Introduction to the Islamic Mediascape in Central Asia

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Wendell Schwab
Coordinator of the Bachelor of Philosophy Program and Senior Academic Adviser,
Division of Undergraduate Studies, Pennsylvania State University
wts11@psu.edu

This special issue publishes the results of a conference hosted by the George Washington University's Central Asia Program and funded by the Henry Luce Foundation. The papers in this issue describe and analyze the diversity of form and content in Soviet and post-Soviet Central Asian Islamic media. Contributions range from an examination of the questioning of religion within contemporary art (Kudaibergenova) to an analysis of the official fatwas of Tajikistan (Nozimova and Epkenhans) to a survey of Islamic media in the supposedly atheist public culture of Soviet Central Asia (Tasar). Other articles look at the rhetoric of Islamic argumentation in Kazakhstan's mass media (Schwab), atheists' use of social media in Kyrgyzstan (Louw), masculinity as a source of authority for Kazakh preachers online (Bigozhin), and the promotion of "national" Muslim exemplars to the detriment of Sufis on Tajik television programs (Gatling).

From these diverse subjects and analyses, I want to draw out three themes which link the articles and provide a framework for future research. First, the articles demonstrate the struggles over Islamic authority in Central Asia.[1] Who speaks for Islam, and why should they be believed? Many of the articles show the importance of nationalist rhetoric in establishing a particularly Tajik or Kazakh or Kyrgyz authority. State-run media contrasts citizens with non- citizens, natives with foreigners, insiders with outsiders. Being native establishes authority; foreigners, or those influenced by foreigners, cannot define Islam for natives.

Unsurprisingly, the importance of nationalist Islamic authority is particularly visible in state-affiliated media. Nozimova and Epkenhans show how, after the government of Tajikistan shut down non-state websites, the state-affiliated Islamic Center's website argued that its interpretations of Islamic law

1 For a broad exploration of authority in Islam, see D. DeWeese, "Authority," in J.J. Elias (ed.), *Key Themes for the Study of Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2010), 26–52.

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were valid in part because they follow the Hanafi school of law, which ensures "national unity." Fatwas on women's clothing, as well as the importance of the hijab, are justified by reference to "our thousand-year-old ancestors," who wore "traditional clothes." Gatling furthers this analysis by showing how Tajik heritage is defined through a television program framing Abu Hanifa, the famed jurisconsult from the eighth century, as a modern Tajik before modernity. Abu Hanifa emphasized education, learned the "core textual sources of Islam—Qur'an and hadith," and remained a merchant to the end of his life. He was committed, in effect, to a middle-class life in a developing nation. A different television program shows Sheykh Temur, a 21st-century Tajik Sufi, as anti-modern and anti-Tajik: Temur has several wives, inspires too much devotion in his ascetic followers, and disrupts the development of Tajikistan. Temur is not authoritative because he is not part of the modern nation. My own contribution shows how different Kazakh authors appeal to national history to construct their authority on Islamic matters. Intellectuals from secular state institutions argue that common Kazakh beliefs and rituals, such as dedicating prayers to the spirits of dead ancestors and asking for ancestors' aid in this life, are reflective of the specifically Kazakh development of a 12th-century Turko-Islamic Sufi philosophy. They, as experts on Kazakh culture, should be looked to as authorities. These intellectuals also assert that the Muftiate of Kazakh- stan and its preachers are trying to destroy this national heritage. However, just as the government of Tajikistan promotes a scripturalist version of Islam as the true heritage of Tajiks, members of the state-affiliated Muftiate of Kazakhstan argue that true Kazakh Islam has been produced in the past by Kazakh scholars. This scholarly tradition, they claim, had been destroyed by the Soviet government but is being reclaimed by contemporary Kazakh scholars in the Muftiate, who should be accepted as authorities by Kazakhs. That is, Kazakhs accepted Islamic scholars as authorities in the past and should do so again.

The Islamic authority of the Kazakh nation is complicated by Bigozhin's work. He establishes how notions of masculinity—physical strength, martial prowess, patriarchal attitudes—are bound up with both "Kazakhstan's imagined bellicose past" and proper Islamic comportment on the YouTube channel of Abdughappar Smanov, a popular Kazakh preacher. Smanov models the type of physicality an ideal man should have: he bench presses, he boxes, he is large and in charge. But this physicality must be channeled in proper Islamic and Kazakh ways, such as defending women from predatory men.

The papers in this volume also show that there are alternative or complementary ways of constructing Islamic authority. Tasar shows that in fatwas issued by sadum, Islamic authority was constructed in terms of economic and social development. A fatwa banning the transport of coffins through

city streets on the shoulders of the deceased's relatives rested its argument on shari'a and the conditions of modernity. Shari'a encourages Muslims to avoid unnecessary difficulties, and walking through the middle of Tashkent causes traffic jams. As such, Islam was not only compatible with Soviet modernity, but commanded it. The legacy of the Soviet emphasis on development is evident in contemporary Central Asian discourse on Islam as well, as seen in Gatling's paper in this volume.2

Louw and Kudaibergenova highlight different parts of the Islamic mediascape in Central Asia, and illustrate how Islamic authority is challenged or dismissed. Louw shows how atheists in the Ferghana Valley and Bishkek dis- like the idea of simply "following tradition." They do not want to say prayers at funerals or family gatherings, for example. However, they feel that they must go along with the kinds of national Islamic culture discussed above. Otherwise, friends and family might shun them and ultra-nationalist groups such as *Kyrk- Choro* might assault them. To escape what they experience as a stultifying culture, these atheists create online communities to discuss their dissatisfaction with Islam and find other atheists to meet offline.

Kudaibergenova analyzes the ways in which contemporary artists question religion. These artists deconstruct "traditions," such as asking for the aid of ancestors, and "fundamentalism," such as new forms of veiling for women. Rather than attempting to build monolithic national or Islamic cultures, many artists point to the cultural contradictions visible in Central Asia. Musrepov's photograph *Praying,* for example, juxtaposes a group of men in prayer with a sumptuous spread of food and alcoholic beverages. Other artists seek to construct national cultures without any Islamic content, as with Kazakh artists' attempts to invent a visual universe for Tengrism, the supposed pre-Islamic religion of Turkic nomads. All of these efforts seek to destabilize or complicate the national culture promoted in state media.

2 An emphasis on economic and social development is not only a legacy of the Soviet era. Tsarist-era Jadids, for example, also cited economic development as a source of authority for new Islamic practices. See A. Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999) and A. Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early ussr* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015). Other scholars have also noted the imbrication of Islam and personal and national economic development. See, for example, W. Schwab and U. Bigozhin, "Shrines and Neopatrimonialism in Southern Kazakhstan," in M. Laruelle (ed.), *Kazakhstan in the Making: Legitimacy, Symbols, and Social Changes* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 89–109; and W. Schwab, "Visual Culture and Islam in Kazakhstan: The Case of Asyl Arna's Social Media," *Central Asian Affairs*, 3, no. 4 (2016): 301–329.

The second theme found in several of the papers is Muslim actors' attempts to model or argue for supposedly "traditional" gender roles in mass media. Tasar's work sets the historical stage for 21st-century Muslims' battles over gen- der roles. He details the threat that Soviet bureaucrats felt from women wearing the full-body veil and seeking medical aid from shrine caretakers. While Tasar reads against the article to demonstrate that Soviet media actually showed the continuing importance of Islamic practices such as veiling and shrine visitation, his work also raises the obvious point: Islam and many conceptions of Islamic gender roles were attacked in Soviet mass media.

In the post-Soviet era, the preachers and mma fighters featured in Bigozhin's paper explicitly tell their viewers and listeners that true masculinity is developed through physical exercise, competition, and Islamic morality. Nozimova and Epkenhans characterize the work of the Islamic Center in Tajikistan as emphasizing "conservative" gender roles: women should veil, as detailed above, and obey their husbands. Fatwas from the Islamic Center argue that rape cannot occur within marriage and that female circumcision can be part of the important work of controlling women's libido.

Louw's atheist interlocutors experience Muslim actors' attempts at "re-traditionalization" as oppressive. One young Russian woman is disturbed by the decreasing space for lgbtqa individuals and culture in Bishkek. She is also concerned by a renewed emphasis on blaming women for society's ills, which she sees in both the Bible and the Qur'an: "The book goes so harsh on women. Everything bad happens because of you! If you are menstruating you are a bad creature, and you are filthy or something." Similarly, Kudaibergenova shows how Central Asian artists contest the effects of "retraditionalization." Do sartorial choices like the hijab empower women in a modern metropolis or erase them? Can a woman in a hijab go roller skating in public, as one photographer depicts a young Kyrgyz woman? Or, as an Uzbek artist suggests of a woman in another photograph, does the hijab force women to blend into the background?

The third theme I want to highlight is the anxiety reflected in and produced by the Islamic mediascape. This anxiety takes many forms, from worries about gender roles to stress regarding national development to fear of cultural erasure. The fatwa discussed by Tasar shows how sadum was anxious to show that Islam could be part of the modernizing mission of the Soviet Union. Tasar also shows how non-official media, such as a handwritten text obtained by a Soviet-era imam in Osh, reflected Central Asians' anxiety as to their place in the Islamic world. The text Tasar discusses reminded readers of "Osh's centrality to the Muslim world" by showing that the Prophet Muhammad saw the holy

mountain of Solomon in the city of Osh during his *miraj* (the second part of the Night Journey). Tasar argues that the text reflects anxiety over the USSR's closed borders, which cut Central Asians off from the Hajj and local pilgrimage circuits in Afghanistan.

Other papers describe Central Asians' concerns about the place of Islam in post-Soviet states. Nozimova and Epkenhans show that the government of Tajikistan's attempts to monopolize Islamic belief and practice stem from anxiety over the possible political ramifications of Islamic thought, such as supranational identities or anti-state violence. The arrest of a minor Sufi figure, as described in Gatling's paper, similarly demonstrates the anxiety of the government of Tajikistan regarding the role of Islam in proper Tajik comportment. In this case, the Sufi's beliefs and practices threaten officials' mental models of modernity and development, and officials arrested Sheykh Temur to allay their fears in this regard. Their actions, however, created an anxious media environment. Sheykh Temur's arrest and subsequent televised confession reminded viewers that there are still undesirable elements in the nation, while any viewers sympathetic to ethnic or religious minorities were caused to recollect the possibility that they, too, could be arrested or face state sanctions. The debate discussed in my paper illustrates how media can create anxiety through heated rhetoric about the possibility of the erasure of Kazakh culture. A Kazakh reader of the sentence, "If Kazakh traditional religious beliefs are reformed, then it is not necessary to prove—for it is axiomatic—that the Kazakh nation will leave history" is not a calm reader. The Kazakh nation might disappear! What then? Kudaibergenova's work also reflects the anxiety over the place of Islam in Kazakhstan. Artists worry about "selling out" to authorities and reproducing the dominant cultural forms of state-run or state-affiliated media. They see their duty as questioning the re-traditionalization of Kazakhstan, which could stultify art and culture. These artists' works, however, cause consternation and worry to those Kazakhs who see artists burning holes in the Qur'an as attacks on Islam and Kazakh culture. Bigozhin's work on Smanov's preaching, weight-lifting, and boxing shows the masculine anxieties of Kazakh Muslims. Smanov reconciles the multiple authoritative accounts of how to be a man found in local, national, and global discourses, modeling a combination of Soviet sportsmanship, worldwide MMA culture, and historical Kazakh warrior identity, all with the imprimatur of a well-known Muslim scholar.

Louw's interlocutors in Kyrgyzstan illustrate a different type of anxiety: that of atheists struggling to find their own space in a national culture perceived as Islamic and increasingly religious. Atheists in Kyrgyzstan worry that their friends and family will not accept them. Social media provide a way for atheists

to forge community and work through the anxiety of being alone and judged abnormal.

Other themes and conclusions could be drawn out of these papers, but to this observer, the contemporary Islamic mediascape in Central Asia is best characterized as a space dominated by nationalizing regimes seeking to promote a scripturalist national form of Islam and presided over by state officials citing history, heritage, and tradition as authoritative. These regimes are anxious and worry about the possible role of Islam in anti-state agitation. Ordinary Central Asians, too, are worried about the place of Islam in politics and anti-state violence. However, they are possibly more worried, on an everyday level, about how to be Muslim while also being, to cite the example from Bigozhin's paper, masculine and Kazakh. In sum, Central Asians and Central Asian states are anxious about Islam for a variety of reasons, and they increasingly work out and battle over their worries on television programs, in contemporary art installations and newspapers, and on social media sites.