



## PREFACE

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**NO QUESTION HAS BEEN MORE CENTRAL** to the Muslim world's politics and society over the past half century than the relationship between religion and state. This period coincided with the rise of political Islam as a dominant ideological movement, and the growing mixing of religion and politics that it helped bring about. The shape and form of this mix has been diverse. At worst, it has taken the shape of terrorist groups such as ISIS and Al Qaeda, and led to Islamic revolutions in Iran and Sudan. In other places, like Turkey, political Islam rose through electoral politics. Everywhere, the implications have been immense. Whereas secular ideas dominated the Muslim world around 1950, at century's end they had been largely marginalized. The impact of this development has been nothing but a disaster. The mixing of religion and politics has done great damage to the political life of Muslim societies, as well as to religion itself. At best, it has led to a new form of authoritarianism that has hit women and minorities hardest; at worst, it has contributed to civil war and the total destruction of societies.

This is the context in which the Muslim-majority states of the former Soviet Union – Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan,

Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – gained independence in 1991. Thirty years later, this book argues, these six states have developed a new model of secular statehood. While this model to some extent still carries remnants of Soviet practices, it is fundamentally different from Soviet-era atheism. And while it draws on the French understanding of *laïcité* and Kemalist Turkey's secularism, it has unique characteristics that derive from the region's own history and approach to religion.

Could this model – or a future, improved version of it – be of relevance to other Muslim nations that seek a way out from the destructive mixing of religion and politics? Many would find such a notion preposterous. For over two decades, a motley crew of officials, scholars and activists have decried the restrictive and indeed repressive aspects of government approaches to religion in Central Asian states and Azerbaijan. Worse, they argued, these approaches would only exacerbate the problem of Islamic extremism these states sought to counter.

Two decades later, those dire predictions turned out to be baseless. If anything, levels of radicalism across the region have declined, leading some of the region's states to dial back on restrictions and adopt a less defensive approach to religion. Meanwhile, statesmen and scholars from the rest of the Muslim world have increasingly taken an interest in the trajectory of Central Asia and Azerbaijan, countries that in their eyes appear to be success stories rather than cautionary tales. Meanwhile, the states of the region are constantly evolving, and are now engaging in much closer cooperation than at any time since independence.

The idea behind this book dates back more than a decade. For long, I had been intrigued by the cognitive dissonance between Westerners and Central Asians. Most Westerners took

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it for granted that the only way forward for these countries was through wholesale liberalization and the expansion of freedom of religion. Central Asian leaders, by contrast, viewed such advice as a recipe for disaster. As new and weak nations whose traditional religious institutions had been decimated by Soviet rule, they feared their societies would be overrun by well-funded propagandists of political Islam. Still, Westerners urged them to reach out to Islamist forces and accommodate them in their political systems. For their part, leaders in Central Asia and Azerbaijan could not understand why their Western interlocutors seemed to criticize their insistence on maintaining secular laws and secular education – something Westerners themselves took for granted in their own countries. Of course, this debate was not unique to Central Asia and Azerbaijan; it was taking place across the Muslim world, most prominently in Turkey. There, the country's Islamist movement deftly appealed to Western powers for support against the country's secularist establishment. And it obtained the blessing of the United States and European Union, helping it gain power in 2002.

At some point, I recall looking into whatever scholarship existed on the relationship between state and religion in Central Asia and Azerbaijan. A cursory survey showed that it was basically non-existent. True, entire shelves could be filled with articles and reports criticizing the approaches taken by these states. But hardly a single study existed that sought to analyze, or even describe, what the leaders of these states sought to achieve, and why they adopted the policies they did. To critics, perhaps, those questions were not relevant. But to a student of the region, they most certainly should be.

Against this background, my colleagues and I resolved

to fill this vacuum, beginning with the publication of country studies that aimed to describe the relationship between state and religion across the region. The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program published successive studies in its Silk Road Papers series from 2016 to 2020, which the reader can consult online.

Following the publication of these case studies, it would have been easy to collect them and publish in book format. But that would not have answered the bigger need: placing the experience of Central Asia and Azerbaijan against the background of developments in the Muslim world as a whole.

That, then, is the purpose of this book. It does so by first painting the outlines of the problem: the broader evolution of the relationship between religion and state in the Muslim world. That question, discussed in chapter one, forms one part of this book's foundation. The other part, the focus of chapter two, is to look more conceptually into models of interaction between religion and state. Having thus established a foundation, the book then delves into the substance of the matter. Chapter three provides an overview of the religious history of Central Asia and Azerbaijan, looking particularly into the characteristics of Islam across the region. Chapter four explores the religious challenge the region's states faced at independence, and how they responded to it. Chapter five delves into the detail, country-by-country, of state approaches to religion. On this basis, the next two chapters move to the important question whether the diverse experience of these six states constitutes a model. Chapter six looks into the internal consistency of the model, exploring the similarities and differences between these states. Chapter seven, by contrast, compares them with other frequently touted models in the Muslim world to

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determine if they are sufficiently distinct from those experiences to be termed a model. Finally, the last chapter looks to the future, examining possible trajectories for the region, and implications for the region's Western partners.