The Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan: Episodes of Islamic Activism, Postconflict Accommodation, and Political Marginalization

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Abstract

The parliamentary elections on March 1, 2015, mark a caesura for postconflict Tajikistan. With the exclusion of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) from Tajikistan's parliament, the political elite has finally abandoned the principles of the 1997 General Peace Accord, which had ended the country's Civil War (1992–1997). Since then, the IRPT has distinguished itself as a credible oppositional political party committed to democratic principles with an almost imperceptible religious agenda. By shifting the IRPT's attention to issues of democratization and socioeconomic development, its chairman, Muhiddin Kabirī, opened the IRPT to a younger electorate. Continuous defamation campaigns and persecution, however, have worn down the IRPT's activists and its electorate. The party's electoral defeat did not come as a surprise.

Keywords

Central Asia – postconflict Tajikistan – Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan

On March 2, 2015, the chairman of Tajikistan's Central Election Committee, Shermuhammad Shohiyon, announced the preliminary results of the parliamentary elections. The Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (*Hizbi nahzati islomii Tojikiston*—IRPT) had failed to clear the 5 percent threshold and therefore would not be represented in Tajikistan's Lower House (*Majlisi namoyandigon*) in the forthcoming legislative period. The audience—mostly representatives

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of the different political parties and Dushanbe's civil society—was silently perplexed by the historic outcome of the elections and the ultimate termination of Tajikistan's postconflict political economy that had originated in the 1997 General Peace Accord. In his initial response, the IRPT's chairman, Muhiddin Kabirī, criticized the administration of the elections but immediately con- firmed the IRPT's compliance with the secular-democratic system (including the participation in elections) and therefore remained faithful to the discursive conventions of postconflict Tajikistan conjuring peace (*tinj*) and stability.[1] In contrast, Shodī Shabdolov—a veteran politician who has been chairman of the Communist Party since the tumultuous independence in 1991—drily commented:

> To whom should we complain, to the General Procurator, to the Central Election Committee, to whom? Everything is in the hands of one party and its leadership is with the President. We will not file any complaint, but the outcome of this election will not be positive. I do not know who advised the President on this issue, but a person should think about the consequences of his decisions. The campaign that happened in our country on 1 March was not an election; it was decreed (*taʿinot*).2

Shabdolov's comments indicate the trajectories of "virtual politics" in Tajikistan and the perception that political institutions and processes are orchestrated and manipulated.3 And although senior IRPT representatives (including Kabirī) shared a similar perception in conversations over the past years, the IRPT nonetheless consistently adheres to the informal political arrangements of postconflict Tajikistan, acknowledging the achievements of the political

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1 For postconflict Tajikistan see John Heathershaw, *Tajikistan*: *The Politics of Peacebuilding and the Emergence of Legitimate Order* (London: Routledge, 2009).

2 The interview with Shabdolov on the Tajik service of Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe *Radioi Ozodī* homepage (http://www.ozodi.org/content/reaction-for-parliament-election-in -tajikistan/26876990.html (accessed March 10, 2015). See additionally the online version of the newspaper *Faraj*: "Intikhobot: Oghozi "era"-i nav [Elections: The Beginning of a new "Era"] at http://faraj.tj/main/8498-intihobot-o1171ozi-era-i-nav.html (accessed June 16, 2015) and "Intikhobi taʿrikhī: Hizbi nahzati islomii Tojikiston basta shavad yo ne?" [Historical Elections: Will the IRPT be Banned or Not?], *Nigoh*, April 1, 2015.

3 For the concept of "virtual politics," see Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2005) and John Heathershaw, "The Global Performance State," in Madeleine Reeves, Johan Rasanayagam, and Judith Beyer (eds), *Ethnographies of the State in Central Asia: Performing Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 29–54.

transition since 1997 and the legitimacy of the political system. Nonetheless, the government has consistently marginalized the IRPT since the mid-2000s and increased the pressure in recent months. The exclusion from the Lower House is far more significant for the IRPT than the loss of two seats in a rubber- stamp institution dominated by the presidential People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan. Despite the political marginalization and continuous defamation campaigns, the formal representation of the IRPT in parliament had always been a symbol of the mutual recognition of the terms of the Peace Agreement and of the exemplary character of Tajikistan's postconflict politics. This has now ended.

The political marginalization, defamation, violent assaults on individual IRPT politicians as well as their public persecution by local officials has paralyzed the party politically and consumed its leadership's energy.4 At the same time, the IRPT has been additionally challenged by the profound social, political, and cultural transformation of Tajik society in recent years and has only slowly adapted to these challenges: labor migration has undermined the traditional social fabrics in the conservative patriarchic milieu of rural Tajikistan (where the IRPT had a large electorate); the government has reorganized the religious administration and has increased government control over religious institutions appropriating "Islam" in its official imagination of Tajik national identity; simultaneously, popular and independent religious authorities renegotiate Islam among a younger generation of Tajik Muslims, encouraging a "new" assertiveness in public religious practice without including the IRPT at all. As a political party with a pronounced religious agenda promoting Islamic values, the IRPT has difficulties—beyond the hostile government politics—in responding to the changing societal environment in Tajikistan.

This article looks at three interrelated aspects, or episodes, of the IRPT's interaction with the wider society: First, I explore the difficult historical relationship of the IRPT with the larger religious field (in the sense of Pierre Bourdieu), in particular with the registered as well as independent *ulamo* before the outbreak of the Civil War in 1992.5 Second, I refer to the changing government administration of religion (Islam) in Tajikistan, i.e., the proliferation

4 Conversation with IRPT representatives in April 2015 in Dushanbe.

5 *Ulamo* is the Tajik version of the Arabic *ʿulamā*, the plural of *ʿalim*, which usually describes religious scholars in the Islamic tradition. In Tajikistan as well as elsewhere in Central Asia, religious scholars and authorities simultaneously use a variety of honorific titles common in the Islamic tradition, such as *pir*, *sheikh*, *mahdum/mahzum*, *domullo*, and so forth indicating at times an affiliation to one of the major mystical orders in the region. As for the religious field and Bourdieu's sociology of religion see: Pierre Bourdieu, *Religion* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2011).

of the High Council of Tajikistan's *ulamo* as the central administrative institution since 2010, further restricting the IRPT's room to maneuver. Third, I look at the changing government imagination of Tajik identity and the IRPT's response to it. These three aspects highlight the changing context of Islam and politics in Tajik society in the past decades.

Origins: The IRPT in Tajikistan's Religious Field

Political Islamism and the proto-Islamic Revival Party6 emerged in rural Tajikistan, in particular the Qarotegin and Vakhsh Valley, among a post-Stalin generation of men who repudiated the Soviet system and intentionally remained at the margins of Soviet society by relinquishing Soviet career patterns.7 The group around the IRPT's founder, Abdulloh Nurī (1947–2006), developed a conservative Hanafi-Sunni religious agenda that aimed at (re-) establishing a public and normative religious practice as well as the social-political relevance of Islam in Tajik society.8 While social interventionism was a novelty in the Soviet context, the ideas of a Hanafi-Sunni tradition or normativity were related to one of the key figures of the "Islamic revival" in Central Asia, *domullo* Muhammadjon Hindustonī (1892–1989), who taught many of the proto-IRPT activists in small circles of students—including Nurī. Until the early 1980s the IRPT resembled a regional cultural and religious club with vague political ambitions, not a political party. This might be related to the origins of the IRPT in rural Soviet Tajikistan and among *muhoğir* (internal "exiles" of the Soviet resettlement campaigns) from the Qarotegin Valley—social groups, as

6 Initially, Nurī and his associates did not give the movement a formal name and simply called it *harakat* (Tajik for movement). In the late 1970s, they adopted the name Revival of Islamic Youth of Tajikistan (*Nahzati Javononi Islomii Tojikistan*). The current designation emerged only during the discussion of the union-wide Islamic Revival Party in 1990. See Sattorī, Qiyomiddin (ed.), *hnit—Zodai ormoni mardum* [The IRPT—Born by the Will of the People] (Dushanbe: ShKOS, 2003), 14.

7 See the memoirs of Sulton Hamad, *Dar payrahai nur* [On the Path of Light] (Dushanbe: Muattar, 2013); Saidumar Husaynī, *Khotiraho az nakhust oshnoiyam ba Harakati Islomii Tojikiston to rasmiyati on* [Memoirs from My First Acquaintance with the IRPT Until Its Registration] (Dushanbe: Muattar, 2013) and Zubaydulloh Roziq, *hnit dar masiri ta'rikh* [The IRPT on the Path of History] (Dushanbe: Muattar, 2013). Cf., Stéphane Dudoignon, "Political Parties and Forces in Tajikistan, 1989–1993", in Mohammad-Reza Djalili, Frédéric Grare, and Shirin Akiner (eds), *Tajikistan: The Trials of Independence* (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 1998), 52–85.

8 "Normative" (or normativity) are understood as constructed in this context.

Stéphane Dudoignon pointedly remarks, that were theoretically less receptive to political Islamism compared with the "classical" social origins of Islamism in the industrial urban centers.9 Arguably, Soviet Central Asia is a deviation from this paradigm due to the importance of the agro-industrial complex and cotton cultivation, which shaped the social transformation and mobilization since the 1960s and 1970s. Ultimately, the particular background of the IRPT accounts for the lack of versatile Soviet-urban intellectuals in its ranks who could transmit the IRPT to the urban electorate in Soviet Tajikistan.10

Most of the Islamist activists graduated in disciplines such as applied sciences and economics. Nurī studied geodesy and worked in the Qūrghonteppa land survey department, Saidumar Husaynī holds a degree in economics, Saidibrohim Gadoev (aka: Muhammadnazar) graduated in mechanical engineering (therefore his nickname *inzhener*—engineer) and Davlat Usmon has a law degree. Some activists—despite a higher education and professional career options—assumed positions that offered more time for private studies but still provided a moderate income and the important *propiska* (residence permit), for instance as nightshifts in the central heating facilities or as night guards. Even in rural Tajikistan, Islamic activists found occupational niches providing additional spare time for their private religious studies, such as gathering mulberry leaves, breeding silkworms, or as beekeepers. At the same time, the activists emphasize their rigid self-discipline, strict regulation of daily life, abstinence from alcohol and cigarettes, and eschew extramarital relation- ships.11 The activists around Nurī thus located themselves outside the main- stream milieus in the later Soviet Union, projecting an alternative lifestyle to the system's career patterns and social recognition.12

9 Stéphane Dudoignon and Sayyid A. Qalandar, "They Were All from the Country: The Revival and Politicisation of Islam in the Lower Wakhsh Valley of the Tajik SSR (1947–1997)," in Stéphane Dudoingnon and C. Noack (eds), *Allah's Kolkhozes: Migration, De-Stalinisation, Privatisation, and the New Muslim Congregations in the Soviet Relam (1950s–2000s*) (Berlin: Klaus-Schwarz, 2013), 47–122. See also Dudoignon, *Political Parties*, 67 and Peter Mandaville, *Islam and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

10 In September/October 1991, the IRPT forged an alliance with the secular opposition in Tajikistan, the Democratic Party of Tajikistan and the civil associations Rastokhez and Laʿli Badakhshon. But the "radical-religious" alliance was short-lived: Internal dissent, personal animosities, the deepening political polarization, and eventually the outbreak of violence in May 1992 fragmented the opposition.

11 Conversation with a former member of the IRPT (Dushanbe, September 2008) and Husaynī, *Khotiraho,* 19–33.

12 Cf. Alexei Yurchak, *Everything was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

Abdulloh Nurī emphasizes five central elements in the movement's origin and agenda. First, he depicts the population of the Qarotegin Valley and Vakhyo as pious and devout Muslims deeply rooted in the culture of the mountain valleys and therefore particularly receptive for Islamic activism. Second, the Qarotegin/Vakhyo population values the traditional Islamic education and therefore the region has produced many important religious scholars (like Nurī himself). Third, horticulture and the local work ethic have made local communities prosperous, and therefore they were able to send their sons and daughters to the centers of the Islamic civilization to acquire a higher Islamic education. Fourth, due to the entrenchment of Islam in the local culture of Qarotegin and Vakhyo, the movement emerged within an authentic local context and was not influenced by foreign movements.13 Fifth, the movement is firmly located within the larger Sunni-Hanafi tradition and as a continuation of the regional *jadidī* movement in the late nineteenth–early twentieth century.14 However, the reference to the *jadidī* movement remains vague, and Nurī never explicates what the *jadidī* movement in his imagination stands for. Apparently, Nurī considered the *jadidī* movement as an "authentic" Central Asian phenomenon embarking on an indigenous modernization project that was interrupted by 70 years of Soviet rule.15 Furthermore, the movement nourished a strong anticolonial senti- ment and Hojī Akbar Tūrajonzoda (the former *qozikalon* of Soviet Tajikistan) observes that the political nomenklatura of Soviet Tajikistan feared the IRPT and the "awakening of Islam" (*bidorii islom*) initiated by the IRPT since this posed "a serious threat to their own colonizing project" (*isteʿmorgarona*).16 Hojī Qalandar Sadriddin, another founding member of the IRPT, mentions three central concerns of their circle: (1) to reintroduce Islamic culture and teach Islam to the people; (2) to fight against unlawful "novelties (*bidʿat*) and superstitions" that had become popular among the common people in Soviet Tajikistan; and (3) eventually to "end the silence of the *ulamo* and to

13 The government frequently portrayed (and stilly portrays) Islamic activism as "foreign" and "alien" to the tolerant, peaceful, and quietist local (authentic Tajik) Islam. See below and Sattorī, *hnit*, 16.

14 For the *jadidī* movement, see Khalid Adeeb, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

15 Muhammadsharif Himmatzoda, Nurī's closest associate, elaborates on the *jadidī* heritage as well and depicts the IRPT as the direct successor of the *jadidī* movement after an enforced hiatus of 50 years Soviet rule. See Sattorī, *hnit*, 17 and 47.

16 Hojī Akbar Tūrağonzoda, *Miyoni obu otash…* [Between Water and Fire…] (Dushanbe, 1998), 50.

Command Right and Forbid Wrong (*amri maʿrufu nahyi munkar*) in public again"17 in order to increase Islamic morals (*akhloqi islomī*) among the Muslims of Tajikistan. The movement's agenda and their activism gradually generated tensions with the established religious authorities. Next to the issue of "innovations" and the "correct" religious practice, IRPT members criticized the political quietism and lack of social intervention by the established *ulamo* in Soviet Tajikistan:

> Among the circles of the Sufis [*halqahoi ahli tasavvuf*], the recitation of books was common in which the *pir* of the order [*tariqa*] was reading a book and his students [*muridon*] were contemplating on "Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong," but never in public meetings.18

Zubaydullo Roziq (who joined the movement in 1978) therefore narrates the emerging IRPT also in terms of a generational split: The established—registered as well as unregistered—religious specialists in Tajikistan were largely self-sufficient, conducting general religious services for the population (for remuneration) but did not popularize Islam anymore.19

The increasing politicization of Central Asian Muslims in the 1970s and 1980s eventually nurtured dissent among the Islamic activists who refused to constrain themselves to the promotion of quietist normative Hanafi Sunni Islam as Hindustonī did. The Soviet invasion and prolonged campaign in Afghanistan accelerated the politicization of Uzbek and Tajik Islamists, some of whom had served in the Soviet Army in Afghanistan. Remarkably, the most contentious disputes among the religious activists were not about jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*aqida*), or politics and ideology, but about ritual practice, particularly rituals that were silently tolerated by the Soviet authorities, such as funerals (*janoza*)20 or the popular visit to local shrines (*ziyorat* to a *mazar*), and performed in public.

The funeral ritual became a highly contentious issue since they were conducted in public where the religious specialists could monitor each other. They

17 Roziq, *hnit*, 45. See also A. Qayumzod, "Xudo bo most, pirūzī niz" [God is with us, victory as well], *Čaroġi rūz*, no. 45 (1992), 3. The Arabic/Persian term *amri maʿrufu nahyi munkar* (Command Right and Forbid Wrong) refers to a central tenet of the Islamic tradition. Cf. Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

18 Roziq, *hnit*, 49.

19 Roziq, *hnit*, 46–49.

20 See Dudoignon and Qalandar, "They Were All from the Country."

also often included a variety of local or regional customs such as expressive mourning, the exchange of "gifts," and the expensive community funeral feasts (colloquially often called *osh*, in the religious literature *taʿomi sartakhta*) commemorating the deceased after seven days, 40 days, and/or one year.21 While the question of ritual normativity was perhaps used as a pretense, the underlying issue was often financial, in particular the financial burden on the deceased's families who were expected to meet certain expectations by the local communities.22 Roziq reports that with the post-Stalinist revival of religious communities, the "correct" (or normative) practice was increasingly undermined by unacceptable "innovations [*bidʿatho*] … local conventions and customs as well as superstitions [*urfu odatho va xurofot*]."23 Islamic activists around Nurī accused local mullahs of transforming religious rituals into a lucrative business and inventing additional rituals and practices in order to receive additional donations.

Individual religious scholars condemned these practices. For instance *qorī* Odil in Chorkūh ordered his sons in the late 1970s to bury him quietly without a large funeral service. When his father passed away, Abdullo Nurī declined to arrange a *janoza* with the obligatory *osh* expected by the population in the Tajikistan collective farm.24 The disputes over the correct religious practice and innovations among the local population, the local mullahs, and adolescent activists triggered fierce debates, and even Zubaydulloh Roziq concedes that some of the activists were too "hot-blooded [*khungarm*] … and outside the limits of etiquette [*odob*] and academic disputation [*munozarai ilmī*]."25 Their aggressive behavior toward the established religious authorities and their communities significantly damaged the reputation of the IRPT among traditionally minded religious circles.

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21 For an evaluation, see Hojī Akbar Tūrajonzoda, *Shariat va jomea* [Sharia and Society] (Dushanbe: Nodir, 2006), 29–38.

22 Still today, a *ǧanoza* with complementary *taʿom* is very expensive affair in Central Asia and Tajikistan easily summing up to several thousand USD. The government in Tajikistan tried to regulate the expenses for rituals by a controversial 2007 "Law on Traditions, Festivities, and Ceremonies."

23 Roziq, *hnit*, 70–71.

24 Roziq (*hnit*, 74–76) reports that Nurī avoided any *bidʿat* during the funeral service of his father, such as the *oshi sartakhta* or the distribution of money to the mourners. However, the "common people" (*ommai mardum*) severely criticized Nurī for burying his father without a "proper" *janoza.* See also Dudoignon and Qalandar, "They Were All from the Country," 91.

25 Roziq, *hnit*, 75.

Defamation and "Othering": The Seal of the Mongols

Analysis of Islam in the USSR, by both Soviet and Western researchers, changed after the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Since the 1980s it has been dominated by concerns that Islamic extremism would subvert the stability of the USSR (and today's post-Soviet Central Asia), and this concern has become increasingly instrumental for legitimizing a narrow, security-driven and authoritarian approach to Islam. In Soviet Tajikistan, the discussion on the emergence of clandestine Islamist circles and the increasing return to religious practice (often attributed to rural communities) started in the mid-1980s. Soon a hostile discourse unfolded in the media and among the political nomenklatura, depicting any form of public religiosity outside the official institutions as a manifestation of extremism or fundamentalism instigated from abroad. The term Wahhabi (*vahhobī*) emerged as a central and influential designation for the forces opposing Soviet modernization and later the secular statehood of independent Tajikistan. Although the term refers to the Saudi Arabian variation of the Hanbali law school in Sunni Islam, the Wahhabiyya, those who employed the term were less concerned about its religious or historical meaning than its potential for defamation. The term was popularized by the Soviet press and used by the KGB and established religious personnel to denounce Islamist activists not registered with the official institutions and who followed "nontraditional" forms of religious practice and thought. The alleged Wahhabis in late-Soviet Central Asia had nothing in common with the Saudi Arabian Wahhabiyya but were labeled Wahhabi due to their noncompliance with the narrowly defined religious normativity of the official institutions (the sadum).26 Notably, the introduction of the politicized term Wahhabi in Soviet Central Asia is associated not with a KGB operative but with Hindustonī, who reportedly applied the Wahhabi label the first time for a group of dissident students. Zubaydullo Roziq concedes that "it is a reason for sadness, however, that the term [*vahhobī*] was first used by Mavlavī Qorī Muhammadjon Hindustonī" in disputes with younger Islamic activists.27 Hindustonī elaborated on the Wahhabi issue further and composed a short polemic against the Wahhabiyya and its founder Muḥammad
b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb in 1987.28 However, those Islamic activists disqualified by

26 B.M. Babajanov, A. Muminov, and A. von Kügelgen, *Disputes on Muslim Authority in Central Asia in Twentieth Century* (Almaty: Daik-Press, 2007).

27 Roziq, *hnit*, 77.

28 For an edition of the letter (in Persian) see: Babajanov, Muminov, and Kügelgen, *Disputes*, 113–116 and, for the Russian translation, 108–112.

Hindustonī as Wahhabi understood themselves rather as "renovators (*mujaddidon*)"29 or "reformers (*islohxohon*)" and certainly not as Wahhabi.

Hindustani's fierce criticism and denunciation of his students as contributed to an increasing polarization between the established religious specialists (born between the 1890s and 1930s) and their younger contenders (born since the late 1940s). The confrontation culminated in a meeting between Hindustonī and his critics in the village of Mirovoy (in the Jilikūl district). A local business- man had invited Hindustonī and a few other established *ulamo*. Activists had waited for the opportunity to confront Hindustonī and to persuade him to retract the Wahhabi accusations against their circle. Reportedly, the atmosphere became increasingly aggressive, and Hindustonī felt pressured by the younger mullahs. He finally gave in and the group dispersed. But a few days later Hindustonī announced that he had felt threatened by the Wahhabi and that his earlier verdict was correct (i.e., that they are actually Wahhabi).

Abdullo Nurī, whose authority partly derives from his intimate affiliation with Hindustonī, tried to mediate and keep the movement aloof from the aggravating conflict.30 The relation between Hindustonī and his former students, however, became irreconcilable with an open letter by the "reformers/ renovators" circulating a few weeks after the meeting, accusing Hindustonī of ignorance (*johil*) in religious affairs, complacency, and portraying him as a puppet of the colonial Soviet regime. They evoke the image of Dukchī-*eshon* (who had led an uprising against the Russian barracks in Andijan in 1898) and his meritorious *jihod* against the Tsar, accusing Hindustonī of collaboration with the colonial system:

> The humiliation of Islam [*horii Islom*] is not important to you. …. You are contemptuous of the time Islam was a free religion and you appraise the rule of the unbelievers [*kufr*]. Due to your influence among the common Muslims you profited from the *sadoqat*31 and you were in the service of a government that was the enemy of God and His religion.32

29 Within the Islamic tradition, the term *mujaddid* is based on a Prophetic tradition and has been frequently used for various reformers. After Abdullo Nurī's demise in 2006, the IRPT published a memorial volume calling Nurī the *mujaddidi asr*, the "renovator of the age," see Muhiddin Kabirī (ed.), *Mujaddidi asr* (Dushanbe: ShKOS hnit, 2007).

30 For the most vivid narrative see Roziq, *hnit*, 81–84.

31 *Sadoqat* is voluntary charity (beyond the *zakot*), in the 1980s, several religious authorities were accused of embezzling *sadoqat*.

32 Quoted in Roziq, *hnit*, 91. See also Abdulloh Rahnamo, *Ulamoi Islomī dar Tojikiston* [The *ulamo* in Tajikistan] (Dushanbe: Irfon, 2009), 173–182.

Hindustonī eventually replies to the open letter of the *mujohid* (as he calls him) and reminds his audience that he was three times sentenced to a Gulag: "You address me as ignorant [*johil*], but for more than 20 years I ventured on the journey for knowledge—but where did you study?"33 Hindustonī expresses his indignation about the unethical and impolite way he was addressed and recalls that the uprising of Dukchī-*eshon* had been suppressed by Tsarist forces with many casualties among the Muslim community in the Fergana Valley. The uprising was not successful and even fostered Russian rule over the region. Muslims should be aware of the Islamic tradition concerning the *jihad*, which can be the fight against unbelievers in a war, but more importantly, should be understood as the struggle within one's soul, which the Prophet called the "greater (*akbar*) *jihad.*"34

The term Wahhabi was eventually plagiarized by the KGB as a "seal" (*tamgho*)35 for Muslim activists in their defamation campaigns in the public and media and constructed—as Johan Rasanayagam points out—a local Otherness.36 The label Wahhabi simultaneously entered Western academic circles related to Islam in Central Asia/Tajikistan.37 For instance, the doyen of Western Soviet "Islamology," Alexandre Benningsen, exploits the Soviet press and in 1988 characterized Nurī as an

> ascetic, he knows the Koran by heart and has a solid theological background. Among his followers, he enjoyed the reputation of a saint, but he refused to recognize the official Soviet Islamic hierarchy, accusing it of betraying Islam. Saidov calls himself a "Wahabi." His public preaching centered on one idea: the creation of the territory of Tadzhikistan of an independent Islamic republic.38

33 Roziq, *hnit*, 95.

34 Roziq, *hnit*, 85–98.

35 Roziq, *hnit*, 78. *Tamgho* is originally a Mongol term for the emblem of a particular tribe and seal/stamp, in Farsi *tamġā* likewise means "stamp" or "stamp-tax" associated with the (non-Islamic) Mongol tax system, cf. Bert Fragner, Bert 'social and Internal Economic Affairs," in W.B. Fischer et al. (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran: The Timurid and Safavid Periods* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 491–567.

36 See Johan Rasanayagam, *Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: The Morality of Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 122, 144–153.

37 Cf. Muriel Atkin, *The Subtlest Battle: Islam in Soviet Tajikistan* (Philadelphia, PA: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 1989).

38 Alexandre Benningsen, "Unrest in the World of Soviet Islam," *Third World Quarterly*, 10, no. 2 (1988): 778–779.

Benningsen's reading of the Soviet press indicates how carelessly the term Wahhabi has been applied by journalists, the KGB, politicians, diplomats, and eventually Western academics. A serious Wahhabi would certainly not be proud of his attention to Sufism (the Wahhabiyya is hostile toward Sufi orders) or would accept being seen as a "saint" by his followers. Last, but not least, the entire IRPT leadership carefully avoided any public reference to an "Islamic state." In the public discussion, the meaning of the term Wahhabi remained vague, elusive, and a political instrument. Safaralī Kenjaev, an influential conservative politician who adopted an Andropov-style approach to reform in the perestroika period and became chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Tajikistan in 1991, insinuates that Wahhabi is in general alien to the Tajik culture and nation; therefore, a Wahhabi is essentially a foreign "other."39 In a polemic against the *qozikalon* Tūrajonzoda and the IRPT, Kenjaev subsumes the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, Mawdudi, and the IRPT as Wahhabi without differentiation demonstrating the ahistorical and discretionary application of the term.40 Būrī Karim—a radical reformer, in many respects Kenjaev's antagonist and former chairman of the state planning agency Gosplan—categorically rejects the existence of a Wahhabi group in Tajikistan and concludes that the fight against the Wahhabis is similar to "Don Quixote's war against wind mills."41

The early IRPT was until 1991 a movement that encompassed diverse groups of Islamist activists adhering to a rather broad religious agenda striving to re-establish their idea of a Sunni-Hanafi normativity among the Muslims in the Tajik ssr. Nurī and Himmatzoda merged the normative Hanafi Sunni Islam of the pre-Soviet Central Asian tradition with the political interventionist teachings of Qutb or Mawdudi and a variation of anticolonial Tajik nationalism. The first IRPT party program from 1991 was remarkably silent about its religious agenda:

> The IRPT is a social-political entity for the Muslims of the Republic of Tajikistan, based on Islamic principles [*aqidai islomī*] which is based on the belief in the one God and on the prophet Muhammad (s). … The Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan is a parliamentary party and participates in elections and suggests its own candidates as people's candidates.
> … The aims of the IRPT are: Spiritual revitalization [*ehyoi maʿnavī*] of the

39 Safaralī Kenjaev, *Tabadduloti Tojikistan* [Coup d'état in Tajikistan] (Dushanbe: Fondi Kenjaev, 1993), 140.

40 Ibid., 259.

41 Būrī Karim, *Faryodi solho* [The Cry of Years] (Moscow: Transdornauka, 1997), 459.

> citizens of Tajikistan / economic and political independence of the republic / political and legal awakening [*bedorii siyosī va huquqī*] with the aim to implement the foundations of Islam in the life of Muslims in Tajikistan.42

From the perspective of religious practice and agenda, the label Wahhabi is certainly wrong for the leading representatives of the IRPT. Actually, they respected or even followed the major Sufi orders in the region and practiced religious rituals not accepted by the Wahhabiyya, such as the *mavlud* (birthday of the Prophet Muhammad), *janozat* (the funeral rites), or the *ziyorat* (visit to a local shrine). The term Wahhabi—in the Russified variation *vovčik*—nonetheless became one of the central markers for Otherness in the early stages of the Civil War in Tajikistan and contributed to the deadly polarization in the Tajik society. The IRPT's role in the Civil War, however, is beyond the limited scope of this article.43

The conflict between Islamic activists and the established *ulamo* should be seen in the overall context in which political Islamism was negotiated, in particular the latent competition between the lay–religious contenders and the established *ulamo*. Although Nurī and Himmatzoda acquired their symbolic capital to a significant extent by their close affiliation with prominent religious authorities (Nurī was a student of Hindustonī and Himmatzoda affiliated to the imminent Naqshbandī authority *eshoni* Abdurahmonjon), they were never able to transform from political activists to *ulamo* acknowledged for their religious guidance (or the *amri maʿruf*).44 The particular origins of the IRPT, its interventionist activism, and its critique of the societal and political quietism of established *ulamo* are causative for the reservation with which many *ulamo* view the party until today; since the General Peace Accord in 1997 not a single prominent religious authority (registered or independent)

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42 Cf. the copy of the program in Muhammad Orzu (ed.), *40 soli Nahzat. Khotira, andesha, didgoh* [40 Years of IRPT. Memoires, Thoughts, Observations] (Dushanbe: Muattar, 2013), 438.

43 See Tim Epkenhans, "For the Soul, Blood, Homeland, and Honour: The Origins of the Civil War in Tajikistan" (forthcoming 2016).

44 The two ideological key personalities in the IRPT, Abdullo Nurī and Muhammadsharif Himmatzoda, passed away at a relatively early age (both were 59) and left only fragmentary religious treatises. See, for instance, Muhammadsharif, Himmatzoda, *Didgoh va masoil* [Views and Issues] (Dushanbe: Devatich, 2006). Nurī was apparently working on a Koran commentary (*tafsir*) as fragments on his website (www.nuri.tj/kitob/) indicate (accessed April 15, 2015).

has unequivocally expressed his support or sympathies for the IRPT. Admittedly, more than just the IRPT's turbulent past (including the experience of the Civil War) has contributed to the distance between Tajikistan's *ulamo* and the IRPT—the social transformation of the Tajik society since 1997, the consolidation of the religious field including the emergence of a younger generation of religious scholars, and a new assertiveness of lay religious com- munities as well as shifting government politics regarding Islam have contributed to the divides.45

The IRPT and the High Council of *ulamo*

Beginning in 1943, the USSR regulated a state-sanctioned version of Islam with the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (Russian: *Dukhovnoe upravlenie musul'man Sredney Azii i Kazakhstana*—sadum). The intricate role of the sadum—the complicity of Soviet academia, the KGB, and established *ulamo* in defining and categorizing "Islam"—has been aptly addressed by Mark Saroyan, Devin DeWeese, Eren Tasar, Michael Kemper, Stéphane Dudoignon, and Johan Rasanayagam.46 The sadum underwent significant changes in the late 1980s when a younger, post- Stalinist generation of religious authorities reorganized the body into a more independent and interventionist institution emphasizing its political and societal relevance. While the *muftī* Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf (1952–2015) initiated this change in Soviet Uzbekistan, his associate Hojī Akbar Tūrajonzoda (b. 1954) transformed sadum's branch in Tajikistan (which was until 1989 formally subordinated to the sadum in Tashkent), the

45 Cf. Shahnoza Nozimova and Tim Epkenhans, "Negotiating Islam in Emerging Public Spheres in Contemporary Tajikistan," *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques*, 67, no. 3 (2013): 965–90; Manja Stephan, "Education, Youth and Islam: The Growing Popularity of Private Religious Lessons in Dushanbe, Tajikistan," *Central Asian Survey*, 29, no. 4 (2010): 469–483 or Sophie Roche, *Domesticating Youth: Youth Bulges And Its Socio-Political Implications in Tajikistan* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014).

46 See, for instance, Michael Kemper, "Ljucian Klimovič: Der ideologische Bluthund der sowjetischen Islamkunde und Zentralasienliteratur," *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques*, 63, no. 1 (2009), 93–133; Mark Saroyan, "Rethinking Islam in the Soviet Union," in S. G. Solomon (ed.), *Beyond Sovietology: Essays in Politics and History* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), 23–52 and the seminal study by Eren Murat Tasar, ''Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, 1943–1991" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2010).

qoziyot, to an independent institution with significant political leverage in the later perestroika years.47 As the *qozikalon*, Tūrajonzoda adopted initially an ambivalent policy toward the Islamic activists in the IRPT. He pointed out that the Tajik society was not ready for an Islamic party and even urged the *ulamo* registered with the *qoziyot* to sign a statement that they were not members of the IRPT and would not join the party thereafter.48 At the same time, however, Tūrajonzoda hired Nurī as the co-editor (next to Tūrajonzoda's brother Mahmudjon) for the *qoziyot*'s newspaper, *Minbari Islom*, while Muhammadsharif Himmatzoda wrote the editorial for the first issue.49 Apparently, Tūrajonzoda intended to contain the IRPT by including their key representatives in the affairs of the *qoziyot* and to utilize the activists' vigor and influence among a younger generation of Muslims. However, the increasing political polarization in Tajikistan after independence and open hostilities by the former communist nomenklatura against the *qozikalon* made it increasingly difficult for Tūrajonzoda to maintain the *qoziyot*'s independence, and in spring 1992 he eventually joined the opposition.50 In November/December 1992—the Civil War had devastated the Vakhsh Valley and the 16th Session of Tajikistan's Supreme Soviet had just elected Emomali Rahmonov to its new chairman adumbrating the defeat of the opposition—Tūrajonzoda left Tajikistan and went into exile. He even joined the IRPT as its deputy chairman (next to Himmatzoda) and represented the party during the peace negotiations. However, his affiliation with the IRPT had only been a marriage of con- venience. In 1999—two years after the General Peace Accord and his return to Tajikistan—he left the IRPT and became its most vocal critic throughout the early 2000s.

Immediately after the Rahmonov government was formed in December 1992/January 1993, the *qoziyot* was replaced by a *mufityot* chaired by Hojī Fathullokhon Sharifzodai Hisorī, who had a less interventionist agenda and

47 Dudoignon, *Political Parties* and Tim Epkenhans, "Defining Normative Islam: Some Remarks on Contemporary Islamic Thought in Tajikistan—Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda's Sharia and Society," *Central Asian Survey*, 30, no. 1 (2011), 81–96. In the 1970s Muhammad Sodiq and Tūrajonzoda were classmates in the Miri Arab *madrasa* in Bukhara and later fellow students in Tashkent. Both were among the few religious students who were sent abroad for post-graduate studies in the early 1980s, Muhammad Sodiq went to Libya, Tūrağonzoda to Jordan.

48 Roziq, *hnit*, 181–182 and Foreign Broadcast Intelligence Service, *Daily Report: Soviet Union*, October 3, 1990, 88.

49 Sattorī, *hnit*, 19.

50 Tūrajonzoda, *Miyoni*, 23.

had tried to keep the *mufityot* out of the Civil War.51 Sharifzoda, however, was assassinated in January 1996 and succeeded by *qorī* Amonulloh Neʿmatzoda. Under his long tenure from 1996 to 2010, the *mufityot* was again transformed into the (present) Islamic Center (*Markazi Islomī*) and High Council of Tajikistan's *ulamo* (*Shūroi olii ulamoi Tojikiston*), which exercised limited control over the registered religious institutions and rarely intervened publicly into religious affairs. Instead, the government relied on the Department for Religious Affairs (DRA, in the presidential administration) and the National Security Council (NSC) to regulate and contain religion. Remarkably, two related developments changed the parameters of how religion was perceived and negotiated in Tajikistan during the quiet tenure of Amanullo Neʿmatzoda.

First, for some time the IRPT was able to represent "Islam" in Tajikistan's political public and among the international community. After the 1997 General Peace Accord, the international community (for instance, the United Nations Tajik Office of Peacebuilding and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe) facilitated dialogue projects with representatives of the "secular" government and the "religious" opposition, in which the IRPT— largely unchallenged—claimed the exclusive representation of and agency for "Islam" in Tajik society.52 The IRPT's political agenda after 1997 followed the official political discourse of postconflict Tajikistan in which political pluralism, democracy, "peace," and vague Islamic values are conjured but never explicitly defined.53 Likewise, party representatives never claimed the public "Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong," as had been demanded by early IRPT activists.

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51 Foreign Broadcast Intelligence Service, *Daily Report: Soviet Union* January 21, 1993, 71–72. Sharifzoda (also Sharifov) was born 1939 into an influential family of Naqshbandī *pir*s and served since the 1980s as a registered *imom-khatib* in Hisor.

52 See, for instance, the documentation of the dialogue project by Jean-Nicolas Bitter (ed.), *From Confidence Building towards Co-Operative Co-Existence: The Tajik experiment of Islamic-Secular Dialogue* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2005) and various similar publications in Russian and German.

53 The collection of articles by Himmatzoda (*Didgoh va masoil*) demonstrates the IRPT's adherence to the discursive conventions of post-conflict Tajikistan: all five chapters deal with general political issues and the how a party with a religious agenda should operate in a secular society and operate within the limits of the constitution and a globalized political context.

Second, Islam in its many variations and meanings has (re)gained its social relevance in society despite hostile official politics. Independent religious authorities have become visible public figures "commanding right" while public observance of religious praxis (prayer, mosque attendance, Muslim rites of passage, and so forth) has noticeably increased among a younger generation of Muslims in Tajikistan. Importantly, Tajikistan's *ulamo* have quietly reclaimed the prerogative of interpreting what Islam could mean in Tajik society—albeit without including the IRPT in this project.54

Likewise, the Tajik government reconsidered its policy toward Islam. In 2007 the government decided to declare the year 2009 as the "Year of Imomi Aʿzam," celebrating the founder of the Hanafi school of law (*mazhab*) in Islam (the dominant Sunni *mazhab* in Central Asia) eventually integrating Islam into the official narrative of Tajik history and national identity.55 While the reconfigurations of official identity politics remain contradictory and ambivalent, the restructuring of the Islamic Center and the High Council of Tajikistan's Ulamo in 2010 after the death of *qorī* Amanullo Neʿmatzoda changed the administration of Islam in Tajikistan decisively. To the surprise of many observers, the government arranged the appointment of Saidmukarram Abdulqodirzoda to succeed Neʿmatzoda.

Abdulqodirzoda was born 1963 in the Sovietskii district (now Temurmalik) close to Kūlob in southeastern Tajikistan (thus, he has the right regional provenance), into the family *domullo* Abdulqodir (a local religious specialist). Abdulqodirzoda completed his graduate studies at the International Islamic University in Islamabad (with a specialization on *tafsir* and *hadith*) in 2000 and continued his postgraduate studies at the same university.56 In 2003 Abdulqodirzoda returned to Tajikistan and started to teach at Dushanbe's Islamic University Imomi Tirmizī, which is subordinated to the High Council.

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54 See Nozimova and Epkenhans, "Negotiating Islam."

55 During the Civil War, the Rahmonov government reformulated the Soviet historiography of Tajikistan based on the Aryan "ethnogenesis" of the Tajiks and their early statehood in the 10th century CE with the Somonid dynasty. Initially, Zoroastrianism was promoted as the genuine Tajik/Aryan religion, but these efforts were abandoned in the early 2000s. For the secular identity construction see Marlene Laruelle, "The Return of the Aryan Myth: Tajikistan in Search of a Secularized National Ideology," *Nationalities Papers*, 35, no.1 (2007): 51–70.

56 In 1991, the *qozikalon* Tūrajonzoda agreed on an exchange program with the International Islamic University in Islamabad (IIU) and over the past decades several Tajik *ulamo* graduated from the IIU, including one of the most popular contemporary religious authorities in Tajikistan, Hojī Mirzo Ibronov, the former *imom-khatib* of the Hiloli Ahmar Friday Mosque in Kūlob.

From 2004 to 2008, he was the vice rector of the university (simultaneously he studied journalism at Tajikistan's State University). In 2008, he shifted to the Department for Religious Affairs in the Presidential Administration until he succeeded Neʿmatzoda as chairman of the High Council in 2010.57 Abdulqodirzoda's professional pedigree certainly qualified him for the position, and he immediately demonstrated his intention to enforce stricter control over the registered religious institutions and their personnel.

In coordination with the Department for Religious Affairs, the Islamic Center restructured the curriculum of the Islamic University Imomi Tirmizī and imposed stricter control over the 19 religious middle schools (*madrasa*) in Tajikistan. It promots a traditional conservative, quietist, and regime- loyal Tajik variation of Islam. Paradoxically, the Islamic Center embraces an idea of Islam that almost resembles a Salafī interpretation, but actually originates in the South Asian Deobandi movement.58 By embracing a "radical" variant of Islam, the Islamic Center aggressively defines a narrow Islamic normativity that integrates (quietist) Salafī sympathizers but excludes Muslims who follow a broader Islamic tradition or emphasize the political relevance of Islamic thought. The conservative interpretation of Islam by the Islamic Center clearly outpaces popular religious specialists, such as Tūrajonzoda, Hojī Mirzo, and the IRPT in its rigorousness. Furthermore, the Islamic Center has adopted a concerted strategy to (re)capture its dominance within the reli- gious field: Abdulqodirzoda confronted and sidelined independent religious authorities (such as the Tūrajon family59), and it established a controversial and intimidating examination board for *imom-khatibs* testing their "knowledge" (which—as a matter of course—is defined by the Islamic Center, the DRA, and "experts" on Islam in the Strategic Study Center under the president 60). Simultaneously, the Islamic Center has started to provide *imom-xatibs*

57 See the short biography on the High Council's website: http://muftiyat.tj/en/members/ ids/3 (accessed April 15, 2015).

58 The Islamic Center emphasizes the importance of the regional Hanafi tradition and a cursory analysis of the Center's announcements and statements suggests a strong influence of the Deobandi movement (perhaps in continuation to Hindustonī). See Stéphane Dudoignon, "From Revival to Mutation: The Religious Personnel of Islam in Tajikistan, from de-Stalinization to Independence (1955–91)," *Central Asian Survey*, 30, no. 1 (2011): 53–80.

59 Cf. Nozimova and Epkenhans, "Negotiating Islam."

60 See "V Tadzhikistane nachalasʿ proverka deyatelʿnosti imam-khatibov sobornykh mechetey," *Islam News TJ*, December 14, 2011, http://islamnews.tj/tajikistan/564-v-tadzhikistane- nachalas-proverka-deyatelnosti-imam-hatibov-sobornyh-mechetey.html (accessed April17, 2015).

with a monthly income ($170–300, depending on their position) and has imposed a uniform dress code.61 Finally, since 2012 the Islamic Center has issued a list of suitable sermon topics for the important Friday *khutba*, including specifications how long the *khutba* and the "Commanding Right" (*amri maʿruf*) should take.

The Islamic Center demonstrated its interventionist strategy in the 2015 parliamentary elections. Shortly before election day (March 1), on Friday, February 27, it issued a text for the Friday *khutba* titled "Elections in Islam" (*Intikhobot dar Islom*).62 The *khutba* underlined that, already in the time of the Prophet Muhammad, elections were an important process and called on the congregation to cast their votes. While this general call for participation might be laud- able, the *khutba* eventually revealed its underlying intention: to denigrate the IRPT. The text repeats a well-known slogan from the political confrontations in 1992/97, that "Islam is no [political] party and that if Islam needed a party, the Prophet Muhammad would have established one."63 Although the *khutba* does not mention the IRPT explicitly, the text refers to "various parties and groups that claim to act in the name of Islam," but these groups have contributed to the conflicts and disunity and they act "against the noble people of Tajikistan, they are against us and you!" [*muqobili movu shumo*].64 The political discourse in contemporary Tajikistan is rich in insinuations and conspiracy theories; therefore, the audience had no difficulty understanding the subtext of the *khutba*. This equally applies for the final paragraph of the text. Instead of voting for dubious individuals and groups,

> We should think who will provide a future for our homeland? Since the future of our homeland, of our children depends on every single of our votes. We should vote for the person, where we can see the results of his activities, we should support the party, that brought peace to the Tajik people, which organized an international symposium for Imomi Aʿzam [Abu Hanifa] and introduced him to a global audience, and which constructed 4,000 mosques in the Republic.65

61 See "Tajik Imams get a Makeover," *rfe/rl News*, January 18, 2014, http://www.rferl.org/content/tajikistan-imams-makeover/25234064.html (accessed April 17, 2015).

62 A copy of the *khutba* text circulated online, See, for instance, http://www.ozodi.org/content/tjk-officials-recommended-to-imams-to-criticise-islamic-party-in-preelection-cermon-on-fab-27/26870678.html (accessed April 17, 2015).

63 Islamic Center, *Intikhobot dar Islam* [Elections in Islam] (Dushanbe, February 27, 2015), 2.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid., 3.

The rather unsubtle electioneering for President Rahmon and his ruling People's Democratic Party indicates the paradigmatic change in the official perception of the Civil War and the General Peace Accord in 1997. While for several years the IRPT and, in particular, its chairman, Nurī, were allowed a share in the peace process and postconflict rehabilitation, this role is now exclusively reserved for Rahmon himself. A few weeks after the elections, on March 27, the Islamic Center issued an explicit *khutba* calling for a ban on the IRPT. Under the headline "The Unity and Solidarity of the Society in the right Election," the author congratulates the Tajik people for their wise decision to vote for the party that guarantees Tajikistan's future as well as "peace and unity" (*sulhu vahdat*).66 The outcome of the elections demonstrated that "except for a few divisive [*judoikhohon*] individuals, nobody supports"67 the IRPT. Notably, the *khutba* refers to Afghanistan, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Libya where so-called Islamic parties have destabilized the governments and instigated civil wars, resulting in uncountable civilian deaths and suffering. In particular, the reference to Arab countries after the so-called Arab Spring discredits IRPT chairman Kabirī, who has travelled extensively to the region and expressed his sympathies for political transformation.68 The *khutba* rhetorically asks whether the events in the Arab world and Ukraine should be under- stood as a manifestation of democracy. Instead, the Muslims of Tajikistan should understand that President Rahmon is a great blessing (*neʿmati buzrug*) for the country since he established peace and stability in Tajikistan. The repeated references to the political developments in the wider Islamic world indicate how nervous the political elite has been over the Arab Spring.

Eventually, the *khutba* implicitly calls for the suspension of the (albeit virtual) democratic system in Tajikistan. Instead, the people should unite behind Rahmon and his party in order to express their solidarity and unity. The Islamic Center's *khutbas* mark an unprecedented appropriation of religion by

66 The second *khutba*, dated March 27, 2015, circulated immediately in the internet. See, for instance, http://www.ozodi.org/content/deputy-tajik-mofti-about-islamic-revival-party/26923410.html (accessed April 17, 2015).

67 Ibid.

68 See the frequent reports in the IRPT's weekly newspaper *Najot*: "Ghanushī: Tunis kishvari dunyavī nest" [Ghanushī: Tunisia is not a secular country], *Najot*, February 29, 2012, 6; "Az Dushanbe to Baytulmuqaddas" [From Dushanbe to Jerusalem], *Najot*, April 4, 2012, 4; Kamol Misrī, "Ey islamogaroyon, ba mardumi xesh va digaron chī payome doda meta-voned?!" [Islamists, what kind of message can you give to your own people and others?!], *Najot*, January 24, 2013, 13; A. Davlat, "Jahoni Islom" [The Islamic World], *Najot*, February 7, 2013, 4.

Tajikistan's government and the opening salvo in the defamation campaign against the IRPT and its chairman. While there have been defamation campaigns against the IRPT before, the quality and approach have changed significantly, indicating a more subtle understanding of how to orchestrate virtual politics in postconflict Tajikistan: The IRPT is no long a mere "radical" or "fundamentalist" Islamic party; now the party is divisive and has a wrong understanding of Islam and of democracy as a political system. The *khutba* furthermore excludes the IRPT and its supporters from the "solidarity" of the "united" and "noble Tajik people" (= us) and constructs them as a diametrically opposed "Other"—narrative strategies that have been employed before and during the Civil War.

The IRPT in Postconflict Tajikistan

The postconflict role of the IRPT has been significantly shaped by Muhiddin Kabirī (b. 1965), who was appointed to the IRPT's Presidium (*Riyosat*) in 1999 and served as Nurī's deputy from 2003 until the latter's death in 2006. As a graduate of the Moscow Diplomatic Academy and an Islamic university in Yemen, Kabirī opened the IRPT to a younger and more urban electorate. Accurately, *The Economist* characterizes Kabiri as "the modern face of the party and the symbol of a new generation."69 After Nurī passed away, Kabirī won the recognition of the IRPT's Presidium and was eventually elected chairman of the party. However, Kabirī's candidacy was challenged by representatives of the "old guard," who demanded a return to the IRPT's original electorate (conservative rural Tajikistan) and more pronounced Islamist political platform. After losing the vote to Kabirī, veteran IRPT activist Davlat Usmon even resigned his membership in the IRPT, indicating the cleavages within the party.70 The current charter (*oinnoma*) of the IRPT, which was adopted in September 2003, reflects the development of the IRPT to a conservative party with a vague reference to "Islamic values." The charter states that the IRPT's program is based on the "principles of the Islamic belief" (*dar asosi aqidai islomī*) but continues with very nationalist priorities, demanding

69 "Allah's Shadow: Is Radical Islam a Threat to Central Asia's Stability?", *The Economist*, May 17, 2003.

70 Davlat Usmon (b. 1957) had been next to Nurī and Himmatzoda one of the key activists in the early IRPT. In the Government of National Reconciliation (formally in office between May and November 1992), Usmon served as deputy prime minister and, after the General Peace Accord, as minister of economy until 2000.

> the protection of the political, economic, and cultural independence of Tajikistan; the protection of the unity (*jakporchagī*) and territorial integrity of Tajikistan; the protection of the consolidation of peace, support for the national unity (*vahdati millī*) and the fraternal co-existence of the [different] people of Tajikistan; the expansion of the supreme Islamic values (*arzishhoi voloi islomī*) as well as the national and general human values among the society of Tajikistan; the resurrection of the culture and spirituality (*maʿnavijot*) of the citizens of Tajikistan based on the supreme Islamic and national values (*arzishhoi voloi islomī va millī*); the refutation of regionalism (*mahalgaroī*) and nepotism (*qavmgaroī*) in the state structures and in the cadre-politics (*sijosati kadrho*); to support the democratization of the society; the implementation of the objectives through the participation of party representatives in the legislative institutions.71

This quote from the IRPT's charter demonstrates how much the IRPT's leadership has become a captive of its own postconflict role and discourse as a nationalist, mildly Islamist opposition party, affirming the terms of the General Peace Accord and accepting the predominance of the Rahmon government.72 The pervasiveness of the postconflict political discourse has resulted in a con- version of the IRPT discourse with the official government one (except for the explicit reference to Islam).73

The official declaration of the year 2009 as the year of "Imomi Aʿzam," how- ever, indicated a significant change in the political strategy regarding "Islam" in Tajikistan. Previous commemoration years, including 2006 as the controversial "Year of Aryan Civilization" (*soli tamadduni orijoī*), reflected the paradigms of official identity politics, excluding religion from its constituent elements.74 However, with the sumptuous celebration of the founder of the Hanafi branch of Islamic law, the government virtually "poached" in the IRPT's discursive

71 IRPT [Hizbi Nahzati Islomii Tojikiston], *Oinnomai Hizbi nahzati Islomii Tojikiston* (Dushanbe 2007). The charter is also online on the IRPT's website: http://nahzat.tj/13014-oinnomai-izbi-nazati-islomii-toikiston.html (accessed March 10, 2015).

72 However, several IRPT members received a modest reward for their political restraint, mostly in form of business opportunities in an otherwise highly restricted economic environment (conversations in Dushanbe, March 2010).

73 See, for instance, the published speeches of President Rahmon[ov]: Emomalī Rahmon[ov], *Istiqloliyati Tojikiston va Ehyoi millat* [The Independence of Tajikistan and the Revival of the Nation] (Dušanbe: Irfon, 2000–2008).

74 Laruelle, "The Return of the Aryan Myth."

space and the celebration was one element in the overall struggle for interpretive predominance of what Islam should mean in Tajik society.

Rahmon outlined his interpretation of the significance of Abu Hanifa in a subtle article published in the government mouthpiece *Jumhuriyat*.75 In it, Rahmon presents Abu Hanifa as a representative of Statism, who considers a strong state as guarantor for peace and stability. Furthermore, Rahmon inte- grates Abu Hanifa into the Persian literary genre of Mirrors for Princes (usually called *andarz* or *pandu nasihat*) such as the *Qabusnoma* of Kaykavus Ibn Iskander, de-Islamizing Abu Hanifa and his heritage. He concedes that the Koran is a source for advice and council (*pandu nasihat*) commanding justice (*insof*), fraternalism (*barodarī*), as well as tolerance (*tahammulpazirī*). How- ever, Rahmon asserts that Abu Hanifa was first and foremost a Tajik merchant (*tojir*) and not merely a religious scholar, thus he was predominately concerned with justice and fairness (*adlu qist*) in commerce (*bazaar*) and less in the political or social system. In Rahmon's version of Abu Hanifa, the founder of the Hanafi law school admonishes his followers to show respect (*ehtirom*) toward the ruler (*podšoh*), to accept one's position in society, and to attend to one's duty, thus legitimizing the existing political and social order. These qualities, Rahmon continues, are needed for the "cultural reconstruction" (*bozsozii farhangi*) of post-Civil War Tajikistan. While Rahmon's interpretation was widely accepted by the Tajik intelligentsia, Muhiddin Kabirī challenges the official interpretation of Abu Hanifa's oeuvre in a commentary for the weekly *Ozodagan*:

> Why do we honor Imomi Aʿzam only for being a Tajik [*tojik budanash*] and his law school [*mazhab*] only for its opposition against radical currents [*muqobalat bo jarajohoi tundrav*]? Why are we afraid to say that the majority of us are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi law school and that every- one who respects the Hanafi law school as part of his self-awareness [*khudshinos*] should struggle to comply in his behavior, speech and religious thought with the Hanafi law school to the extent possible? Why don't we say that our society should acknowledge the person [of Abu Hanifa] and his law school as they are [*hamon tavre ki hast*] in order to follow

75 See "Imomi Aʿzam va ahloqi umumiinsonī [Imomi Aʿzam and universal human morals]," *Jumhuriyat*, July 9, 2009. The article was reproduced on the *Khovar* homepage, http://khovar.tj/archive/7549-imomi-azam-va-ahlo1178i-umumiinson1250.html (accessed April 17, 2015). Already in 2006, an edited volume of Rahmon's speeches was published dealing with religious affairs. E. Rahmon[ov], *Dar borai din* [On Religion] (Dushanbe: Sharqi ozod, 2006).

> them? Why don't we say that the teaching of Islamic knowledge [*maʿrifati Islom*] is a necessity, because the majority among us are Muslims and every self-aware Muslim has to know the principle foundations of his religion, just as every Christian or Jew—no one should be afraid or embarrassed to demand this. In case we are confident that the law school of Imomi Aʿzam is genuine and sincere, and that his thoughts are constituent [*sozgorand*] for our society and that this strengthens our statehood [*davlatdorī*], we need to confirm loudly and with courage.76

Kabirī's critique of the de-Islamization of Abu Hanifa/Imomi Aʿzam by the government went largely unheard; however, his comments indicate the IRPT's concerns regarding the government's official identity politics.

Conclusion

After the General Peace Accord 1997, the IRPT adopted the paradigms of the postconflict political discourse in Tajikistan, conjuring the exigency of "peace" and "stability." While initially the IRPT—and its chairman Nurī—was granted a share in the peace dividend, the government gradually consolidated its position and started to marginalize the IRPT. Since the mid-2000s, and in particular after the death of Nurī in 2006, Rahmon has increasingly presented himself as the exclusive guarantor of peace and stability in Tajikistan as well as the actual "architect of peace,"77 while the IRPT is presented in official history textbooks as responsible for the outbreak of the Civil War.78 Simultaneously, the government persecutes IRPT members and severely constricts the party's political activities throughout the country—arguably, the persecution and constant infringements have worn out the party's leadership and consumed its energy more than discussions about the nature of Abu Hanifa's contribution to the official imagination of Tajik identity. However, the IRPT's complex relationship with the *ulamo* and the profound restructuring of the wider religious field in Tajikistan in the past decade has further eroded the party's political and societal relevance. The IRPT never found a successful strategy to respond to the

76 Reprinted in Muhiddin Kabirī, *Din va siyosat* [Religion and Politics] (Dushanbe: Muattar, 2010), 12–13.

77 Rahim Masov, "Emomali Rahmon: "The Architect of Peace"," *Diplomatic World*, no. 36 (2012): S. 64–68.

78 See Rohat Nabieva and Zikriyoev Foteh, *Taʿrikhi khalqi Tojik. Kitobi darsī baroi sinfi 11* [History of the Tajik People. Textbook for the 11th grade] (Dushanbe: Sobiriyon, 2006).

increased assertiveness (and success) of the *ulamo* in "Commanding Right" and its diminished relevance in the larger religious field. Finally, the government's strategy to strengthen the quasi-state-controlled Islamic Center with the High Council of *ulamo* and to allow the institution a larger degree of control over religious personnel and institutions has significantly increased the government's "ownership" in the religious sphere and further isolated the IRPT. Perhaps, the government does indeed plan to ban the IRPT in the near future—the "defeat" in the elections, the belligerent rhetoric by representatives of the government, and the Islamic Center hint at this possibility. However, the government has manipulated and effectively taken over various political parties, orchestrating its version of democracy in recent years and this might be the plan for the IRPT as well.79 Apparently, Muhiddin Kabirī—as a charismatic, young, and versatile politician—was particularly targeted by defamation campaigns in recent years, and the government might try to arrange Kabirī's removal and the "appointment" of a more compliant and less charismatic successor (such as Nurī's son Muhammad). Although the government has not formally terminated the General Peace Accord of 1997, it has departed from the informal conventions of the postconflict political discourse in Tajikistan and suspended dialogue with the opposition. The recent (2015) celebrations on the Day of National Unity, commemorating the General Peace Accord of June 27, 1997, resembled more a monologue in which Rahmon portrays himself as the exclusive guarantor of peace and stability in Tajikistan while he holds the opposition responsible for the outbreak of the Civil War. Uncompromising, he concludes that

> in the course of history, not a single nation and its people have forgiven and will forgive treason against the homeland—mother, government and people. In particular, the noble people of Tajikistan will never forget the perfidious behavior (*raftori khiyonatkorona*) of some groups and individuals who have transformed the homeland of our ancestors into a field of blood and set our country which had only recently gained its independence on fire.80

79 Since the mid-1990s, the Democratic Party of Tajikistan and the Agrarian Party were manipulated and split into opposing factions. Except for the CPT, all parties in the current parliament are part of the presidential orchestration of "democracy."

80 "Sukhanronii Emomalī Rahmon, Presidenti Jumhurii Tojikiston, ba munosibati 18-solagii Rūzi Vahdati millī [Speech of Emomalī Rahmon, President of the Republic of Tajikistan, on the occasion of the 18th anniversary of the Day of national Unity," *Jumhuriyat*, June 27, 2015.

Lacking any subtlety, Rahmon leaves no doubts who these groups and individuals are, underlining the dramatic shift by his government to an increasingly confrontational policy. By excluding the IRPT and conducting a campaign of belligerent defamation against the party, the government has suspended any form of public debate in Tajik society on the legacy of the Civil War, the postconflict transformation, and the contemporary social and political challenges, eventually compromising the very "peace" and "stability" it claims to guarantee.

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