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WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF STATE APPROACHES to religion in Central Asia and Azerbaijan? Why does it matter to the United States and Europe? Could this region develop a sustainable, positive form of secular government, and could this be an inspiration for other parts of the Muslim world? These are some of the questions that arise from the preceding pages, to which we shall turn after briefly summarizing the argument made in this book.

Central Asia and Azerbaijan are a clear outlier in the Muslim world. Whereas most other countries have moved toward greater mixing of religion and politics, this region has chosen a secular mode of government and, moreover, doubled down on this approach in the past decade. This approach could easily be dismissed as some form of post-Soviet leftover that carries little intrinsic value. That, however, would be a mistake. As this book has sought to illustrate, Central Asia and Azerbaijan are home to a deep-seated religious tradition that, in the past, proved to be compatible with world-class scientific advances and with a moderate and tolerant approach to religious affairs. This Hanafi-Maturidi tradition, coupled with an influential role for the esoteric practice

of Sufism, differs greatly from the core Middle East, which has been under the influence of much more orthodox and intolerant theology. The indigenous religious tradition in Central Asia and the Caucasus nevertheless fell into decline, but in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a school of modernist renewers, the *jadids*, sought to bring it into compatibility with modern science and learning. This exciting experiment was nevertheless brought to an end by Soviet rule, which decimated the indigenous religious tradition of Central Asia and Azerbaijan.

At independence, the situation faced by the leaders of the six new nations was far from enviable. The task of building new, functioning states out of the rubble left by the USSR was exacerbated by widespread poverty, a lack of governing institutions, and in several states, armed conflict as well. Their southern neighborhood was torn apart by violent extremists, who also played a key role in the destruction of Tajikistan. This, and the threat of Iranian-sponsored radicalism, was a formative experience that helped guide the approach that the leaders of these young states took to religious affairs. There was never any question that they would abandon the hollow atheism promoted by Communist ideology; the question was what would replace it. Everywhere in the region, the answer was the same: the six states all embraced a secular form of government that borrowed heavily from the Turkish Kemalist model.

In practice, this meant that the states enshrined secularism into their constitutions and laws, thus ensuring that laws, courts and education systems were shielded from religious influence. The states all took a skeptical approach to religion. In conceptual terms, they followed the French understanding of *laïcité*, which seeks to safeguard the state and society from the oppression of a dominant religious institution, and not the Anglo-Saxon concept

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of secularism that focuses on the promotion of individual religious freedom. As a result, they took a hard line toward any manifestation of Islamist ideology. Going beyond that, they remained highly skeptical toward *any* novel religious influence that appeared to depart from the indigenous traditions of the region. While they championed the harmonious relations among their traditional Muslim, Christian and Jewish populations, they made sure that challengers to these traditions were made to feel decidedly unwelcome.

There were, especially initially, differences in approach. While Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan took a hard line from the beginning, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan saw less of a danger in religious activism, and tolerated the arrival of proselytizers of various faiths. But over time, the approaches of regional states have become increasingly similar. Whereas Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have imposed growing restrictions, Uzbekistan has begun to liberalize its approaches. Azerbaijan has maintained a relatively steady approach, and in the region today only Tajikistan and Turkmenistan stand out for their highly restrictive approach.

The growing similarity in approaches toward religious affairs does not appear to be the result of any visible coordination between political leaders. While leaders have manifestly discussed religious matters during their many bilateral and multilateral meetings, they appear to have separately come to embrace a largely similar approach to the issue. A remarkable element of this approach is their decision to actively champion the region's indigenous religious tradition, and to assist in the rebuilding of institutions undergirding this tradition. Particularly in the last decade, the Central Asian states have all explicitly come to support the Hanafi-Maturidi tradition as the one supported by

the state. Azerbaijan, standing out because of its mixed Shi'a and Sunni population, has similarly supported its indigenous religious traditions but specifically worked to make its Shi'a clergy less dependent on their Iranian counterparts.

This, of course, would appear to contradict the states' simultaneous emphasis on secularism. How can the state be secular if it also explicitly supports a particular religious tradition? While this notion would seem to run entirely counter to secularism as understood by the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution, it is less extraordinary from the vantage point of majority-Catholic countries that have sought to separate religion from the state and regulate relations between state and church. On the basis of France's *Concordat* of 1801, many countries have maintained the secular character of their government, laws and education while regulating their relationship with the country's dominant religious tradition, a process that often includes a recognition of its particular role in society. The difference in Central Asia and Azerbaijan is that the state, following the Soviet era, is not just regulating its relationship with traditional religion but actively assisting in the *restoration* of that tradition.

This peculiar approach is unique to the post-Soviet Muslim-majority states, and a result of their leaders' pragmatic view of religious affairs. Viewing the indigenous religious tradition as part of their national identity, they concluded that it is natural for religion to once again reclaim its role in society and in the lives of individuals. However, they saw an ability – and indeed a need – to influence *what* religious tradition re-emerges in society. Following independence, they were faced with an onslaught of well-funded and confident religious proselytizers from abroad. Indigenous traditional religious forces, decimated by Soviet rule and lacking both

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funds, confidence and religious knowledge, were at a significant disadvantage against these foreign challengers. If governments had maintained a strict neutrality in religious affairs, they could have witnessed a rapid displacement of their indigenous religious tradition with imported and highly intolerant schools of religious thought from the Middle East and South Asia. Indeed, inklings of such a tendency are already visible in Kyrgyzstan. Seeing this lack of a level playing field, and the potentially destabilizing effect on society of many novel religious forces, governments chose to take an active role and put their finger on the scale. They restricted the ability of foreign religious influences to spread in society and instead sought to champion – and control – the indigenous religious institutions and facilitate their reconstruction.

As a result, the states in the region states exhibit a curious combination: they are at once skeptical of institutional religion while also championing its restoration. In this sense, they combine elements of two ideal types outlined in this book: the skeptical and insulating approach pioneered by Republican France and developed by Kemalist Turkey, as well as the dominant religion approach that has historically been widespread across the world. Still, it is the Skeptical approach that defines them, given their insistence on keeping religion out of their laws, politics and education systems.

The policies adopted by the six states show considerable similarities. Formulations in their constitutions defining the secularism of the state are remarkably similar. Many also establish the secularism of the education system in the constitution itself; other common themes include the prohibition of political parties based on religion, and of clergy engaging in political activities. The six also impose very similar restrictions on religious activity

within their borders. They require religious organizations to register with state agencies supervising religious affairs and impose registration requirements that by design are difficult to meet. They also impose restrictions on religious activities by unregistered groups. They seek to impede proselytism – some ban it outright, while others proscribe the promotion of one religion over another. Going further, they supervise and restrict the importation and publication of religious literature, frequently by requiring all such materials to be vetted by state agencies. And in all six states, the security services play a key role in the state approach to religion, taking a direct role in supervising, infiltrating, and prosecuting religious activism that falls outside the boundaries determined by the state.

The approach taken by Central Asian Azerbaijani governments differs considerably from the rest of the Muslim world. The most considerable overlap is with the Kemalist secularism that once prevailed in Turkey, but there are differences: the region's states have taken an, even more, interventionist role in controlling religious proselytism and religious literature. Compared to present-day Turkey, differences are even more profound, given Turkey's slide toward a political system dominated by an Islamist party, with references to religion in politics and the education system now ubiquitous. Compared to other models, similarities are even less pronounced. Central Asia and Azerbaijan share an official commitment to secularism with West African states that were once French colonies, but practical differences abound. Compared to the weak nature of African states, the post-Soviet states have considerably more powerful and activist state institutions, particularly security services. Moreover, West African states have failed to fully secularize their legislation. The notion of family law being

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adjudicated by customary institutions or according to Islamic principles would appear very foreign to most Central Asians. As for liberal Arab states, both Tunisia and monarchies like Jordan, Morocco and the UAE also seek to combine moderate Islam with modernity and progress. Uzbekistan in particular has taken a page from this playbook by seeking to assertively advocate for a moderate and traditional religious tradition as a counter-weight to extremism. But the similarities end there, as even the most progressive Arab states at the very least pay lip service to Sharia, and recognize Islam as the religion of the state. And while Indonesia is similar to Central Asia and Azerbaijan in championing several different religious traditions and priding itself on the harmony between them, it differs by being a state that actively promotes a religious foundation to education and law, undermining any notion of secular governance.

The differences are not just theoretical, they are meaningful in practice as well. In Central Asia and Azerbaijan, a young woman can go through a fully secular education system, in an environment where religious issues remain a private choice rather than something the state seeks to impose on her. When she reaches adulthood, she enjoys rights that, on paper, are the same as a man's, including in the realm of inheritance and divorce. Elements of these rights exist in several other areas of the Muslim world, but only in Central Asia and Azerbaijan are they all present. Of course, the implementation of these rights continues to leave much to be desired. And while there is a long way to go before everyone in the region enjoys all these rights, the fact that they even exist cannot be taken for granted anywhere else and is a strong foundation for the region to build on.

None of this is to suggest that Central Asian states and

Azerbaijan have found an ideal model, or that it is in any way perfected. This book has pointed to the deficiencies of these states' approach to religion. It has not delved in detail into them, primarily because so many others already have. Anyone seeking detail need go no further than consulting the yearly reports of the U.S. State Department or any number of nongovernmental watchdogs that have spent years cataloging problems and abuses in the region's religious affairs. As these reports amply illustrate, the region's approach suffers from a penchant toward restrictive and often repressive measures, to say nothing of the governments' tolerance of abuses by many of their employees. This is, to a significant extent, a legacy of the Soviet era, as the region's states have continued to accord state security services and the mentality they represent a prominent role in many walks of life, including but not limited to religious affairs. Only very recently have some states begun to curb the role of these services – most dramatically in Uzbekistan – but others have yet to begin that task, and no state is close to completing it.

Even if and when these repressive measures are eased, however, foreign watchdogs are unlikely to be satisfied. That is because there will likely remain fundamental philosophical differences between Western proponents of religious freedom and Central Asian and Azerbaijani leaders. The former – with the exception of France – define secularism in terms of individual religious freedom and as a result, have little acceptance for states that intervene in religious affairs, particularly if this intervention seeks to limit the operation of religious groups. Moreover, western proponents of religious freedom draw the line of acceptable activity in religious affairs at violence or the incitement thereof. As a result, they do not consider it legitimate to proscribe extremist ideology

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unless that ideology overtly calls for violence. By contrast, leaders in Central Asia and Azerbaijan define secularism as a set of safeguards to protect the state and society from religious oppression. They also consider the content and substance of an ideology, not just its violent manifestations, as problematic enough to warrant restrictive measures against it. These differences are unlikely to be bridged anytime soon.

Then again, Western governments have not always spoken with one voice. During the war on terror, for example, the U.S. State Department voiced criticism of the Central Asian states' approach to religion, while representatives of the Department of Defense were considerably more supportive. Furthermore, it should be noted that opinion in America and Europe is itself shifting, and religious freedom activists may not be fully representative of the approaches taken by Western states. The Trump Administration took a much darker view of Islamist ideology than its predecessors, for example. Unfortunately, it did not advance a coherent approach, and sometimes voiced a rhetoric and took measures – such as the travel ban on some Muslim countries – that appeared to target Islam rather than the political ideology of Islamism. In Europe, countries such as Denmark and France have begun to counter the political ideology of Islamism and not just violent extremism. France's new law to “boost republican principles” adopted in fall 2020 is the most recent example. Religious freedom advocates in the West are often highly critical of these measures. But in some ways, Western states are moving closer to the Central Asian approach, setting up a possible future where there is a greater approximation between the two. In the meantime, however, controversies over state approaches to religion in the region are likely to continue.

Accepting that the region's model is imperfect, however, does not mean it is beyond repair. Quite to the contrary, this book has sought to show that the ambition of the regional states is essentially a worthy one that deserves support, even though all methods they employ to implement it might not. This is the main weakness of Western policy on the issue: it has tended to question not just the methods but the aims of state policies in religious affairs. With some exceptions, Western policies have advocated for full religious freedom and only rarely voiced understanding, let alone support, for these states' ambition to maintain secular government. From the region's perspective, Western advice can be summarized as follows: "stop requiring foreign religious groups to register; stop banning Islamist political activity; stop restricting foreign-trained imams from serving in your mosques; stop censoring imported religious literature; and stop banning Islamic dress in schools." Not staying at that, Westerners have confidently argued that if regional states fail to heed this advice, their problem with violent extremism would get much worse. However, these dire predictions, voiced since the 1990s, have failed to materialize. As a result, leaders in Central Asia and Azerbaijan have come to view Western advice in religious affairs as hopelessly naïve at best and outright dangerous at worst. As a result, they have largely tuned out such criticism.

A better approach going forward would be to express understanding and appreciation for the goals set by the regional states' approach and offer to support gradual reforms to it that would, over time, make it less reliant on restrictive measures and more focused on constructive and positive measures. In recent years, the prospect of an improved dialogue on these matters has increased as a result of the renewed urgency for reform that has been visible

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in the three largest countries of the region – Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. As seen in the example of Uzbekistan, which has already involved the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission and the OSCE in the task of writing a new law on religion, this general urge for reform is certain to affect religious affairs. But the region’s states are only likely to be willing to internalize Western advice if their Western partners make a serious effort to understand their perspectives on religious matters, and respect their long-term strategic goals.

What is the sustainability of the state approaches to religion in Central Asia and Azerbaijan? As mentioned already in the introduction to this volume, it is an inescapable fact that these states are colored very much by their still recent Soviet experience. It remains an open question, therefore, whether the current commitment to secularism will continue to prevail within the scope of the next two decades, which is as far ahead as it is prudent to produce any forecast. As noted in the introduction, their likely trajectory depends in part on the development of political and religious ideas in the rest of the Muslim world. But it also depends on choices that governments in the region will make in coming years. To a lesser degree, choices by Western states and international bodies in how to approach the question will also play a role. Against this background, there are essentially four likely scenarios for the future. In a first scenario, the region’s states have a continued restrictive and defensive approach, something that proves unsustainable. In a second, their continued restrictive approach proves durable over time. In a third, the states liberalize religious policy, but fail to safeguard secular government. And in a fourth, they liberalize religious policy and succeed in maintaining secularism.

Of course, it is entirely possible that different states will follow different scenarios.

In the first scenario, states continue to pursue the current approach but do not engage in significant reform of it. In other words, their approach continues to be centered on restrictive and even repressive measures. But as societies evolve, and as the Soviet generations are replaced with younger people with no memory of the Soviet era or even of the instability and conflict of the 1990s, popular opposition to religious restrictions grows. This is coupled with a continued domination of Islamism across the Muslim world. Furthermore, state efforts to restrict religion fail, because of the impossibility of regulating the spread of information over the internet and particularly social media. Even within the governments themselves, there is increasing support for a more Islamic approach, not least because younger officials themselves no longer believe in the separation of religion and state. Those at the top gradually come to consider secularism as a danger to their position of power, and as a result gradually embrace steps to give greater recognition to Islam. This scenario may occur either under continued authoritarian rule, or under a gradual political liberalization. Central Asia and Azerbaijan would, in this scenario, follow the evolution of Pakistan, Egypt or Malaysia in recent decades. It would lead the regional states to increasingly look to the Islamic world in their foreign policy, and more likely than not lead them to embrace an increasingly antagonistic approach to the United States and Europe.

In the second scenario, the states also continue to embrace an approach heavy on restrictions. The main difference is that they are able to sustain this without generating substantial challenges either from within the government, or from society as a whole.

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In other words, the situation would look very much like it does today. This could be the result of several factors. First, if violent extremism in the rest of the Muslim world continues to be prominently in the news, it may – as it has done thus far – provide popular backing for restrictive approaches, as Central Asians and Azerbaijanis fear being dragged into the Middle Eastern morass. Second, if political Islam peaks in the next decade or two and becomes increasingly unpopular among Muslims everywhere, the same thing could happen. These two possibilities are, incidentally, not mutually exclusive: political Islam could lose support exactly because of its continued association with violence and unrest. Moreover, the efforts of Central Asian states and Azerbaijan to foster a secular ethos in their education systems could actually succeed, and their restrictive measures could prove effective at keeping Islamism at bay.

The third scenario features a liberalization of religious policy that leads to the gradual abandonment of secularism. The regional states, in this scenario, would follow the Turkish or Egyptian trajectory: a transition to multi-party politics coincides with the growth of political Islam as the main political force in society. This could take place gradually, over several decades, as in Turkey; or rapidly, in a revolutionary scenario, as in Egypt in 2011. Most likely, in this scenario states would lose control over the religious bureaucracies they promoted. Politicized interpretations of Islam would get a foothold within the *muftiates* of the region, leading the official *Ulama*, invigorated by state support, to gradually make ever-growing demands for the Islamization of society. This would follow the example of Al-Azhar in Egypt, or the *Diyane*t in Turkey. This scenario also rests on the assumption that Islamism continues to be a dominant force in the Muslim world, and that

Islamist ideas gain a stronger foothold in Central Asia and Azerbaijan in spite of government opposition. In this scenario, it would be likely for the liberalization of these states to be short-lived: as in Turkey, they would be likely to see a restoration of authoritarianism in a more Islamist form, as happened during Erdogan, and in Egypt however abortively under Muhammad Morsi. The alternative would be a Tunisia-like situation, in which Islamist forces are “domesticated” in a secular system. But as viewed in chapter eight, Tunisia has been an outlier and its success thus far has been a result of the strength of its civil society, something that Central Asia and Azerbaijan do not possess at this point. In this scenario, the region’s states would in a sense “revert to the mean” of the situation in the broader Muslim world, indicating the failure of the experiment with secular government.

The fourth and final scenario is one in which the gradual liberalization of the region’s religious policies does not lead to the abandonment of secular government. It is a scenario that would be likely either if the regional states engage in a gradual liberalization under continued semi-authoritarian rule, or if they make a gradual transition to democracy. It presupposes a commitment to reform that is broader than just the religious realm, as it requires the gradual liberalization of the political system. Still, liberalization and democratization are not synonymous: a state can maintain control over the political system, while liberalizing restrictions on society, including in religious affairs. Such liberalization would, of course, be at least as likely in a scenario that sees greater political participation and contestation of political power. Either way, this scenario is most likely to occur under certain conditions. First, the region maintains political stability and any liberalization is gradual and evolutionary. (As has been seen in the past two

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decades, revolutionary change tends to open the door to Islamist challenges.) Second, Islamist ideology sees a diminishing appeal across the Muslim world, weakening its appeal in Central Asia and Azerbaijan. And third, as a result, the present support for secular governance continues to prevail in the region, meaning that political Islam gains only the support of a minority of the region's population as political liberalization occurs.

Among these four scenarios, it is clear that the fourth is the most desirable outcome. But how can the region's states achieve it? That will require several important developments in regional affairs. Many variables outside the region will help determine the outcome, and none is more important than the way the Muslim world as a whole relates to the phenomenon of Islamism. Aside from that, three questions will be key. Can the states move on from the Soviet legacy? Can they develop a positive definition of secularism that maintains popular support? And finally, can they phase out their support for dominant religion?

First, for the region's model to be successful in the longer term, it will need to move beyond the Soviet legacy, which manifests itself in a reflexive reliance on state security issues to deal with societal phenomena. A key weakness of the region's approach to religious affairs is what political scientists call "securitization." It is because it defines an issue as a security challenge that the state legitimizes the deployment of repressive measures. In other words, seeing nails everywhere, the state reflexively reaches for the hammer. This was understandable and even perhaps natural for a new, weak state with a poor understanding of religious affairs in a neighborhood replete with very real manifestations of religiously motivated violent extremism. But as time passes, the states of the region have become stronger; and it has become clear that

religious extremism does not constitute the mortal challenge it once appeared to.

As this book has argued, states such as Uzbekistan have come to conclude they have the problem more or less under control. Others, like Kazakhstan, have arguably overreacted to terrorist incidents, just as many observers would say the United States did following September 11, 2001. In any case, it has become clear that most regional states continue to securitize matters that do not realistically pose a security threat to either the state or society. Reviewing the application of security measures and reserving them for true security challenges will be an important task for the future. Again, whether this proves possible will depend on whether the challenge of extremism continues to be a manageable one for the regional states. Azerbaijan will continue to have to factor in the role of Iran in supporting Shia radicalism as it fine-tunes its approach. Weaker states, such as Tajikistan, are likely to be more reluctant to release the pressure than stronger and more confident ones like Uzbekistan. This is why the current reform process in Uzbekistan is of central importance to the region. Should Uzbekistan prove successful in managing religious affairs in a more measured way than in the past, that would in all likelihood lead other regional states to follow suit.

A second key question is whether the regional states can develop a positive approach to secularism that maintains the support of their populations. As this book has shown, the regional states already differ on this question. Some, like Tajikistan, rely heavily on negative, restrictive measures in their approach to religion. Others, like Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan, have begun to articulate a more positive agenda, which centers on the importance of secular government but also embraces the tolerant indigenous

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religious traditions. Going forward, all regional states will need to develop such positive agendas, and ensure they communicate them to their populations. This will require the development of school curricula, as in Kazakhstan, where a course on secularism and religious affairs has been assigned to high school students. It will also require engagement of civil society to secure the buy-in of the population. Not least, it will require that civil servants are well trained in the concepts underlying the state approach to religious affairs, an area in which much progress remains to be made.

This leaves the question what, exactly, the positive message will be. Again, this will differ from country to country. Azerbaijan, with its need to balance its mixed Shia and Sunni population, is likely to focus more strongly on the conceptual aspects of secular government, and the imperative of the neutrality of the state between these two sects. It is also likely to continue to support theological approaches that bridge the two, as it has sought to do through “unity prayers” that are unique in the Muslim world. Central Asian states will logically continue to stress the compatibility of their Hanafi-Maturidi tradition with secular government, modernity, and the advancement of science. In this regard, they have thus far focused mainly on Abu Hanifa, something that is natural given the scholar’s key role in the development of the largest and most moderate of the Sunni schools of jurisprudence. But going forward, Central Asians have a largely untapped resource: the rediscovery of Maturidi’s work.

As discussed in chapter four, this medieval theologian remains accepted as a mainstream Sunni scholar, with broad legitimacy across the Muslim world. Yet over many centuries, his theology – including his defense of free will and scientific notions of causality – came to be overshadowed by the more austere

Ashari theology. If Central Asians are looking for a way to boost the legitimacy of their secular form of government, reclaiming the Samarkand-born scholar's legacy will be of crucial importance, and will provide Muslims far beyond Central Asia with a positive alternative. This alternative may not go as far in its embrace of rationalism as the Mutazilite school does; yet it would appear to be an easier lift in many areas of the Muslim world than to restore the role of the widely discredited Mutazilism.

A third key question is how long the states will continue to bolster their indigenous religious traditions. As the preceding paragraph makes clear, it is likely to remain a key element of state policy for some time to come. And because those traditions were so damaged by Soviet rule, this is natural and perhaps even desirable. But over time, the states will run the danger, in supporting religious institutions of a particular kind, of undermining the secularism of the state by allying themselves too closely with that religious tradition. This is an issue that is likely to become increasingly problematic over the next two decades, particularly as a new generation of more self-confident Islamic scholars emerges that may not simply follow the priorities set by governments. In other words, Central Asian states and Azerbaijan will need to find an exit strategy – one that brings them closer to the French model of *laïcité*, which despite the *Concordat* approaches different religious traditions in a more neutral way than do these states, or for that matter Turkey with its *Diyanet*.

In the best case scenario, then, the outlines of a slightly different model would emerge. In this model, the Central Asian states and Azerbaijan continue to be committed to secular government, laws and education. But this secularism would be based on positive underpinnings rather than a defensive and restrictive

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approach. To boot, the approach would largely be endorsed by the civil society of these countries. Governments would likely continue to take an active role in religious affairs, and continue to promote – though more subtly – indigenous religious institutions that would have restored, to some degree, their historical place in society. Meanwhile, governments would still supervise the activity of foreign religious groups and the publication and distribution of religious literature. But they would do so with a lighter hand, and focus their energies on those influences that are truly extremist in nature, while essentially leaving alone small religious groups that pose no threat to societal stability. In terms of their approach to religion, these states are not likely to become like the United States; but they could become more like France.

Could the secular model of Central Asia and Azerbaijan be emulated by other parts of the Muslim world? To some, this may appear to be neither likely nor desirable. Countries in the “core” areas of the Muslim world may feel there is little to learn from what they see as peripheral post-Soviet states that continue to be affected by the legacy of Communism. And even if they would, they may emulate mainly the defensive and restrictive elements of state approaches to religion there.

Yet it is by no means certain that Islamism will continue to remain the dominant ideology in the Muslim world. Islamists have had a certain appeal to the masses, but what has made them powerful is four key factors: their determination and organizational capability; their ample financial resources, courtesy of Gulf funders; their willingness and ability to intimidate or eliminate opponents; and the collapse of alternative ideologies. As noted in chapter two, there are indications that Islamism may, in fact,

have passed its peak. When Sudan declared itself a secular state in 2020, it marked the first time that a country having adopted Islamism turned its back to the ideology, implicitly declaring it a failure. The once-mighty Muslim Brotherhood is a shadow of its former self. When several Arab states normalized relations with Israel, the fury of the “Arab street” was nowhere to be seen. Most remarkably, Saudi Arabia, of all countries, has embraced a path to moderation, even purging its textbooks of hatred toward Jews and Christians.

In Iran, the regime is able to maintain its power only through massive and systematic repression. In Turkey, Tayyip Erdogan’s rule has turned sour, and his rule is now widely associated with corruption and mismanagement. In both countries, Islamist rule has repelled the population, which is reacting by dissociating itself from religious conservatism and even from religion itself. Two thirds of Iranians want religious prescriptions purged from legislation, and three in five no longer fast during Ramadan. Similarly in Turkey, self-identified religious conservatives are declining rapidly, and a flurry of indicators show the population being more liberal, supportive of women’s rights, and tolerant of other faiths.¹ Similarly, a 2019 survey by the Arab Barometer of six large Arab states showed a significant and rapid loss of trust in both Islamist parties and religious leaders.²

This is not to say Islamism is not a serious force; it remains the most powerful movement across the Muslim world, and its ideas have been internalized by millions of Muslims around the

1 Terry Daley, “Iran’s Secular Shift: New Survey Reveals Huge Changes in Religious Beliefs,” *The Conversation*, September 10, 2020; Ragip Soyulu, “Turkish Youth Increasingly Secular and Modern Under Erdogan, Poll Finds,” *Middle East Eye*, March 20, 2019.

2 “Arabs are Losing Faith in Religious Parties and Leaders,” *Economist*, December 5, 2019.

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globe. But an increasing number of Muslim intellectuals have begun to speak about the decline of Islamism, indicating it may well have passed its prime. The conclusion is that Muslims are gradually tiring of the hatred, unrest and sectarian violence that is being committed in the name of Islam.³

If this trend intensifies, as seems likely, Muslims will be looking for alternative models of organizing the relationship between religion and the state. The idea of separating religion and politics, prominent in the Muslim world fifty years ago, is likely to once again gain traction among intellectuals and the public at large. A generation ago, Turkey played the role of an example of successful secular government, which inspired secularists elsewhere and formed an important model for the development of the Central Asian model studied in this book. It no longer plays this role, and no other major state has emerged to replace it. This makes the trajectory of Central Asia and Azerbaijan all the more important. If they fail to build a model that proves sustainable, there will be no example of successful secular government in the Muslim world. Eyes would by necessity turn to the next best example – countries that are not secular, but which are liberalizing under a broad reference to religion, as Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia or the UAE.

Should Central Asia and Azerbaijan refine their model along the lines outlined here, however, it is more than likely that they will catch the attention of those seeking an alternative to the current mixing of religion and politics that prevails in Muslim-majority countries. Just as they once were inspired by the example of Turkey, Central Asia and Azerbaijan can themselves be an example of successful secular government.

³ Mustafa Akyol, "A New Secularism is Appearing in Islam," *New York Times*, December 23, 2019.



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