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Central Asia's Muslims and the Taliban

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Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbours have generally reacted pragmatically to the Taliban's seizure of power there. For the autocratically ruled, secular states on the periphery of the former Soviet empire, economic cooperation and the stabilisation of humanitarian and political conditions in Afghanistan are at the forefront of their interests in maintaining relations with their southern neighbour. According to official discourse, Central Asia's entrenched secularism is not challenged by the Taliban's Islamism. On social media in Central Asia, however, the Islamic emirate of the Taliban is portrayed as a political counter-model; one which is more positively received in countries with greater discursive freedom and under governments whose policies more openly confront the Taliban. This reveals a trend towards Islamist-inspired identity formation that will be difficult to stop through censorship and repression.

The speed with which the Taliban conquered Afghanistan in the early summer of 2021, taking the capital of Kabul in August, all without encountering any significant resistance came as a surprise to Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbours. Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and especially Uzbekistan had maintained contacts with the Taliban before, but only limited to representatives of the Taliban's foreign policy wing. The neighbours apparently had no more detailed knowledge of the movement's military strategy and internal structures than the Western actors operating in Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, it is striking how quickly the governments in the secular states of Central Asia have decided to prioritise pragmatism in their dealings with the de facto Islamist regime of the Taliban. Only Tajikistan has stressed the threat of a possible attack by Taliban militias and made efforts to strengthen its military capability — mainly with Russian help. For the other two neighbours, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, such threat perceptions play a subordinate role, and in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the Taliban are not perceived as an immediate danger.

Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan in particular, but also Kazakhstan, have strong economic interests in Afghanistan. These are linked to trade and the development of infrastructure for the transport of goods and energy to and through Afghanistan. For Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan in particular, the relevant projects are the expansion of the Mazar-i Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway line, the Uzbek-Afghan electricity grid and the construction of a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to India. At the same time,

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the governments of both countries have come to an understanding with the Taliban that cooperation presupposes the inviolability of the respective national borders. Both Tashkent and Ashgabad trust that the Taliban will keep its promise and prevent a possible spill over of Islamist militancy, whether from within its own ranks or from competing jihadist groups. As a precaution, both neighbours have flanked this arrangement with military measures to secure the borders, demonstrating defensive readiness to keep the Taliban at bay.

Islamist Challenges

The threat posed by jihadist groups is particularly significant for the secular states of Central Asia, which have a difficult relationship with Islam. This religion is considered an elementary component of national cultures in the region and "Muslim" values and moral concepts are defended as fundamental for social cohesion — even and especially in relation to liberal-universalist norms. But Central Asia's authoritarian rulers have been confronted with actors who want to give more weight to Islamic concepts of law and order. Especially in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, both immediate neighbours of Afghanistan, Islamist groups and movements have already fought for an Islamic state in the past, partly by peaceful means, partly by violence. In both countries, it was possible to drive the Islamists out of the country or to neutralise them through strict control and repression, thus depriving them of ground. Their followers then often joined Islamist organisations abroad — the first Islamic Emirate of the Taliban (1996—2001) or the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq (2013—2017). To illustrate, the number of fighters from Central Asia in the ranks of the IS is estimated to have been at least 5,000, the majority of whom came from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

After purging the religious field of Islamist competitors, the authoritarian rulers in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan gained largely unchallenged authority over the interpretation of religious questions. While this process began in Uzbekistan as early as the 1990s with the expulsion of the *Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan* (IMU), in Tajikistan the state succeeded in gaining supremacy in the field of religion only in 2015 with the banning of the *Islamic Revival Party* (IRPT). Since then, in Tajikistan, too, a conservative Hanafi Islam, which is compatible with secular principles and which is cultivated by the secular and religious elites in post-Soviet Central Asia, has been part of the unofficial state doctrine.

The Elites' View of the Taliban

Especially within Uzbekistan's foreign policy discourse, references to transnational history, cultural commonalities and shared values all play an important role in underpinning the country's pragmatic interest in cooperating with the Taliban. Great importance is attached to Muslim legal traditions and the basic theological convictions that Central Asia's Sunni Muslims and the (also Sunni) Taliban have in common. In fact, the legal traditions in question go back to the Maturidiyya branch of the Hanafi school of law. This branch originated in Samarkand (in modern day Uzbekistan) in the 10th century and decisively shaped Central Asian religious scholarship. The Taliban's religious purism is also not foreign to the Muslim establishment in Central Asia: reformist currents of Islam had taken hold in Central Asia during the Soviet era; and they later favoured the spread of neo-Salafist teachings. However, radical prescriptions as advocated by the Taliban have not prevailed in Central Asia. Instead, across the region, local Muslim clergy cultivates the virtues of moderation and tolerance. Above all, however, the principle of the (secular) nation state is undisputed in Central Asia while the idea of an Islamic caliphate, on the other hand, is not an option.

Against the backdrop of consolidated secularism, relations with the Taliban seem politically unobjectionable to state elites in Central Asia; they may even seem natural

in light of the religious and cultural commonalities. Muslim authorities, who provide politicians with the theological arguments to confirm their acceptance of the Taliban, also refer to this common ground. The speeches of such authorities reveal that they by no means see themselves as secondary to politics; indeed, they often go far beyond what official pronouncements reveal about the state's perception of the Taliban. The lectures of a popular Uzbek preacher, for example, convey an image of the Taliban that makes them seem like natural allies of Uzbekistan. The Taliban are compared to the *Basmachi*, Muslim guerrilla warriors who fought against the Bolsheviks after their conquest of Central Asia. Generally, the religious lectures follow a familiar narrative: just like the *Basmachi*, the Taliban wanted one thing above all — to liberate the country from the Western occupying powers; and the Afghan people, who hated the corrupt government supported by the West, therefore sided with the Taliban. Unlike the IS terrorist organisation, the Taliban strived for a peaceful regional order and respected the territorial integrity of neighbouring states. The Taliban's assumption of power is therefore to be welcomed without reservation. Other influential religious leaders have adopted a similar line of thought.

The Taliban on Social Media

The foreign policy elites' favourable assessment of the Taliban and the positive image of the group as conveyed by religious authorities in Uzbekistan are both reflected in social media. In comments and discussion posts, this positive image is even boosted at times. Uzbekistan's reform policy has enabled an opening of the media landscape and created free discursive spaces that are embraced by society. For example, an analysis of comments on articles and videos on popular news channels from May 2021 to January 2022 shows that many Uzbek users not only welcome the Taliban's takeover, but even see them as a role model for their own country.

A frequent topic of the debates on social media is the narrative of the fight of the West (especially the USA) against Muslims, which is not only popular in Islamist circles. Here, the aim of the West is to sow discord between Muslims and thus weaken Islam. In this narrative — which ties in with eschatological-apocalyptic traditions of Islam — the seizure of power by the Taliban appears as an important victory. Their comparison with the *Basmachi* is also repeatedly invoked in social media comments, and their struggle against Soviet rule is also interpreted against the backdrop of the universal confrontation between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Another recurring theme on social media is Sharia. Here, users refer to the strict dress codes for women introduced by the Taliban, the ban on drugs and stimulants, the outlawing of music and dance, and the archaic corporal punishment for violating the Taliban's legal norms. While the female body covering is mainly advocated by male users and tends to be criticised by women, such a bias is not evident in the comments referring to the Taliban's other laws. The majority of users consider draconian punishments and the public display of executed people to be effective instruments in the fight against crime and corruption which should also be applied in Uzbekistan.

Tajik comments on reporting on the Taliban also show approval of the Taliban's legal ideas. This is remarkable because the state leadership has adopted a confrontational stance vis-à-vis the Taliban, a position that is obediently represented and disseminated by the country's media. For the country's government-controlled communication organs, Afghanistan's Pashtun warriors of Islam are stereotypically described as enemies of the Tajiks, against whom maximum vigilance is required. The majority of commentors on social media agree — whether out of conviction or opportunism.

However, many also criticise the "Islamophobia" of President Rahmon's regime and denounce negative reporting on the Taliban as propaganda of the "infidels". Such assessments indicate a gap between government

and popular narratives, leading to the cautious conclusion that the number of those who sympathise with Islamism is considerably larger than the analysed comments on social media suggest.

Against "Talibanisation"

The state-directed discourse in Tajikistan recognisably aims to prevent the building of solidarity in the name of Islam. It does this by implementing control and strict censorship, vocalizing vehement opposition of the Taliban and by promoting ethnic-national mobilisation. Both in terms of its uniformity and its consistency, Tajikistan's state propaganda is an exceptional case in the region. In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, it is not so much the Taliban itself that is feared as the Islamist "sleeper cells" in their own countries. In Uzbekistan, too, people reckon with the existence of a violent Islamist underground that could be strengthened once again by the rise of the Taliban and, most concerningly, attract supporters to the IS.

The Afghan IS offshoot "Khorasan Province" (ISPK) has been able to expand its activities on the Hindu Kush considerably since NATO withdrew from the country and, unlike the Taliban, it also has Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbours in its sights. In particular, the ISPK is trying to recruit Uzbek jihadists by using propaganda that exploits the antagonism between the Taliban and the IMU, which joined the IS in 2015. The cooperation between the Taliban and the secular regime in Tashkent, which has pursued a repressive religious policy in the past, is also used by the ISPK to win Uzbeks to fight the Taliban.

The state authorities in Central Asia are trying to prevent the rise of radical groups' propaganda by using military, police and educational means. By strengthening military preparedness and securing their countries' borders, they want to prevent Islamists from entering Central Asian territories. The restrictive refugee policies of Afghanistan's neighbours are not least due to such fears. Control of the religious scene in the Central Asian states has also become more rigid since the Taliban took power. Since August 2021, there have been more reports of raids and arrests in the Islamist milieu — especially in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. There, authorities are also working on a counter-extremism and counter-terrorism action plan, which will initially cover the 2022—2026 period.

Above all, however, the Central Asian governments are employing educational initiatives as a means of preventing "Talibanisation" in their own countries. State and religious institutions are required to pool their resources, for example by carrying out educational measures to help immunise the population against extremist ideas. Imams are instructed to conduct educational talks with mosque visitors and to warn the faithful of the dangers posed by extremism and terrorism. In Uzbekistan, imams are supported by additional personnel from the spiritual administration. Under the motto "enlightenment against ignorance", these professionals are tasked with teaching people about the "true Islam" and protecting them from the threat of extremist indoctrination.

Adherents with radical convictions will certainly not be swayed by such educational measures — and even less so as the extreme positions that the state wants to combat are tolerated, and in some cases even openly propagated by the religious elite. Nevertheless, these dialogue and educational initiatives are still useful if not only because they make it possible to monitor the scene. In the long run, this should prove more effective in preventing Islamist-inspired violence than harsh censorship and repression, which leaves no room for ambiguity and also drives even moderate believers underground. The sympathies for the Taliban expressed on social media reveal a trend towards Islamist-inspired identity formation in Central Asia. While this trend may displease some, the pursuit of repressive religious policies will hardly stop it, but merely make it invisible.

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