqued as running counter to the values of "peace," "tolerance," and "diversity" written into the very walls of Sheikh Zayed's mosque. As in Turkmenistan, though, an iconic site like the Grand Mosque is a particularly convenient way of deflecting this criticism, because it ostensibly stands as a monument to these values and their persistence in the present. Claiming the right to narrate Zayed's legacy and symbolic meaning as the "father of the nation" thus becomes of discursive resource to buttress the spiritual authority of the current regime.

In both Turkmenistan and the UAE, where the authoritarian states continue to be imbued by personalism, the leader-as-icon operates not as tragicomic "cult of personality" indicative of certain political "backwardness." His image is rather part of a broader ideological discourse that constitutes key elements of the nationalist imaginary, infused with paternalist norms and values, to justify prevailing nondemocratic political systems. Discourses, though, can both trap and liberate those who choose to employ them. The act of materially in- scribing these discursive claims into the urban landscape, for example in the form of mosques commemorating and sacralizing the "father of the nation," indeed reflects this dual nature, as actors seek to fix certain values and identity narratives, but also try to free themselves from a singular interpretation and re-interpret their significance for the contemporary political community. As scholars of memory have long illustrated, localized struggles over meaning cause symbolic landscapes to constantly be in flux. It just so happens that rather than abstract values like "freedom," "democracy," "stability," or "progress" that dominate ideological discourses elsewhere, the icon at the center of personalistic regimes is a charismatic individual who symbolizes all that is good in the nation. But in the world's varied systems, democratic and authoritarian alike, politics is ultimately about who gets the authority to represent what is "good." From this perspective, personalistic regimes appear to be rather less "bizarre" than some observers might like to imagine.

77 Silvia Colombo, "The GCC Countries and the Arab Spring: Between Outreach, Patronage and Repression," Istituto Affari Internazionali Working Paper 12, no. 9 (March 2012): 1–15; Ingo Forstenlechner, Emilie Rutledge, and Rashed Salem Alnuaimi, "The UAE, the 'Arab Spring' and Different Types of Dissent," *Middle East Policy*, 19, no. 4 (2012): 54–67; Koch, "Is Nationalism Just for Nationals?"; Sean Yom and F. Gregory Gause, "Resilient Royals: How Arab Monarchies Hang On," *Journal of Democracy*, 23, no. 4 (2012): 74–88.