The Fabric of Answer: Constructing a National Facade

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Abstract

The fabric of answer (*fabrika javob*) refers to the efforts of Tajikistan's State Committee for National Security to respond to discussions in the media as well as among people (rumors). Its primary goal is to shape the outside facade of the country and shut down, ridicule or negate critical and dissident speech. The main goal is to work on the image (*imijsoz*) of the country, which is done by exploiting the notions of *vatan* (homeland) and *millat* (nation). The fabric of answer has become the main agent for deciding who is part of the homeland and nation and who is a traitor and enemy. Based on documents and internet discussions, this article demonstrates how the fabric of answer interferes in human lives and online discussions. The use of homeland and nation serves to emotionalize discussions and divert readers' attention from social problems and criticism.

Keywords

Tajikistan – secret services – social anthropology – fabric of answer

Introduction

Facebook and other social media have been identified as civil society-promoting tools during the Arab Spring[1] and as a new information source and form of

1 For an introduction to social media in the Arab Spring, see Reza Jamali, *Online Arab Spring* (Amsterdam et al.: Chandos Publishing, 2014).

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political participation for youth.2 Fewer researchers have investigated the use of social media by authoritarian regimes. In several post-Soviet states, Facebook has become a major platform for political discussions and opinion- making. Whereas Athina Karatzogianni observes that in social media political subjects are infants, I see Facebook's political role in Tajikistan as an extension of political discussions on the ground; it is for this reason that it has drawn the attention of the secret services. Tajik youths and secret service agents alike use social media as an extension of their struggle on the ground.3 By this I mean that they expect social media to be a controlled platform of communicative exchange while simultaneously providing the space for individual opinion-making and political activity. (Most political activists use their real names when they post on Facebook and contrast this with the fake Names of secret agents.)

In his article on "Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat," Serguei Alex Oushakine advised against seeing dissent as invisible underground work: "Strange as it may sound, publicity was an essential characteristic of Soviet dissent."4 With his argument that dissidents used the state's own language to claim political activism, he has highlighted perhaps the most specific feature of opposition-making in post-Soviet countries. This form of dissent relied on public texts known as *samizdat* (self-publishing), rather than forming a hidden transcript in James Scott's sense. Sarah Kendzior has noted a similar mimicry in Uzbekistan regarding the term *ma'naviyat*.5 Political discussions between the regime and dissidents, she has observed, are contextualized in morality claims that represent national pride. In a similar way, we will see that the Tajik state and opposition struggle over *vatan* (homeland) and *millat* (nation).

While Oushakine and Kendzior consider the state to be the initiator of the discourse, this is less obvious in Tajikistan. The Tajik opposition used the notion of *vatan* long before the president appropriated the term as part of his own ideology. Whatever its origin, the regime's control of society—and, by extension, of the internet—does not respond to hidden activities but to public

2 Marton Bene, "Influenced by Peers: Facebook as an Information Source for Young People," *Social Media + Society* (2017): 1–14.

3 Athina Karatzogianni, "The Social Media Political Subject Is an Infant," *Social Media + Society* (2015): 1–2.

4 Serguei A. Oushakine, "The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat," *Public Culture* 13, no. 2 (2001): 196.

5 Sarah Kendzior, "Reclaiming Ma'naviyat: Morality, Criminality and Dissident Politics in Uzbekistan," in *Ethnographies of the State in Central Asia: Performing Politics*, ed. Madeleine Reeves, Johan Rasanayagam, and Judith Beyer (Bloomington, in: Indiana University Press, 2014), 223–42.

statements, and makes use of terms that are specific to the political debate in Tajikistan, the shared understanding of which imbues these terms with power.

Unable to completely control websites like Facebook, since there are means of circumventing government-imposed prohibitions and accessing forbidden pages, totalitarian regimes instead try to interfere and participate in discussions through intermediaries, namely youths who have been preselected and trained. Hence, we cannot understand online activities without paying attention to political methods of controlling society. How does this opinion-making work? Who are the actors and what is their goal?

In Tajik, the term "fabric of answer" has been established to describe the practice of interfering in social platforms in order to discredit a person and his or her opinion or to push academics, poets and journalists to shape social opinion:

> In our country we have a fabric that works day and night. Neither the periods without electricity nor its workers' not paying taxes hinder its work. But, dear readers, don't get excited, this fabric produces neither socks nor galoshes. The fabric is exclusively constructing gossip and producing nonsense. At times, it also strikes by generating insults. This fabric is known by the name "fabric of answer."6

This paper examines the fabric of answer as a tool deployed by the Committee of National Security to interfere in public media and among social groups to the end of shaping the face of the country. It deploys humiliation, personal attacks, and intimate insults, as well as seemingly rational comments and long articles published on state-run websites. This practice is designed to discredit individuals—though its tools may appear innocuous to people raised in democratic regimes, they have substantial power in systems where a person's reputation determines his or her job and social standing, not to mention the prospects of his or her family. The fabric of answer also works in an impersonal manner, responding to international media reports and even political events. At the same time as it fabricates answers, it credits any national, social, economic, or historical development to the person of the president, making him the ultimate leader of society, the state, and national culture. In her work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt wrote, "Totalitarianism in power uses the state as its outward facade, to represent the country

6 "Fabrikai çavob: Imiçsoz jo imiçsūz?" *Ozodagon*, May 17, 2014, http://www.ozodagon.com/16203-fabrikai-avob-imisoz-e-imisz.html.

in the nontotalitarian world."7 The fabric of answer's primary role is precisely this outward face-making (*imijsoz*). Arendt recognized the crucial role of the secret services in establishing not only a domestic ideology, but also an external projection of the country.8 This outward face of the country becomes a crucial issue for totalitarian regimes and has to be considered in parallel with internal developments but not confused with nation-building processes moregenerally.

This image-making (*imijsoz*) merges politics with society, creating a single body in which dissidence becomes at once political opposition and anti-social. This process blurs the boundaries between society and the state through cultural constructions. In this construction, relatives in the country become re- sponsible for the dissident abroad and the internet turns into the primary communication platform to work on individual dissidents, at the same time as the blueprint of the country's outward face is produced and reproduced internally. This paper investigates how the fabric of answer works against individual journalists, political leaders and researchers in order to ban any critical discussion and establish the facade of a harmonious, peaceful Tajikistan.

The Fabric of Answer

Tajikistan's State Committee of National Security (*Kumitai Davlatii Amniyati Milli Jumhurii Tojikiston*),9 the former KGB, is one of the systems that was little affected by the transition and collapse of the Soviet Union—it has merely been nationalized. Most veterans of the KGB, Christopher Andrew and Wassili Mitrochin claim, are unable to distance themselves from their role in the intelligence apparatus and cannot understand dissidents.10 Deconstructing

7 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, 1962), 420.

8 Participating in the secret services is an increasingly popular means of acquiring a job and prestige. "This automatically means a great improvement in prestige and position, even though it is accompanied by a definite loss of real power. The secret services no longer know anything that the Leader does not know better; in terms of power, they have sunk to the level of the executioner." (Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* 426).

9 As well as the Tajik intelligence agency, the GKNB.

10 Christopher Andrew and Wassili Mitrochin, *Das Schwarzbuch des KGB* 2: *Moskaus Geheimoperationen im Kalten Krieg* (Berlin: Propyläen Verlag, 2006), 684. For a detailed description of the KGB, see also Wadim Bakatin, *Im Innern des KGB* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1993 [1992]).

this institution, Mitrochin explains, has therefore been a challenge in most post-Soviet countries. Consequently, the power and influence of this institution persists in many post-Soviet countries. In Tajikistan, the CNS took a while to catch up with new technologies, but remains very much in evidence; since my first trip to the country, I have been constantly aware of its omnipresence. The network of people working directly for the CNS extends to all corners of the country. The current leader, Saidmū'min Yatimov, is a controversial figure, at times presenting a direct challenge to the president's camp. This competition is also reflected in villages, where the police, the *hukumat* (local administration), and the secret services occupy three different offices and foreign visitors have to register in all three places. In the mountainous areas of Jirgatol, I repeatedly witnessed conflicts between the three institutions, to the chagrin of villagers, who are the object of such disputes. While this may not be universal, the competition between the CNS and the police is certainly more thanoccasional.

The CNS in Tajikistan has enormously improved its use of technology since the mid-2000s. Young employees spend their time listening to critical mu- sic, phone calls, and recordings of other "suspicious activities." If a suspect is found, a committee will work on this individual, giving the person concerned the sense that his life is in their hands. The CNS co-opts writers in and outside of academia and asks them to produce texts in response to specific events, which puts enormous pressure on those who are singled out by the security organs. Authors have little choice but to agree if they want to avoid further trouble. Skillful writers try to formulate issues in controversial ways and there- by fulfill their obligations only partially.

The task of the fabric of answer is to respond to provocative articles from neighboring countries, to conflicts, to non-self-explanatory events (such as the arrest of popular figures), and—most importantly—to critical voices. The CNS goes to great lengths to make students, teachers, academics, youth leaders, religious authorities, and the like participate in the project of national ideology, demonstrating that the fabric of answer is more subtle and flexible than a mere propaganda institution. It pledges individuals as the defenders of a national face against critics foreign and domestic.

The work of the fabric of answer establishes a sense that any kind of oppositional thinking is akin to betraying one's homeland (*vatan*) and nation (*millat*). The orientation to what is correct and in line with the homeland and the nation derives from a political-cultural construction. In other words, Tajikistan is not the mere result of historical processes, but enjoys the heritage of the "oldest nation" in the region, with the president coming from the "oldest place" in

Tajikistan,ll securing "peace", "cultural authenticity" and a quasi-religious leader beyond Islam. In this construction, the president is no longer just a political leader; as his title explains, he is "The Founder of Peace and National Unity, Leader of the Nation, President of the Republic of Tajikistan, His Excellency Emomali Rahmon." Consequently, any criticism of the president, the party, or politics is tantamount to a direct act of aggression against the nation and homeland. This reasoning, as absurd as it seems, is crucial to understanding why individuals can be humiliated by declaring them "traitor to the homeland" (*vatan furush*) or "enemy of the people" (*choini millat*).

The fabric of answer uses this political-cultural construction to articulate its answers, and the presence of classic enemies serves to simplify the discussions. These enemies are the Islamists, Islamic terrorists, and political opponents. "Terrorists" here refers not to a perpetrator of terrorist acts but to a person who has lost his *vatan* and *millat*, a person who has lost loyalty to the homeland. "I have repeatedly highlighted before the United Nations and other international organizations that a terrorist has no *vatan*, *millat*, and religion and *mazhab* [a school of thought within Islamic jurisprudence],"12 the president declared in a speech.

Losing one's homeland entails being excluded from one's country, whereas loving one's homeland is synonymous with loving the president and subscribing to his politics. The intertwining of politics and society—to the point that one is indistinguishable from the other—has been advanced by organizations like Sozandagoni Vatan, official titles bestowed on the president, history books, and laws that impose rules of dress, modes of celebrating life cycle rituals, and much more. Anna Grzymala-Busse and Pauline Jones Luong posit that post- Soviet states emphasized that the boundaries between state and society had been blurred in the Soviet Union.13 This blurring of boundaries was achieved by declaring the political a part of cultural life and taking culture as a form of political expression. This goes much further than the simple performativity of the state; the political and the cultural merge to the degree that cultural actors are political actors and vice versa.

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11 "Prezident ta'rixi 4 hazorsolai şahrnişinī dar Danoqararo tasdiq kard," *Ozodagon*, July 14, 2016, http://www.ozodagon.com/index.php?newsid=27070.

12 Emomali Rahmon, "Pajomi Peşvoi millat, Prezidenti Toçikiston muhtaram Emomalī Rahmon ba Maçlisi Olii Çumhurii Toçikiston" (speech, Dushanbe, January 20, 2016), http://www.mts.tj/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=688:-20012016-1152-&catid=158:2013-06-09-14-39-56&Itemid=154&lang=ru.

13 Anna Grzymala-Busse and Pauline Jones Luong, "Reconceptualizing the State: Lessons from Post-Communism," *Politics and Society* 30, no. 4 (2002): 534.

The fabric of answer (*fabrika javob*) refers to the efforts of the CNS to respond to discussions in the media as well as among people (rumors) and become an opinion leader through the production of scientific "facts," as well as interfere in ongoing discussions. Its primary goal is to establish a national outward-facing facade based on a cultural-political picture. It is based on the idea that what is written is real, particularly if it comes from academics and specialists.14 This public production of text-based facts competes with alternative versions of events, those that are transmitted by word of mouth and dominate social media. Since urban youth are particularly well connected via their mobile phones, the alternative version of events is often the first to spread among young men—at least, this was my experience while in Tajikistan. However, the CNS' view does not lag far behind and soon finds its way onto social media and television, as well as into newspapers. The nature of the texts depends on the events and author, but the common denominator is *vatan* and *millat*, the cultural nation. In this article, I argue that the CNS uses cultural notions of *vatan* and *millat* that mesh with the supreme leader's ongo- ing eradication of the border between society and politics through intermedi- aries (contract workers of the fabric of answer), who produce answers in order to control the outward facade.

Most political analysts tend to concentrate on political parties and their agenda, as though people naturally submit to systems. However, they pay less attention to the system that produces meaning and influences opinion. Young people are certainly the primary audience of the fabric of answer; older generations have understood subtle signs since the Soviet period. The Arab Spring and other events have demonstrated that youth can torpedo a system only if they believe in an alternative. This has driven some states to invest enormous energy in influencing young people's ideas and keeping them loyal by means of emotional ties to the country. *Vatan* has become a tool loose enough to remain flexible and firm enough to be imbued with political claims. The link between flexibility and secrecy has been suggested by Arendt: "One of the reasons for the duplication of secret services whose agents are unknown to each other is that total domination needs the most extreme flexibility."15 The fabric of answer can be understood in this way—it works with contract workers who do

14 For a discussion on the role of culture and texts in the making of the Soviet Union, see Katerina Clark and Evgeny Dobrenko, *Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents, 1917–1953* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2007); Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

15 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 426.

not know each other but act under a shared ideology, reacting flexibly and rapidly via online platforms and in the institutions in which they are employed.

In what follows, I will begin with a short reflection on methodology in order to outline my own approach to the topic. I will then present three examples of how the fabric of answer has worked—including examples from Facebook, state-run online media and academics—before bringing these different examples together in a reflection on the fabric of answer as a whole. My modest aim is to provide a first insight into the fabric of answer, without attempting to explain nation-building or post-Soviet politics more generally.

A Note on Methodology

When I first went to Tajikistan as a social anthropologist in 2002, I had little understanding of what a post-socialist state should look like and even less interest in security issues. Indeed, such issues might never have crossed my mind had the CNS not chosen to cross paths with me so often. During a one-year research trip in 2006, I received a death threat from an intelligence officer who had come to visit the family where I was living, in which one brother was a member of the ruling party and another brother part of the opposition (a fact of which I had been unaware up to that point). The officers came to search my things while I was away and were well informed about where I was. Anna Zadrożna, who conducted research in the People's Republic of China, has observed that she felt constantly compelled to explain that she was not a spy.16 To be honest, it never occurred to me that somebody might even think I was a spy, since all parts of my life in the village were open to public scrutiny. Following these direct threats, I asked local people directly what I should do, as I believed villagers to be best equipped to assess the situation. Without exception, they advised me to stay and simply continue with my work, explaining

16 Her presentation is part of a special issue on surveillance, which provides interesting in- sights into different contexts of surveillance and researchers' responses to these experiences. Anna Zadrożna, "What are You *Really* Looking For? Ethnography while (Feeling) under Surveillance," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 141 (2016): 215–32. Several authors have struggled with the complexity of on-the-ground research in post-socialist societies. The self-censorship, search for trust, and imagination of the past are some of the difficulties which researchers face. See Nora Dudwick and Hermine G. De Soto, "Introduction," in *Fieldwork Dilemmas. Anthropologists in Postsocialist States*, ed. Hermine G. De Soto and Nora Dudwick (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 100–18; Katherine Verdery, "Observers Observed: An Anthropologist under Surveillance," *Anthropology Now* 4, no. 29 (2012): 14–23; or the special issue of *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 141 (2016).

that such events were to be understood as "routine." Over the years, I gained more and more "insights" into a system of control that was as much part of the population as it was directed against individuals. I learned to read its influence and distinguish texts written for the "fabric of answer" from "real texts" (i.e. those that represent the author's genuine opinion). This paper is a first result of this side research project, an ethnographic account that documents more than ten years of personal experiences and encounters. If I had set out to conduct research in this domain, I would obviously have taken another approach and spoken to different people, but I doubt I would have received the same information. I am primarily interested here in the functioning of the fabric of answer. The concept of "fabric" (rather than institution) under- lines that meaning-making can become a controlled, planned, and systematic production.

Working on such a topic is sensitive not only for its secrecy—in Tajikistan, they did not seem to be very keen on keeping things secret—but also for ethical reasons. It is difficult to understand a system from the outside, to identify key players and their influence; it is dangerous to name names and the consequences of working on such an issue are unpredictable. That is why in this paper I concentrate on a very few examples based on ethnographic experiences and a careful analysis of social media, but I do not claim to be the ultimate truth or a structural explanation. Rather, my aim is to show that politics in Tajikistan cannot be understood solely as an abstract systemic enterprise and structural organization, but must be taken, in part, as the continuation of a Soviet tradition that considered culture a political issue and thought of its population as being bounded by emotions and political loyalty.

"In a culture of political surveillance, participant observation is at best an absurdity and at the least a form of complicity with those outsiders who surveil."17 Allen Feldman, who wrote about Northern Ireland, enquired about the formation of violence and encountered the difficulties of doing research in a tense conflictual context:

> The domain of secret knowledge interposed a certain "spacing" between discourse, between words and acts, between informants. To conduct a dialogue meant apprehending the political necessity of "spacing" and the political impossibility of interpersonal parity. This dialogue with silence generated a contingent epistemology in the "field."18

17 Allen Feldman, *Formation of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 12.

18 Feldman, *Formation of Violence*.

Whereas the context of a civil war or military regime is to some degree apparent to a researcher from the outset, post-Soviet Central Asia was hailed as a liberated area, a space of dynamic new life with a kind of amnesia about the past. Local scholars were very reluctant to research the near past, instead diving far into history as a way to establish a sense of continuity, tradition, and history. Though surveillance never ceased, people did not feel threatened by it once the Tajik civil war of the 1990s was over and their lives were no longer conditioned by fear. People did not expect to experience a drop back, only a push forward. Even political actors were motivated by hope for the future rather than fear of dropping back. Until the mid-2000s, people, researchers and politicians worked toward a liberal economy and stable society. However, after recovering from the shock of civil war and enjoying freedom, several political administrations—in close cooperation with the secret services—have taken a firmer grip on society. Researchers who have worked in Tajikistan over the past fifteen years have felt the change in working conditions and informants' increasing suspicion of researchers.

Researchers Engaged in *Imijsoz*

On December 9, 2015, the lower house of Parliament of the Republic of Tajikistan adopted the Law "On the Founder of Peace and National Unity—Leader of the Nation."19 With this law, Emomali Rahmon entered the canon of outstanding leaders known to the Tajik nation as "supreme leader" (*peshvo*). The life stories of these leaders are taught in school and every child can name the six heroes of the nation: Sadriddin Aini, Bobojon Ghafurov, Nusratullo Makhsum, Mirzo Tursunzoda, Shotemur Shirinsho and Emomali Rahmon. Rahmon, however, surmounts all previous leaders in his role as *peshvoi millat*.

What could have been just a law to which nobody paid any attention was instead accompanied by activities to celebrate the event. Students and workers were brought to dance and clap for the *peshvoi millat*, and academics were asked to honor him in their talks and writings. Thus, the law was not confined to a political decision, but became a cultural-ideological event.

The following example demonstrates how the supreme leader is discursively positioned as the originator of all cultural, social and international political success:

19 In the most recent referendum (May 2016), this position was included in the new constitution, thereby giving Rahmon and his family legal immunity for life.

> Today the people of Tajikistan recognize Emomalī Rahmon not only as an ordinary leader (*rohbar*) but as savior of the state, the uniter of the nation, the guarantor of reconciliation and peace, the re-animator of national culture (*farhang*), the founder of national modern state schools and, in sum, builder of a new state of Tajiks and the worldwide acknowledged supreme leader (*peshvo*20).21

This quote from Abdullo Rahnamo, a scholar of international renown, is an example of the canon of texts produced for this occasion. Each line blends political and cultural notions, just as they are intermixed in the person of the supreme leader, an authority who stands for society and the state. We can speak here of a "*population* of publications" constituting a specific historical form of consciousness.22 Genre lies between the individual and a larger tradition.

We can speak of a text genre as the product of the fabric of answer. Even if the genre has many different variations, it works toward a clear goal, employs specific notions and aims to create emotional reactions in the reader and loyalty to the existing regime. The texts of the fabric of answer can be recognized and classified by their content, goal, and use of signifier. This genre was not invented by the above-mentioned scholar or poets, journalists, or simple workers, but follows the plan of the fabric. Like any form of production, the genre can be learned and the necessary skills acquired. In this case, behind this public presentation stands the CNS, who sent a note (*ittiloiya*) to the researchers of the Academy of Sciences that reads:

> This is to draw the attention of the academic workers of the Institute, to corroborate to the … Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Tajikistan number 53 of 25.04.2016 … Our institute is one of the warrants in the preparation of articles concerning Tajiks: [name of disciplines] reports of VAU, in the internet and with foreign countries and other less important prints are asked to leave traces of *Peshvoi millat*, *Janobi Oli*, Emomali

20 *Peshvo* in this context refers to a charismatic leader. Rahmon is no longer just a president or leader; he *is* Tajikistan. Rahmon and the state are one and the same, and his subjects follow him on account of his charismatic leadership. Elections are no longer possible because this would question Rahmon and, by extension, the nation-state itself.

21 "A. Rahnamo: Emomalī Rahmon naçotbaxşi davlat, sarçam'kunandai millat, kafili sulhu vahdat…" *Ozodagon*, November 27, 2015, http://www.ozodagon.com/24282-abdullo-rana mo-emomal-ramon-naotbahshi-davlat-saramkunandai-millat-kafili-sulu-vadat.html.

22 Karin Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons, and Public: Oral and Written Culture in Africa and Beyond*. New Departures in Anthropology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 41. Emphasis original.

> Rahmon in Tajik, Russian and English language … We ask that you send all academic work [mentioning] the legacy of the *Peshvoi millat* in academic, academic-popular and all guides in electronic version to [e-mail address].

This note, which was distributed to the researchers of the Academy of Sciences, as well as to university faculties and academics at other institutions, makes each researcher a potential participant in the fabric, not because these individuals are motivated by ideological convictions but because a worker in a fabric produces according to the plan. Through the message, the academic workers are pressured to link any subject regarding Tajiks to the supreme leader. Academic workers continue to enjoy high prestige as intellectuals of the nation, hence textual productions that identify the president as either producer of knowledge or maker of history cement the idea of the nation's dependence on its leader. The use of *farhang*, *vatan* and *millat* merge politics with nation and culture, which makes political programs superfluous. Researchers form the most important connections with the outside world, and the CNS counts on them to produce a specific image of Tajikistan in this community.

In the same way, researchers are pushed to produce texts against Muhiddin Kabiri, whose network includes academics from all over the world.23 Kabiri, a trained orientalist, is the leader of the Islamic Revival Party and holds a *Doktor Nauk* degree in diplomacy. Just as the fabric of answer nurtures the supreme leader, it discredits Kabiri as the main enemy (*vatan furush, choini millat,* etc.). Not only researchers at key academic institutions but also students have been pushed to write texts opposing the IRPT and Kabiri as proof of their loyalty to the regime.

The following example derives from an open letter that was spread via the internet. It was probably initiated by a small group in a university and developed into a rather impressive collection of signatures. The cultural project of the nation in this letter links Islam to violence and geopolitics that endanger the Tajik nation as a cultural-political entity:

> Open Letter in the name of 8,657 students at higher education institutions in the Sughd district to the leader of the IRPT.

23 I will not expand on the history of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan at this point. Suffice it to say that its origins go back to the 1970s as a movement to revive Islam; it became a political party with independence in 1991. After the civil war of the 1990s, the party registered and remained part of the opposition until it was banned in 2015. Kabiri was first elected as head of the party in 2006, and has been re-elected at every contest since.

> […]
> Dear Muhiddin Kabirī!
> We had planned to send you this letter earlier, but we held back until now … We reasoned that each of these parties and movements that works under the banner of Islam does it as a pretext to kill children. Two- three years ago we thought about your words and writings, at times we participated in your meetings. We hoped that under your leadership the *nahzati* would change its worldview and, following the possibility of each people and nation, the party would focus on activities to benefit the nation [*millat*] and HOMELAND … History is witness—you as an Arabist know that even better than anyone else—that Tajiks have a history and civilization of eight thousand years. Over this time it has changed belief, customs and religion many times. But it has not changed its nationality
> … They spoke in the name of the nation, they were Tajiks those who remained. They built a country. With the name Tojikiston. We are all Muslims. Also without a party.

This letter was part of the fabric of answer, meant to provide logical arguments for why an individual should distance himself or herself from the party. Even if the grammar (missing verbs, unrelated sentences) raises some questions as to the educational level of the author, the open letter is a product of the fabric. The national cultural-political project is endangered by political dissidence and Islam's cultural influence. "Eight thousand years" of Tajik history are at stake, the authors believe. Hannah Arendt has identified the elite's acceptance of a fantastic falsification of history under totalitarian regimes.24 While the elite is aware of such fraud, it does little to oppose it and hence collaborates in its production, she argues. While this is not the place to put blame on researchers under totalitarian regimes, Arendt is right to include the educated elite in the process of promoting falsified facts, even if they are complicit only for self- protection or to keep a job. This document has to be contextualized as such: the goal is not history, but erasing any distinction between culture, society, history, and politics. The 396 pages of signatures attached to the letter testify that the organizers hunted for students and teachers who would be willing to sign; some of them must have read at least parts of the letter. The students signed on to the idea that political dissidence is automatically an act of aggression against the nation's history and culture.

The various texts produced against Kabiri, particularly by internationally embedded Tajik scholars, will not be displayed out of respect for the authors

24 Arendt, *The Origin of Totalitarianism*, 713.

who worked under pressure. It should be mentioned, however, that the "global war on terror" provides the globally recognized rhetoric for contextualizing religious activism. The previously demonstrated consequences of the "global war on terror" for legal developments and security politics already discussed in the literature25 likewise hold true for the fabric of answer—that is, for less visible institutions. The accusation in the letter above—"We reasoned that each of these parties and movements that worked under the banner of Islam does it as a pretext to kill children"—establishes the link between politics, Islam and terrorist acts, namely the killing of innocent people. The fabric of answer thus employs global discourses in support of the national image.

The Fabric of Answer on the Internet

Social media, open access journals, and state-run websites are important platforms for the fabric of answer to promote its "products." Just as in academic texts, notions of *vatan* and *millat* feature prominently in these outlets. The answers they provide turn people against those dissidents who had to leave the country and seek refuge in Europe. The refugee is seen to lose the right to his or her homeland.26 Only the individual who stays in the country and wins over others has the right to claim leadership of the nation. This idea of "survival of the fittest" in a society that is dependent on the success of a single leader allows for the abolition of democratic processes. The following text, excerpted from a two-page article in the state-run online journal *Jumhuriyat*, exemplifies

25 "While external players are far more interested in such threats as Al-Qaeda, the Taliban and international terrorist networks of terrorists, the Tajik government is less concerned with them" (Anna Matveeva, "EU Stakes in Central Asia," *Chaillot Paper* No. 91 (Paris: Institute for Security Studies, European Union, July 2006, 141)) and profits from the global discourse to get rid of its internal opposition (cf. Mariya Omelicheva, *Counterterrorism Policies in Central Asia* (London: Routledge, 2011)). Similarly, Julia Eckert has criticized the way the "new global geography of security" allowed states like Russia to interpret the security paradigm to exploit local tensions and conflict (Julia Eckert, "Laws for Enemies," in *The Social Life of Anti-Terrorism Laws: The War on Terror and the Classifications of the 'Dangerous Other'*, ed. Julia Eckert (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2008), 7–31).

26 My ethnographic work confirms that even during the civil war refugees were considered weak and low compared to those who stayed to fight. Ideas of homeland are tied to the willingness to defend it—with violence, if necessary. We can see that here the civil war logic continues to apply, nourished by the annual celebration of the peace agreement, during which the president presents himself as the winner of the war and guarantor of peace.

the use of *vatan* to discredit political dissidents by denying the individual's claim to belong to the homeland.

> In recent months, the enemy of the Tajik nation Dodojon Atovullo has begun to speak on the television channel K+ and in online media with the financial support of his relatives and with all the hatred and hostility, aversion and negative attitude that he has toward his native nation, pretending that white is black and mulberries are willows. If Dodojon Atovullo, due to other political opponents, failed to stay in Vatan, will Vatandori continue?27

The journalist Atovulloev is one of the country's most famous dissidents. He left Tajikistan as early as 1993, returning briefly in 2004 before being persecuted again a couple of years later. With Vatandori, he founded a movement popular among Tajik migrants in Russia. He has never stopped raising his voice through online news channels and articles, denouncing corruption, human rights abuses, and political fraud. A nuisance to the regime, he has been an important target for the fabric of answer. However, instead of countering his criticisms with arguments and political discussions, responses to Atovulloev draw on the concepts of homeland and nation. As the passage above shows, his political arguments are interpreted as hostility to the nation and homeland; his status as a refugee takes away his right to lay claim to a homeland. As such, the CNS engages in a struggle over belonging in cultural-political terms. The fabric uses nationalist claims to define modes of inclusion and exclusion in online media and deploys personal humiliation as a means of discrediting dissidents or critics. Over the years, a struggle over the right to belong and represent *vatan* and *millat* (the nation and the homeland) has emerged between various dissidents and the fabric of answer. This struggle is about who represents the nation at home and abroad, who belongs to the nation, who has the right to participate in the discourse, and how much plurality is tolerable. The fabric of answer claims to act as arbiter in this matter, whereas political dissidents demand un-fettered plurality and open political debate.

The article from which the extract above is drawn also includes poems about the homeland and loyalty of the author (who claims to be a poet). It further features comments intended to exclude Atovulloev from *vatan,* such as "he is expelled" (*oqshuda*), and describes him as a person who failed to stay

27 Davlat Safar, "Tarozui xirad," *Jumhuriyat*, August 24, 2013, http://www.jumhuriyat.tj/index.php?art_id=11554.

in the country. Here, the fabric of answer employs a person from the cultural scene—a poet—to disqualify a journalist and political activist.

This humiliation also happens on the most personal level, such as on Facebook. Social media has gained high relevance to political discussions and is a means of identifying leaders and activists. The CNS uses Facebook to identify youth activists and interferes directly in personal exchanges. When a political activist founded the Facebook site *Virtual'noe pravitel'stvo i parlament respubliki Tadzhikistan* ("Virtual Government and Parliament of the Republic of Tajikistan"), it turned into a vivid platform for political discussion and opinion-making. On this site, laws were summarized and discussed with the goal of increasing readers' political maturity. Sometime later, the organizer was offered several thousand dollars to sell the site to the secret services. While I do not know whether it was sold or not, the site lost its attraction soon thereafter. This is only one example of how the fabric of answer engages with social media; the figures behind the fabric of answer know that it is on these platforms that opinions are shaped.

On a more personal note, a female journalist was attacked on Facebook not by countering the critique of social problems she presented but by humiliating her femaleness:

> Safarali Rakhimov: [name] if you were a person you would not have run away with your tail between your legs, the regime is also looking for you, enemy of the nation, you are also without honor.
>
> Sarafrozi Olamfruz: prostitute hi! Is it true that you are one? [a picture of two men looking up at two women dressed in few clothes]

The discussion of a critical article turns into a personal humiliation in which becoming an "enemy of the nation" is treated as a logical consequence of leaving the country. Gendered comments have a further dimension: they question a target's honor. The enemy of the nation is put on equal terms with a prostitute, a charge that is not made against male dissidents. This is not simply sexual harassment enabled by Facebook, but a systematic use of *vatan* as a masculine, controlling, and political claim against a feminized enemy and prostitute. It is this systematic use of humiliation and non-political argumentation that makes the fabric of answer effective and turns political discussions into emotional discourse. The fabric of answer employs workers who spend their time destroying a conversation by ridiculing a comment and personally mocking or humiliating the author. Yet it is the denial that one is acting for the good of one's country and people that hurts most. The privatization of *vatan* and *millat* by the president in power creates the base for the fabric of answer.

The merging of politics with culture and society is thus not a natural process, nor less a traditional feature of Central Asian societies, but the work of a fabric that effectively produces the face of a nation in which the president is at once the cultural arbiter, the victor in post-Soviet conflicts, and the leader of a (newly invented) national tribe.

Conclusion

Social anthropologists have long recognized the power of culture to shape society. Yet the degree to which culture becomes a construction in a political project creates unease and has been left to scholars outside the field. One reason is certainly that this notion of culture bears little resemblance to notions used by ethnographers to describe the complexity of human life. However, ethnographers have repeatedly mentioned the difficulties of working in some of the post-Soviet countries, particularly because of the rhetorical representations that appear like masks and seek to hide the diversity that unfolds in front of ethnographers' very eyes.28 The discrepancy between generalized self- portrayals and actual life is one of the challenges for scholars working in the region.

In this paper, I have consciously focused on one of the main constructors of this (sur)face, and demonstrated that this is not propaganda imposed from somewhere far away, but a conscious construction and polishing of the nation- al facade that uses ordinary people, intellectuals, and experts alike. In order to understand the function of the fabric of answer, I have drawn on Arendt's analysis of totalitarian regimes as well as Grzymala-Busse and Luong's suggestion that the Soviet state made a clear distinction between society and state difficult or impossible. These authors have recognized the strategies that states use not only to establish internal control but also—and primarily—to work on outward representations. Similar to observations of Soviet *samizdat* and Uzbekistan's use of *ma'naviyat*, the notion of homeland and nation feature prominently in political claims in independent Tajikistan. What we can observe is a culturalizing of political struggle promoted by the fabric of answer in order to erase critical debates over social problems.

Rapid technological change and youth's increasing global connectivity have forced the fabric of answer to adapt its technologies and strategies to

28 The most precise study discussing this problem of representation has been provided by Colette Harris, *Control and Subversion: Gender Relations in Tajikistan* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).

the new generation, which has little or no memory of the Soviet period. My ethnographic inquiry into the fabric of answer is, of course, also shaped by auto-censorship; I choose to neither provide names nor discuss events that may endanger colleagues or friends. Yet the increasing restrictions on and persecution of ordinary people, teachers, scholars, and others have motivated me to launch this debate nevertheless.

The fabric of answer produces a state of insecurity and humiliation in order to shut down dissident thinking considered harmful to national unity. At the same time, it promotes a blueprint of the nation, to which authors are asked to orient their writings. The *imijsoz* of the country hence works in two directions: against the individual and in promotion of a national facade.