

THE POLITICAL CULTURE OF ISLAM, GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT IN UZBEKISTAN

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TITLE VIII PROGRAM

Project Information*

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Council Contract Number: 814-24f
Date: November 8, 2000

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* The work leading to this report was supported in part by contract or grant funds provided by the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research, funds which were made available by the U.S. Department of State under Title VIII (The Soviet-East European Research and Training Act of 1983, as amended). The analysis and interpretations contained herein are those of the author.

Executive Summary

This report offers an analysis of the relationship between women, Islam, and development, as a starting point for improving Western foreign aid policies to Uzbekistan, and the former Soviet Central Asia as a whole. It analyzes how development discourses of gender, secularism, and modernization shape local responses to women's public roles and situates that analysis within the historical and political context of debates over the changing role of Islam in Uzbek state and society. Research for this project is drawn primarily from personal interviews with representatives from local women's NGOs and foreign NGO support organizations, human rights reports, donor organization policy papers on women or gender in development (WID/GID), and social science literature on women, development, and Islam in other predominantly Muslim countries.

There is a direct link between the events in Afghanistan and security in Central Asia and Central Asian countries and the radical centers. The centers which are politicizing Islam are pursuing one goal, to stop, to turn back the process which has been chosen by all the people of Central Asia. They want to bring us back to the Middle Ages. To put the paranja¹ on our children, on our beautiful daughters. You see what is happening in Afghanistan. How people are living there. (Uzbek President Islam Karimov).²

Introduction

In this report, I offer an analysis of the relationship between women, Islam, and development as a necessary starting point for improving Western foreign aid policies to Uzbekistan, and the former Soviet Central Asia as a whole. I analyze how development discourses of gender, secularism, and modernization shape local responses to women's public roles and situate that analysis within the historical and political context of debates over the changing role of Islam in Uzbek state and society. Research for this project is drawn primarily from personal interviews with representatives from local women's NGOs and foreign NGO support organizations, human rights reports, donor organization policy papers on women or gender in development (WID/GID), and social science literature on women, development, and Islam in other predominantly Muslim countries.

I begin the report by characterizing the political culture of post-Soviet state "secularism" that has evolved in Uzbekistan since independence and how its complexity is reflected in practices such as veiling. I then look at what lessons can be drawn from struggles over secularism and Islam in other Muslim countries, especially in the domain of education. These struggles suggest that Uzbekistan is not entirely unique in this regard and that what these societies share is a more global struggle with processes of modernization that do not recognize any role for Islam.

I identify one of the most recent priorities – "gender" – which Western donor and development organizations have highlighted in their programs, showing how project-oriented conceptualizations of gender illustrate larger problems in the intersection of development ideology and Islam. Lastly, I argue that in framing the priorities of social change in the very narrow terms of secular modernization, development projects and development practitioners

¹ Clothes for veiling that cover more of the body than just hair or part of the face as is typical in Uzbekistan.

² Kyrgyz Radio, first broadcast in Russian (2000).

exclude large segments of society by discounting alternative and homegrown survival strategies. This oversight also leads to the dismissal of Islam as a framework for progressive change.

Given our tendency to treat “transition” as an opportunity to “build from scratch,” which is impossible, where can we look to find the foundations of civil society and civility that must already exist, yet elude our post-soviet reconstructionist gaze? How might we adjust our ideologically informed desire “to develop” in order to accommodate existing social forms that are already flexible enough to provide most of the necessary social, economic, and political stability, given thoughtful and strategically-placed support and guidance?

In unexpected ways, current Western strategies to develop societies like Uzbekistan into global partners are more likely to lead to “collision and collusion” (Wedel 1998) than the kind of “partnership” USAID and other donor organizations are articulating (USAID 1999). The collision I refer to here is not between so-called transitional and developed countries (although this is possible as well), but more significantly between groups with increasingly polarized priorities within societies like Uzbekistan. This polarization as a consequence of current strategies is virtually inevitable given contradictions between the high stakes in this transitional period, their increasing links to unilateral assistance, and the dubious language of cooperation (“partnership”) that accompanies development programs.

Secularism and the Uzbek State

While the Republic of Uzbekistan has existed as a sovereign state for nine years, some of the symbols that Uzbekistanis initially celebrated and understood as representing national independence have changed remarkably during this time. For example, the role of Islam in state and society is perhaps becoming the single most divisive and contentious post-independence issue facing the government and citizens of Uzbekistan today. Once characterized either as a cultural “survival” of a pre-modern Central Asia or as a national cultural trait amidst many others in a modern Soviet society, Islam has acquired an irrepressible and increasingly pervasive public presence in the building of a post-Soviet Uzbek society.

Uzbek state policies, whether oppressive or tolerant, have thus far been unable to either erase or reconcile the insistent symbolic power and utility of Islamic practice or discourse. This persistence of Islam as an “identity” should be seen, however, not as some ineffable force which has literally compelled people to struggle for or over it – if that were the case why wouldn’t there

be greater consensus? – but rather as a powerful language, or symbolic toolkit, which Uzbekistanis find indispensable at all levels of social life for conveying moral interests and emotional needs. Islam’s political appeal derives from the shared awareness of its social – i.e. emotional, spiritual, and moral – necessity. In other words, Islam’s political power derives at once from socio-economic and cultural, material and symbolic sources.

Under Soviet socialism, Islam, like all religions, was officially banned. The state ideology promoted atheism in both state and society. Nevertheless, the Soviet government had to make political compromises in its international relations, especially with third world Muslim countries, and to demonstrate that as long as there were Muslims living in the USSR their needs would be accommodated. Thus, the government allowed token *madrasas* (Islamic secondary schools) and other Islamic institutions to function, but under tight control. At the very least, these gestures enabled claims of religious tolerance as well as claims to a rich Islamic heritage and the region’s important role in the cultural history of the Islamic world.

In its post-independence state, the Uzbek government has been managing Islam in a manner that bears some continuity with the Soviet past. Even more ambitiously, it has also taken on the difficult challenge of rendering a national ideology in secular terms. The restoration of an Uzbek national culture in deeper ways than were ever possible in Soviet times has inevitably raised questions of how to distinguish between national and Islamic cultures.

One way of course is to label and celebrate all practices under the rubric of national culture. This involves the manipulation of those cultural practices that, after 70 years of Soviet rule, continue to have Islamic significance, but in a way that makes them seem uniquely Uzbek. The idea is that the more unique is Uzbekistan’s Islam, the less likely Uzbek Muslims are going to identify transnationally with global forms of Islam. Following independence, the Uzbek state celebrated the possibility of Uzbek citizens’ public participation in national customs. For example, Russian and Soviet place-names were changed to those of local heroes and the government highlighted the *mahalla* (a form of traditional urban neighborhood) as a unique social institution where families preserve positive Uzbek values and customs.

Yet despite these attempts to manage social practices and beliefs, there continue to be at least two meanings of Islam in Uzbek society today. The government seeks to domesticate Islam by relying on it as part of the nation-building process, but also puts limits on Islamic forms of expression. It thus brings religion into politics, but tries to subordinate it to national priorities.

But religious practices also have social meanings that are not necessarily political. In the current climate, women, for example, may adopt an Islamic style of dress (“veiling”) that permits them to retain their good name in a patriarchal system and to engage simultaneously in practices that might otherwise be deemed unacceptable. They too, like the government, are “using” Islam, but for different and more diverse ends. The government, however, having tried to use religion, must read these alternative practices as political. Given these limitations of “Uzbek Islam,” it is not surprising that Muslims would seek to innovate their own versions.

This climate of politicized Islam has been largely responsible for increasing incidents of violence in the region. For example, in December of 1997, the Uzbek government escalated an already existing crackdown on Islamic activism by arresting and harassing hundreds of people in eastern Uzbekistan’s Farghona Valley, following the murder of a local state official in the city of Namangan, allegedly by Muslim extremists (Human Rights Watch 1998). Just over two years later, in February of 1999, six bombs exploded in Uzbekistan’s capital city Tashkent, killing 15 people and injuring over 100.

The government attributed these explosions to Muslim terrorists and subsequently conducted even more massive arrests. Other violent events have occurred since then with the incursions of armed groups into Uzbek territory from across mountainous borders with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. These incidents and analyses of them have occupied numerous pages in the news media, on the internet, and in policy papers.³ Despite voluminous coverage that attributes the rise of violence to socio-economic problems, no one has attempted to put everyday Islamic revivalism in Uzbekistan in a comparative perspective. This is the approach of the next section.

Putting Islamism in Comparative Perspective

The relative novelty of sovereign nation-state status for Uzbekistan and of scholarship on post-Soviet Islam lends urgency to a comparative approach to Islamic revivalism, or Islamism. For this reason I shall refer briefly to research conducted in other predominantly Muslim societies, such as Egypt and Turkey. The reason why Egypt and Turkey are important cases for thinking about Uzbekistan is that both countries have experienced massive campaigns –

³ For one of the most in-depth policy-oriented studies of the post-independence conflict in Farghona, see Lubin and Rubin (1999).

socialism under Nasser in Egypt and westernization under Kemal Ataturk in Turkey – to “modernize” institutions organized on Islamic principles and practices. Currently, both have governments facing serious new challenges to define the role of Islam in state and society.

One of the more significant contributions of recent anthropological literature on Islamic reform movements⁴ focuses on the shift in the locus of authority in education from the orthodoxy of a Muslim elite (*ulama*) to populist, or democratic, forms of knowledge transmission. These authors collectively demonstrate that the majority of leaders of Islamist movements are products of the same Western (European)-inspired state educational systems that were designed to produce modern, secular, and rational citizens. They further argue that in Egypt schools have actually become the focal point of Islamic revivalism and it is in the schools where the government finds the greatest threat.

This phenomenon is far from limited to places like Egypt and Turkey. France has experienced similar tensions with Muslim politics in its state school system (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996: 3-4) and so has the United States, with demands by Christian groups for prayer in school. In short, conflict over the role of religion in public schools may be more of a global phenomenon than first appears and, as I shall discuss below, has emerged as a thorny problem in post-Soviet Uzbekistan as well (Human Rights Watch 1999).⁵

Studies like these on how Muslims have adapted Islam to large-scale and changing conditions allow us to draw two conclusions. First, Islamism in places like Egypt is not limited to traditionally socialized segments of the population; rather, it is the expression of a diverse group of Muslims (both elitist and populist) seeking resolutions to current local and global problems in accordance with the ideals of an Islamic community as a moral community.⁶ The second conclusion is that Islamism is not solely a class issue, i.e., its popular revival as a force of

⁴ Or “Islamism” (Horvatic 1994), “the Islamic Trend” (Starrett 1998), “radical Islam,” “fundamentalism,” et al.

⁵ The questions we need to ask, then, are: Is the fact that public educational systems in so many secular societies have already become or are becoming battlegrounds on which the language of religion and secularism are the weapons merely a coincidence? If it is in fact a global phenomenon, to what globally shared state-society tendencies is it a reaction? Given the growth and prevalence of development as a global industry with global networks of people, information, and particular means of producing knowledge (e.g., the pedagogies of non-governmental organizations for teaching about civil society or the disaggregation in ever greater detail of economic and demographic statistics), how might donor organizations rethink their agendas of selling modernization in a way that is appreciative of these global backlashes against the ideological imposition of secular knowledge?

⁶ Starrett (1999: 149) points out that religion is as much about practice and the creation of a moral community as it is about belief.

political mobilization cannot be explained as merely a response to social and economic hardship. The latter conclusion challenges a common misperception about the *cause* of Islamic revivalism; the former questions beliefs about the very nature of Islam itself and Muslims as beings who somehow exist independently of the social world rather than as part of it. Neither of these conclusions is reflected in most scholarship on Central Asia or in the kind of literature that informs foreign aid policy decisions.

In this section I have suggested some of the ways that current approaches to understanding the various manifestations of Islam in Central Asia are inadequate and misleading. These approaches are based on assumptions grounded in studies of now obsolete Soviet state-society relations, theories of ethnic identity and conflict, and modernization as applied to the development of third-world or traditional, societies. An understanding of Islamism in Uzbekistan today as something more than the popular response to the socio-economic hardships that followed the political collapse of the Soviet Union is extremely important.

Islam and Gender: Veiling Modernity

Walking around Tashkent these days, one sees more and more young Uzbek women wearing *hijab* (covering their heads, veiling) in public. It is possible to find veiled women now working in kiosks and restaurants in both semi-rural and urban settings. While the majority of Central Asian women have worn headscarves at some point in their lives, there is a new way many Uzbek women are wearing them today.

According to the Human Rights Watch report “Class Dismissed: Discriminatory Expulsions of Muslim Students,” university administrators and government officials are enforcing what virtually amounts to a national dress code in which a distinction is drawn between “acceptable national dress – a patterned scarf worn on the head and tied at the back of the neck, leaving the face open – and what they regarded as ‘Arab’ or foreign dress – a solid colored scarf that is clasped in front or covers the face. To them [representatives of the state], the latter style was unacceptable because it does not conform with Uzbek tradition” (1999: 9). Claiming that such forms of public display are evidence of Muslim “extremist,” “fundamentalist,” or “Wahhabi” sentiment and threaten the state’s commitment to secularism in

its educational system, school and university administrators have been expelling female students who do not conform to Uzbek standards of dress.⁷

Male students with beards have also been harassed and expelled, although apparently in smaller numbers (*ibid.*: 16). In traveling around Uzbekistan and in the capital city Tashkent with a bearded Uzbek friend, I witnessed widespread suspicion and harassment of men with beards. In each of many incidents in which police and security forces stopped us and asked to see our passports, one of them always mentioned that my friend “looked like a terrorist.” Had I, with my American passport, not been accompanying him, he almost certainly would have been detained for much longer. Whenever he wore a tie, he told me, he was rarely harassed. Apparently, Muslim terrorists do not wear ties!

What the Human Rights Watch report does not discuss or explain are the reasons why some Uzbek Muslims insist on wearing *hijab*, growing beards, or engaging in other Islamic practices against the will of the state and for the first time in their lives. Veiling, for example, in addition to being a relatively new opportunity to display one’s commitment to Islam, also enables Muslim women to work and be in public without sexual harassment by men. It also puts their families at ease. Veiling at once morally legitimizes their presence and allows them to maintain their dignity by demonstrating religious observance. Thus it is an innovative way to reconcile modernity, Islam, and economic necessity.

With respect to the renewed popularity of veiling practices among lower-middle-class working women in Cairo, Arlene MacLeod writes that they:

see the issue of veiling as an option, and they interpret this option within a wide range of frameworks including cultural authenticity, fashion, feminism or reactionary behavior, socio-economic crisis and, finally, religion. They see veiling, most importantly, as a personal decision they must consider, forced by various social pressures.... Every woman must take some sort of stand (1991: 115).

⁷ The term Wahhabism (a movement or school of thought), or Wahhabi (a person who practices Wahhabism) is used in a range of ways in Uzbekistan. Its most narrow usage is in reference to the official, and highly orthodox, form of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia. It is more commonly used as a synonym for Muslim extremists, or fundamentalists. There exists, however, an even broader and pejorative usage, as a label for anyone who is opposed to or offers versions alternative to state interpretations of Islam or state-sanctioned Islamic practices. Of course, since interpretation is often ambiguous, people have used the label Wahhabi increasingly to vilify their opponents in Uzbekistan’s secular political culture. This “green-baiting,” to coin a phrase, has at times effectively resulted in loss of employment and imprisonment, if not execution.

In addition to the rather wide range of possible individual motivations for veiling, there is also a collective, societal impact. As Gregory Starrett points, out “the act of veiling, whatever its individual motivation and spiritual consequences, is a ritual act that contributes *de facto* to the Islamization of public space” (1998: 245). Hence, the uncertainty about where such a process will lead induces fear for the future.

Distinctions between national and Islamic practices, however, were and continue to be ambiguous. In proclaiming Uzbekistan a secular state (and society), the government is pursuing a policy of nationalizing Islamic practices as a means of securing its population’s loyalty to the nation by symbolically framing those practices as national first, Islamic second. Because many Muslims can potentially envisage Islam as a community that is either global in scope or at least recognizes no national boundaries, the survival of the Uzbek state may depend on its population’s learning to be content with an Uzbek national Islam. This may be all the more true given the hardening of national borders since the end of the USSR.

Thus, the state singles out women who “veil” in ways that are foreign to Uzbekistan because this expression of Islam symbolically privileges a transnational Islamic community. However, it is important not to interpret transnational veiling as a deliberate attempt to defy the state. Rather, veiling “transnationally” is a way for women to show their commitment to Islam in ways that they were unable to in the past because Uzbek national traditions (which were heavily influenced and engineered during seven decades of Soviet rule) are not flexible enough to allow for such innovation.

Ironically, if young women are veiling so that they can be in public either at work or in school, veiling is also the reason that they are being expelled from school in increasing numbers. Some of the ways in which male administrators (and perhaps female ones too) have justified the fact that a considerable majority of school and university expulsions (approximately 90 percent) have been female students⁸ seem to contradict the principles of modern secularism as they are understood in the West. Human Rights Watch quoted the rector of the Tashkent Pediatric Medical Institute as saying: ““The institute is pleased that more men are coming to the university to study now, because all over the world medicine is considered men’s work”” (1999: 16).

⁸ It should be noted that this figure, taken from Human Rights Watch (1999: 16), is based on a very small sample of confirmed cases.

That many people choose to use their state offices to insist on the appearance of a secular state and society is ultimately a reactionary position that is legitimated by the mask of modernity. Here, secularism (i.e., the separation of religious and state affairs or the banning of obvious religious symbols and practices from the public sphere) does not coincide with the modern priority of equal social and economic rights for women.

What is going on here, culturally speaking? The fact that the rector did not (and could not, given his position on veiling) invoke Islamic principles to expel female students tells us that there are interpretations of Islam that are more accommodating to women's right to education than are some secular ones. Thus, not only do these dynamics reveal potentials for tolerance and flexibility within Islam, but they also do not correspond to the dichotomy of "modern" and "traditional" that accompanies the ideology of the secular state in places like Uzbekistan.

For now the problem of Islam and secularism in Uzbek society revolves around people's desire to share, publicly, their interest in and commitment to an Islamic way of life. This "way of life" is by no means homogenous, but there are certain practices that people generally recognize as Islamic. In addition to modest dressing for women and sporting beards for men, praying five times a day and attending Friday mosque, making the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, and fasting for Ramadan are other markers of Islamism in Uzbekistan today. Many government officials and employees of state institutions increasingly engage in these practices as well. If this seems to be at odds with patterns of secularization in the public sphere, then we need to rethink what secular means in the post-Soviet Uzbek context.

Gender and Development: Problems with Gender as a Development Priority

The construction of gender as a cultural category has become a prominent issue as people deal with the tensions between Islamism and secularism in Uzbek public life. Foreign aid organizations, too, have made gender a high priority in development projects. The arguments that efforts around the world to reduce gender inequalities have failed and that aid projects have actually contributed to "the feminization of poverty"⁹ are common justifications for this

⁹ See section entitled "The Feminization of Poverty Here and Abroad," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 5(2), Summer/Fall 1998, but especially Moghadam, pp. 225-249.

development priority. However, the shift in the structure of international development from aiding governments to supporting non-governmental organizations might also explain the new emphasis.

This shift is itself gendered in that it has opened up the development field to organizations in which women are highly represented and to issues with which women have traditionally been concerned. While this trend is generally a good thing in that it democratizes participation in and control over development, it is important not to lose sight of the potential to feminize development and distort how gender is understood in prioritizing aid. As Emma Crewe and Elizabeth Harrison point out, “[a]ccording to many donors, the biggest barrier to addressing gender issues is a shortage of information, not what is done with it” (1998: 67); yet how information is used makes all the difference.

One of the weaknesses of the treatment of gender in development is its continued focus on women and on “gender relations” as something to be understood and disaggregated as if they exist in isolation of other kinds of relations. According to a World Bank report, “understanding gender” means being able to anticipate how men and how women in the aggregate will respond to development policy based on the idea that gender “refers to the socially learned behaviors and expectations associated with the two sexes” (King and Mason 2000: 2). While this definition of gender is a sensible one, it is inadequate for programs of social change because it does not account for how situational variation influences individual and group action.

This definition suggests the need to pay more attention to gender relations by listening to what women and men equally have to say about social programs and unmet needs. This may yield more information about women’s poverty, but it also leads to incomplete conclusions such as the “feminization of poverty.” Furthermore, in removing “women” as a category from the diverse set of social relationships – marital, familial, neighborly, and occupational – in which they are involved, it is too easy to portray women as being a singularly powerless and homogenous group.

The almost exclusive emphasis in development literature on what development policies “do” to people rather than on what people do in response to aid practices reveals an unfortunately weak and unbalanced understanding of the dynamics of social change. As the veiling controversy in contemporary Uzbekistan (and in many other Muslim countries) reveals, female “disadvantage” has little to do with where societies lie on a scale of least to most

“developed.” Choices to veil and the revival of other Islamic practices should be understood in terms of the negotiation of power among shifting constituencies of interests based on gender, religion, class, occupation, and ethnicity. In other words, development discourse must be able to explain why gender-sensitive policies that encourage women to enter the workplace and enroll in institutions of higher learning are the same policies that inadvertently lead to more public veiling and the expulsion of women from workplaces and classrooms.

Debates over the causes of “feminization of poverty” are taking place throughout the global development community. This phenomenon has been attributed to either the consequences of neoliberal economic reforms or traditionalist backlashes against the kinds of changes such reforms promote and entail. Uzbekistan has its own version of this development debate, which is sometimes expressed as an increasingly polarized struggle between traditional (conservative, religious-based) and modern (secular) cultures. Each “side” has its own distinct strategy for coping with socio-economic pressures brought on by the collapse of the Soviet command economy. In the remaining part of this section I will briefly summarize what those strategies are and suggest why both should be taken seriously.

There are two social formations – NGO and *gap* – that women participate in to pursue large-scale societal goals or to enhance their own economic power, that of their family’s, and of extended networks of friends and relations. Women who participate in NGOs tend to use the civil society model familiar to western societies to address specific social problems. Women who participate in *gap* – regularly scheduled social gatherings, usually of neighbors, classmates, or friends from work – tend to adapt local economic, social, and even political needs and goals to traditional forms of interaction. While both strategies have been shown to be successful in certain ways, forms of dependency also limit their effectiveness. NGOs tend to be dependent on foreign aid, while *gap* networks are dependent on the limited resources of members.

The women’s NGOs I researched tend to focus on two kinds of projects – economic and cultural, although they are often combined. The economic-oriented NGOs are concerned with helping women to become financially independent or at least to develop work skills in order to supplement family income. Such skills include women’s computer training, hairdressing, sewing, baking, and confection as well as the marketing of what these activities produce. Cultural NGOs tend to promote arts and leisure activities such as a puppet theater and recreational clubs.

Financial sustainability has been one of the chief obstacles to the flourishing of these organizations, which could easily dissolve should they fail to secure successive grants from foreign donors. Moreover, in most places outside Uzbekistan's capital city Tashkent, there is often very limited local support for NGO activities, partly because they take valuable time away from more profitable ventures and partly because the donor organizations that fund them tend to favor women who profess western, secular values.

Given the close ties, western orientation, and visibility of most local Uzbek NGOs, foreign donor organizations tend not to be aware of existing alternative modes of accomplishing the goals of civil society. Even though people who participate in *gap* draw on the language of tradition, *gap* is hardly the reactionary "old tradition" or unchanging social form that their detractors assert.¹⁰ Some critics have claimed that "[r]ural women's movements, in general, are not adequately supported by local communities" (Ikramova 1998: 5). While it is probably true that most rural communities are not familiar with and do not support western-style local NGOs, this is not true of the women's *gap*.

As I have argued elsewhere (Abramson 1999a), the small minority that does participate in and benefit from development, especially NGO projects, self-selects for Soviet-educated elites – i.e., those who already most resemble the West in the simplistic traditional-modern continuum. Unfortunately, this self-selected group of beneficiaries and the donor organizations that work with them have been thus far unable and unwilling to accommodate Islam or "traditional" practices in development programs and civil society-building projects. Consequently, despite the fact that the U.S. aid agenda for Uzbekistan includes support for freedom of religious expression and human rights, the larger program of development as modernization actually undermines the very civil society and freedoms it purports to be aiding.

Development and Islam: Homegrown Approaches

While the Uzbek government is suppressing certain forms of Muslim activism and religious expression, it is also actively supporting its own grandiose projects to restore and rebuild Islamic saints' shrines, which have functioned as pilgrimage sites and institutions for capital accumulation and charity (*waqf*) for hundreds of years. According to the historian Robert

¹⁰ For more on *gap* in contemporary Uzbekistan see Kandiyoti 1998; on NGOs, see Abramson 1999a and 1999b.

McChesney (1996: 73), Central Asian shrines have “formed a focal point for public works and, like non-profit organizations today, have long served as vehicles for channeling government funding into welfare services.”

Among these complexes, which are at various stages of planning and development, are the shrines of Baha’ al-Din Naqshband and Imam Abu Bakr Ahmad b. Sa’d near Bukhara, the shrine of ‘Ubayd Allah Ahrar in Samarqand, and the Khazrati Imam Ensemble at the Barak Khan Madrassa located in the old city center of Uzbekistan’s capital Tashkent. Supported by UNESCO,¹¹ Uzbekistan’s Oltin Meros Foundation, and other state agencies, these complexes are designed to accommodate tourists, artisans, Muslim clerics, and pilgrims, although some have more of an emphasis on the revival and preservation of “folk handicrafts” and the “traditional environment,” while others are marketed for their historical sacredness.

The similarities of form and purpose between the *waqf*-endowment system, which was governed by Islamic Shari’a law, and the non-profit philanthropy sector in the United States are striking. Both seek to establish civil institutions that can sustain themselves and their charitable programs through capital accumulation. As countless representatives of foreign aid and non-profit organizations working in Uzbekistan have acknowledged, the greatest obstacle to their success has been the lack of a legal framework and standards for ensuring stability and accountability. As McChesney has also noted, the primary difference between the two systems is that Islamic (Shari’a) law, with deep historical roots in Central Asia, has the potential to command more widely shared loyalty and “to carry with it the moral authority necessary to engender legal consensus about, and submission to, a rule of law without which economic activity remains the prisoner of arbitrariness” (1996: 68).¹²

The magnitude of these projects and their potential significance as major tourist, artisanal, and pilgrimage sites is considerable. There have been heated debates over restoration

¹¹ Support thus far has focused primarily, and narrowly, on the preservation of historical authenticity rather than on practical economic issues or on the sites’ broad range of social functions.

¹² It remains to be seen whether the shrine-complex model will offer a viable local civil societal alternative to or variant of the non-governmental organization (NGO) model that Western aid programs are currently promoting. Is there a possibility for developing a legal and morally authoritative framework that draws on Islamic and secular traditions to support institutions such as charitable endowments?

and reproduction techniques that appear to be central to the process of endowing the museums and monuments with historical authenticity. Despite the debates, pragmatism in the forms of hasty construction and the usage of non-traditional materials and restoration methods has often won out for several reasons, including the attention won by “finished” products, lack of adequate funding for research and construction, and the possibility of increasing revenues from pilgrims’ donations. Among the reasons for developing shrine-complexes include: economic growth through the honoring of Uzbek, or Central Asian, national cultural heritage; support for artisans and revival commercial arts, many of which were almost entirely “lost” under socialism; and education in regional history through the creation of museums.

The development of shrine-complexes, partly funded by foreign aid, is one of a few circumscribed areas where the government actively participates in the country’s post-independence revival of Islamic heritage. State rhetoric is careful to frame these projects in national cultural terms, not Islamic ones. Hence, the focus on museums, national handicrafts, and tourism. Foreign aid programs have tended to mirror those of the Uzbek state in categorizing Muslim practices and beliefs as elements of an essentialized and static Islam that is merely one isolatable aspect of the national state culture.

Nevertheless, Uzbek state (and foreign) sponsorship for redeveloping these shrine-megacomplexes as cultural heritage sites for tourism and the revival of national commercial arts and crafts places its claims to state secularism on shaky ground. Cultural politics permeate the ways state, or public sector secularism, allied to national identity, is used to circumscribe and regulate Islamic revivalism whether in the commercialization of shrines and the Hajj, on the one hand, or in the promotion of certain forms of Islam – such as the Naqshbandiy school of Sufism of which these shrines are largely representative – as politically “correct” on the other.

While the impulse to develop and participate in these complexes is spread among a diverse set of interests – professional, political, and spiritual – the government’s own involvement and support is indicative of state-level benefits. Harnessing Islamic sites to the economic welfare of Uzbek society may win “the state” legitimacy as the primary patron of a specifically Uzbek Islam. In nationalizing Islamic heritage in Uzbekistan, the government might preempt the promotion of Islam as an ideology that conflicts with national interests. Finally, attracting foreign attention through these projects might secure greater support for the “right” kind of Islam.

Conclusions: Islam and the Future of Development in Uzbekistan

The political culture of Islam in Uzbekistan today can be characterized as one in which state social and political institutions are responding to increasing public displays of Islam by attempting to ascribe to them “national” and “secular” meaning. These displays take a variety of forms, ranging from participation in Islamically meaningful customs and clothing to the permeation of Islamic discourse in everyday speech. State control of Islam involves recognizing it as an influential force; but it also means the possibility of repackaging it in secular national terms.

Foreign aid policies for Uzbekistan focus on the causal link between growing socio-economic inequity and Islamism. This approach is misconceived. The implication of this causal relationship is that people (in this case, Uzbeks, Central Asians, Muslims) will turn to religion (Islam) when times get hard. In other words, people switch from rational thought to irrational belief when they become “desperate.” Until this claim is linked to an explanation of what “Islam” precisely offers the poor, its implications will remain threatening and will lead to political polarization. Moreover, such an argument positions religion, perhaps inadvertently, as an obstacle to the true goals of development. Defining the two as relationally incompatible inevitably leads to the identification of progressive social change with certain forms of radical secularism and the exclusion of religiously framed values from development’s solutions.

While there is a complex relationship between poverty and Islam in Central Asia, there are many other factors to be considered as well, namely that Islamism is occurring despite socio-economic problems in the region. Furthermore, the evidence I have provided clearly shows that the reasons for the growth of Islamism are much more diverse than the representations of it by Uzbek state officials, local NGO activists, academics, and foreign donors suggest. My discussion of the relationship between women, Islam, and development illustrates how the above misconceived causal relationship between poverty and Islam is a self-fulfilling prophecy given the combined policies and practices of many aid programs and state officials with respect to women.

Gender aid, couched in the terms of building a secular civil society, targets women’s NGOs. Its language is secular precisely because it does not address or accommodate Islam as a significant and guiding set of moral practices and beliefs with a strong emphasis on community

that inform and motivate social interaction. My research on women's NGO activity reveals that the packaging of development solutions as possible only within secular terms tends not to draw women who are participating in the Islamic revival. It does draw a range of women who are unsympathetic to and even fearful of Islamism.

For this reason, foreign aid in the form of NGOs reaches and empowers a very small segment of the population (one that is in a good position to receive support, for different reasons, from both the Uzbek government as well as from abroad). As I have also shown, many publicly active Muslim women seek both to participate in Islamism and to empower themselves by receiving a state-supported secular education. The fact that school administrators are expelling many of them for publicly revealing their Islamic interests means that these women are excluded from state support.

In distinct ways, both state institutions and foreign aid organizations participate in undermining the opportunities for empowerment available to a large segment of Uzbekistan's female population. The theoretical supposition that Islamism is evidence of a society's failure to develop is the self-fulfilling prophecy that enables theory to become practice in a way that thwarts the broader democratic objectives of development.

If socio-economic inequality in the world is not the main, or only, reason why people seek solace, answers, solutions, and hope in religion, then what other motivations or catalysts are there? Without further study we can only speculate, but it seems likely that globalization, or the expansion of transnational political economic relations and the concomitant weakening of nation-states might be one. Not only is religion capable of transcending nationally based ideologies and commanding transnational loyalties, but, and this is a corollary, it offers an ideological framework for tapping into and creating global networks (Lawrence 1999; Karam 2000). In sum, given the nature of the current global political economy, it is not unreasonable for the poorest people in a state run by elites to seek communities, loyalties, and identities which are alternative to the modern nation-state.

Development organizations must seriously question the paradigm of modern progress under which they currently operate. This would necessarily involve questioning the assumption that secularization must take place in each and every "developing" society as the starting point for populations to "develop" to their full potential; and exploring what ideologies that are more adaptable to transnational needs and projects have to offer. This does not mean abandoning the

nation-state, which is impossible anyway; it does mean restructuring international aid so that its agents can respond to the needs of more than just nation-states or regional clusters of nation-states.

In focusing on the cultural politics of Muslim women in development, this project will hopefully contribute to an understanding of Islamism in more than socio-economic terms. More than the manifestation of economic hardships following the political collapse of the Soviet Union, the phenomenon of Islamism is a culturally complex response to global political-economic systems, including patterns of international aid and development.

Some Policy Recommendations

- This study shows that Islam is extremely adaptable to contemporary circumstances and has the potential for providing Muslims with the means to solve contemporary problems.
- The government of Uzbekistan and foreign aid organizations are not doing enough to distinguish between Uzbek national Islam and Islam's myriad and diverse forms of expression. Foreign aid organizations should support and initiate efforts to understand this diversity within Islam.
- At the moment, there is practically no public space for debate in Uzbekistan over the issue of Islam's diversity. There is only the choice between a nationalized Islam and a criminalized one.
- Efforts should be made to increase dialogue between different sectarian groups and movements in Uzbekistan. This dialogue could take the form of academic panels or conferences held in Uzbekistan on topics such as "Islam in Plural Societies" and "The Adaptability of Islam to Modern Life." Foreign (Muslim and non-Muslim) scholars could present their own views on tolerance and Islam's adaptability in the present and in history.

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