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Engaging with Muslim Civil Society in Central Asia

COMPONENTS, APPROACHES, AND OPPORTUNITIES

By Sebastien Peyrouse and Emil Nasritdinov



UNITED STATES
INSTITUTE OF PEACE
Making Peace Possible

NO. 181 | DECEMBER 2021

PEACEWORKS

NO. 181 | DECEMBER 2021



ABOUT THE REPORT

This report provides a tour d’horizon of Central Asia’s Muslim civil society organizations. Based on dozens of interviews conducted in four Central Asian countries, it finds that the region’s Muslim civil society organizations are highly diverse in terms of activities and structures, often politically moderate and supportive of democracy, and open to working with global development actors. The report was commissioned by the Central Asia program at the United States Institute of Peace.

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Cover photo: Worshipers gather for Friday prayers during Ramadan in Dushanbe’s Central Mosque in Tajikistan, on August 19, 2011. (Photo by Theodore Kaye/AP)

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Peaceworks No. 181. First published 2021.

ISBN: 978-1-60127-880-7



UNITED STATES
INSTITUTE OF PEACE PRESS



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Summary



Muslim civil society organizations (MCSOs) in Central Asia are highly diverse in terms of views, activities, and structures. In most cases, however, they are politically moderate, supportive of democracy, and open to working with global development actors that respect the local Islamic social and cultural context.

The authors of this report facilitated interviews with representatives of Muslim civil society in each of four countries in the region: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The findings testify to the existence of an active and diverse sector that defies easy generalizations and deserves closer inspection.

The report examines a non-exhaustive list of six types of MCSOs: muftiates, mosques, *mahallas*, *jamaats*, Islamic charitable foundations, and Islamic non-governmental organizations. Some of these tend to have relatively close links to state structures, whereas others seek to keep their distance from governments that espouse secularism and regard Islamic groups suspiciously. The governments' suspicion helps explain why the latter avoid activities that could be construed as political or critical of the state and instead focus on charity work and development assistance, much of it inspired by Islamic precepts and funded by alms donated by members of local communities and foreign foundations.

Even so, the interviewees were not silent about corruption and other perceived moral wrongs in their countries, about the need to address social and economic problems, and about state interference in religion. Most MCSOs seem to be supportive of greater democracy and closer global ties, including with the West, but some are more conservative on social issues, such as women's role within society, and are committed to preserving Islamic culture and traditions.

With their strong local legitimacy, Central Asia MCSOs have the potential to be valuable partners for global development actors. To start tapping this potential, donors and practitioners should learn more about and reach out to Muslim civil society while urging Central Asian governments to allow more space for MCSOs' charitable and developmental activities.



Ethnic Uzbek gather to attend a Friday prayer in a mosque in Jalal-Abad, in southern Kyrgyzstan, on June 25, 2010. (Photo by Sergey Ponomarev/AP)

Introduction

In contemporary discussions among Western development practitioners and policymakers on the future of Central Asia, an important topic is usually missing: the role of Muslim civil society. It is either left aside for want of information or avoided due to prejudices or political concerns. Muslim civil society has been frowned on for not defending the values traditionally associated with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as Western-style democracy and gender equality. It has also been suspected of having links to extremist groups. This wariness, however, is usually rooted in ignorance. Although some groups do indeed espouse radical—and even violent—agendas, most Muslim civil society organizations (MCSOs) are moderate and do not directly challenge the secular political system in Central Asia.

In the Muslim world as a whole, civil society is diversified in its aims, actors, and methods. Some MCSOs are

directly linked to governments and seem to act as the “charitable hand” of other Muslim states such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. Others, however, have close links to political organizations or underground movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb ut-Tahrir. Muslim civil society can clearly have a profound political impact, as was seen during and after the “Arab Spring,” yet some MCSOs, such as Tablighi Jamaat in Kyrgyzstan, are apolitical and others, such as the Turkish group Khizmet, are dependent on Muslim business associations.

Even though MCSOs have sometimes stepped in to fill gaps in government-provided social assistance, many governments do not recognize the positive role that civil society in general, whether secular or Muslim, could play, fearing that these groups could compete with state authority. This attitude is particularly pronounced in Central Asia, where secular and authoritarian governments have

often sought to restrict Muslim civil society. Such government restrictions find support among secular parts of the population, particularly members of the older generation whose outlooks are still shaped by the legacy of Soviet atheist propaganda. Yet as Central Asian populations grow increasingly religious, governments are being pushed to respond by becoming more tolerant toward the public practice of Islam in general, and are even integrating some Islamic concepts into their official discourse in order to garner popular support. This shift is opening the door for increased MCSO activities.

To date, most studies of Islam in Central Asia have concentrated either on Islam as a religion—with its rites, customs, jurisprudence, and traditions of gender segregation—or on Islam as a political ideology, particularly in the extreme form that promotes radicalization and is appropriated by terrorist networks. Until recently, very few policy-oriented assessments had been produced of the role played by MCSOs in social and economic development in general or, more particularly, in the development of civic community-based solutions for local, national, and regional security. This report is intended to help generate a much-needed conversation about Muslim civil society in Central Asia and its potential to enhance the development of democratic patterns. The aim here is not to describe the space for Muslim civil society within specific countries, nor to offer assessments of the capacities and activities of specific organizations. Rather, the report provides a tour d’horizon of Muslim civil society in the region, describing the rich variety within that sector while also identifying some common threads in terms of views and activities. (Portions of the authors’ research on this topic were summarized in a report jointly published by the Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, the European Neighborhood Council, and the Hollings Center for International Dialogue in May 2021.¹)

The report begins by describing six different types of MCSOs—muftiates, mosques, *mahallas*, *jamaats*, Islamic charitable foundations, and Islamic NGOs—that together

reflect the diversity and multiplicity of Muslim civil society. Next, the report discusses the two main types of activities carried out by MCSOs, charity work and development assistance, and explains how they are intertwined with religion as a driving force. In its third and fourth sections, the report explores the relationship between MCSOs and state structures and state policies. MCSOs tend to keep a low profile vis-à-vis the state, not least because the authoritarian governments in the region are wary of independent religious actors. MCSOs’ political views vary widely and defy Western generalizations; for instance, strong support for democracy often coexists with conservative approaches to social issues. The report concludes by discussing how the international community and policymakers might constructively interact with MCSOs in Central Asia, which are not generally hostile to the West but regard Western models as to some extent inappropriate to the local context in Central Asia.

This report is based on interviews with representatives of Muslim civil society in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan conducted between October 2020 and June 2021. In each country, interviews were conducted with between five and ten people, all of whom are actively engaged in the work of an MCSO. (Interviews were not conducted in Turkmenistan, however, due to its very limited civil society and high level of political repression, which would have made interviewing dangerous.) In all countries, however, interviews were usually hard to arrange because of the reluctance of potential interviewees to discuss a subject that remains politically sensitive and their fear of reprisals from political and administrative authorities. For security reasons and at the request of the interviewees, their names and the names of their organizations have frequently been withheld from this report.² The interviews reflect only part of the considerable diversity of MCSOs in the region. This study did not seek to explore any possible relationship between civil society and radical or terrorist groups, so interviews were not conducted with members of organizations toward the more radical end of the broad MCSO spectrum.



People gather to pray in the central square of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on May 1, 2021. (Photo by Vladimir Voronin/AP)

Organizational Types of Muslim Civil Society

“Civil society” is understood in this report as encompassing voluntary, independent, and self-regulatory organizations such as NGOs, religious groups, foundations, social movements, and trade unions. These entities pursue a wide array of goals, including economic, cultural, informational and educational, interest based, and developmental objectives. What they have in common is that they bring “individuals together outside of their family bonds in non-commercial relationships” and act as a “protective barrier between the individual and his or her family on the one hand, and the state and society on the other.”³

Any definition of Muslim civil society must be broad—as in the case of this definition presented at an Arab

world symposium in Beirut in 1992: “the sum of the political, economic, social and cultural institutions that act each within its own field independently of the state to achieve a variety of purposes” that are “centered around the axis of Islamic thinking and culture.”⁴ Muslim civil society, like secular civil society, involves diverse actors, working methods, and objectives in a multiplicity of local societal contexts. In the Central Asian context, the study selected six main types of actor: muftiates, mosques, mahallas, jamaats, Islamic charitable foundations, and NGOs. All have in common their commitment to nurturing civil society through philanthropic activities or to contributing to the development of the well-being of populations at the local, national, or

international level. Their ties to the state vary considerably, with the muftiates and mahallas being closest to government authority. The others, with fewer links to government, are more diverse. These six actors do not constitute an exhaustive list of actors, but have been selected for the diversity of their working methods, objectives, structures, and funders, as well as their relationships to the state.

MUFTIATES

Every state in Central Asia has its own muftiate, a body that governs the practice of Islam, exercising control over mosques and all other Muslim places of worship and over the theology and worship practice of the clergy and the believing population. These five muftiates are the successors to the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan created under the Soviet regime in 1943.

The status of muftiates as civil society organizations (CSOs) is somewhat ambiguous. Muftiates cannot be state institutions, because all Central Asian states have secular constitutions, and muftiates are supposedly the main institutions representing the interests of the Muslim population and Islamic groups. Yet, although the degree of control exercised over the practice of Islam varies considerably from state to state, muftiates are generally monitored by the state administration and often cooperate closely with state bodies, including committees for religious affairs, ministries of domestic affairs, and security services.

Muftiates may carry out charitable activities by providing funds, clothing, or food to local populations. Some engage in sensitive social sectors such as health, as exemplified by the activities of the Muftiate of Kyrgyzstan in the fight against COVID-19 in 2020.⁵ A muftiate's philanthropic work may be conducted and managed by a special department within the muftiate or by associations specially created for this purpose, such as the Talaba association in Kazakhstan that provides social assistance to Kazakhstanis who study abroad.⁶ Some charitable activities have been limited by a dearth of funding, because

they are usually supported partly by the muftiate's modest income, which comes in turn from *sadaqa al-fitr* (compulsory charitable giving during fasting), from its role in organizing the annual hajj, or from contributions from its own employees, who may donate part of their salaries.⁷

MOSQUES

Mosques are an essential channel for social activism in Muslim civil society. They are often constructed with income that comes from mahallas, from local or foreign donors, or through local collective efforts. Although several hundred mosques opened after independence were subsequently closed by authoritarian regimes in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, mosques have generally flourished throughout the Central Asian region since the fall of the Soviet regime.

Like muftiates, mosques are often limited in their activities by insufficient funding. Many are dependent on charitable donations, and almost every mosque has a *sadaka* (charity) box into which visitors put money, particularly during Friday prayers. In many cases, mosques can barely cover the expenses and salaries of their clergy, and fundraising and expenditures by mosques are closely controlled and monitored by the government.

Mosques are places not only where people pray but also where they discuss issues facing their community and—in the words of a member of an apolitical MCSO in Kyrgyzstan—“where people can change.” Like the KASI Mosque profiled in box 1 (page 7), they provide a basis for social expression through their capacity to mobilize people within the framework of social events. Many mosques participate in organized social activities, often in the name of moral principles, such as the fight against drug and alcohol use. Social commitment is also reflected through their charitable actions, which are one of Central Asia's chief mechanisms for distributing food aid and clothing. For example, in Kazakhstan, mosques have offered aid each year to many thousands of needy people, to disabled children, and to people affected by natural disasters, such as

BOX 1. KASI MOSQUE AND JAMAAT

The KASI Mosque, located in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, and formally called the Toiiba Mosque, is both a religious and a social center for the large community of practicing Muslims living in the surrounding micro-districts. It was built in the 2000s with the help of the Kyrgyz-Arab Department of the Kyrgyz State University of Construction, Transport, and Architecture. Headed by an imam, it attracts between 70 and 120 believers for daily prayers, and its Friday prayers are among the best-attended in the city. Among its social activities is a monthly collection to buy food and other everyday goods for the local home for the elderly. The KASI Mosque is also home to one of the largest Tablighi Jamaat groups in Bishkek, which is known as the KASI Jamaat. Its members hold their daily and weekly activities at the mosque; they also host weekly regional council meetings and coordinate the trips that jamaat members make throughout the larger KASI region of Bishkek.

residents of the Karaganda region after floods in 2015. Religious holidays are often a platform for large-scale actions. For example, Kazakhstani mosques helped over twenty-three thousand low-income families during the Kurban Ait holidays in 2015.⁸

Mosques often serve as unofficial madrassas, where children from a very young age are sent by their parents to study—which mostly involves reading and memorizing the Quran. Mosques are sometimes also places where members of jamaats (described below) gather and engage in their daily activities.

MAHALLAS

“Mahalla” is a traditional term in Central Asia for an urban neighborhood with established boundaries and, usually, its own name. Mahallas were always more prevalent among the historically settled Central Asian peoples, such as the Uzbeks and Tajiks, than among traditionally nomadic peoples such as Kazakhs and Kyrgyz. In many Central Asian cities, mahallas are still an important element of the urban fabric. The root of the word *mahalla* is the Arabic word *mahol*, which means “environment,” signaling that the mahalla is not only a bounded territory but also a place that has a specific atmosphere with a community united by certain norms, ethics, and identity. As such, the mahalla is a very specific form of Islamic civil society. Mosques,

in both the physical and the social sense, are often the centers of mahallas, and as Islamic practice is becoming more popular, even residents of the nontraditional Soviet-style residential blocs are in some ways developing their own mahallas. So, while traditional mahallas as urban structures are increasingly replaced by more modern residential districts, mahallas as a civil society concept are expanding.

Both muftiates and mosques operate in cooperation with mahallas through neighborhood committees. Mahallas exist in all four countries included in this study, but their responsibilities and activities vary significantly from country to country.⁹ In Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, although mahallas sometimes cooperate with the government to organize social events, they operate relatively free from government control, unlike in Uzbekistan, where they are given administrative functions by local authorities. Defined after Uzbekistan’s independence by late president Islam Karimov as an indigenous form of self-government that might form a part of the foundation of civil society, mahallas are regulated by rules based on practices and customs rooted in the Central Asian Islamic tradition, and hence have been seen as promoting Islamic values.¹⁰ In the region as a whole, they are seen as a symbol of a well-ordered Muslim society whose members are bound by mutual reliance.¹¹

ISLAMIC CHARITABLE FOUNDATIONS

Islamic charitable foundations, whose function is to collect and distribute aid (such as money, food, clothing, and medicine), are present to various degrees in several Central Asian states. In addition to local charitable foundations, there are numerous international ones, many of which have their headquarters in the Arab world, particularly in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait. In Kyrgyzstan, the main foundations based in or that receive financial support from Saudi Arabia include the Al-Wakf Al-Islamia, the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, Ehsan Khairiya, As-Salam, As-Safa, As-Salabil, Nama, and Itar-Zharkyn Zhashtar. One of the most common types of activity these foundations engage in is the construction of mosques. After the mosques are built, their ownership and control are usually given to local communities, thus creating the physical infrastructure for local Islamic groups.

The foundations also engage in various kinds of social projects, such as building schools and hospitals, helping poor families and orphanages (in Kyrgyzstan, orphans receive more support from Islamic foundations than from the state), and organizing iftars (evening meals) during Ramadan. In Kyrgyzstan, charitable foundations have built nearly seventy secular public schools and a large number of medical facilities, as well as more than twenty mini-towns for socially vulnerable families across the country. Foundations have also undertaken projects to bring water for both drinking and irrigation to rural communities. This social component of the work of Islamic charitable foundations has become more prominent in response to tighter government monitoring of their religious activities. Faced with increased restrictions and surveillance, Islamic foundations have asserted their involvement with local populations by bolstering their charitable, development, and education activities.

JAMAATS

Jamaat is an Arabic word that describes a group and can be interpreted very broadly. For example, a group of worshipers who are conducting a joint prayer and a group of Muslims regularly attending a particular

mosque can both be called a *jamaat*. In this report, the term is used to identify groups that represent specific Islamic movements, whether local or, more often, of foreign origin. Some of the *jamaats* with the largest number of members in Central Asia include groups of Turkish origin (e.g., Khizmet, Nurjular, and Sulaimanchiler), groups of Indo-Pakistani origin (Tablighi Jamaat), and various Salafi groups of Saudi origin. In addition, Hizb ut-Tahrir (of Syrian origin) has developed a strong Central Asian presence. Some of these groups, such as Khizmet, Nurjular, and certain Salafi *jamaats*, receive foreign funding. Others, such as Tablighi Jamaat, are financially self-reliant. The suspicion among the region's authoritarian governments that religious groups of foreign origin may evade regulation or have ties to radical or terrorist groups has fueled government repression and largely limited their ability to develop in the region. In most Central Asian countries, these groups were popular in the 1990s and early 2000s but were later banned and now have either ceased their activities or operate underground. Kyrgyzstan, however, is an exception, with some *jamaats* banned in other Central Asian countries still legal and active in the country. One such group is Tablighi Jamaat, which organizes several kinds of events: daily *taalim* (study circle), *mashvara* (council), and three types of *gasht* (visitations) to the community.

Although most Muslims in Central Asia do not affiliate themselves with specific *jamaats*, for those who do, their identity is significantly shaped by the views of the group to which they belong. *Jamaats* often see each other as competitors, can be critical of one another, and target different layers of the population. For example, Tablighi Jamaat is more popular among the poor, while Khizmet, which operates through a network of expensive private schools, is more connected to the middle and upper-middle class.

Interviews found that *jamaats* aim to support their members in many ways. For example, Tablighi Jamaat is known for helping people overcome various forms of addiction, including alcohol and drug abuse. Other groups, such as Khizmet, help their members with professional career

BOX 2. THE NGO UMMA IN KYRGYZSTAN

The Kyrgyz NGO called UMMA was established by a husband-and-wife team in 2015 and is officially registered with both the Muftiate of Kyrgyzstan and the Ministry of Justice. Its main goal is the spiritual and intellectual development of young people in Kyrgyzstan. UMMA helps young people tackle the challenges of modern society. It has a center that brings together practicing Muslims from across Kyrgyzstan; publishes an online journal; and conducts both educational and charitable activities. Over the last five years, it has collected money during the month of Ramadan and redistributed it among poor families. In 2021, UMMA collected more than \$14,000 during Ramadan, which was used to prepare food packages for nearly a thousand families as well as for a home for the elderly and an orphanage. UMMA also mobilized Kyrgyzstan's Muslim community to provide various kinds of assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

development. Most jamaats have networks that members use to obtain jobs, develop businesses, or access public services. Most of these groups are also involved in various forms of *dawah* (spreading the message of Islam) and engage in various kinds of charitable or development work.

ISLAMIC NGOS

Islamic NGOs may be the most diverse sector of Muslim civil society in Central Asia in terms of both status and activities. The status of Islamic NGOs runs the gamut from official to semiofficial to underground, and organizations may be local, national, or international. Their size and organizational structures are extremely varied, ranging from a few individuals working from their homes to offices with dozens of people. Their sources of funding are just as diverse. While some are able to find the resources to conduct charitable or development activities on a regular basis, others can afford to engage only in ad hoc activities, often conducted on a small scale, such as in a single neighborhood.

Some Islamic NGOs have come to be widely known and respected in the region. This is the case for the Aga Khan Foundation, which in Central Asia operates mainly in the Pamir region of Tajikistan as well as in a more limited manner in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and for the Kyrgyz NGO Mutakalim. However, many Islamic NGOs, such as those whose members were

interviewed for this study, keep a low profile so as not to attract the unwanted attention of political authorities. Nevertheless, Islamic NGOs are one of the most dynamic players in the region due to both their growing numbers and the logistical and financial support they receive from various sources, including private individuals and Islamic charitable foundations.

As illustrated by the NGO UMMA, profiled in box 2 on page 9, Islamic NGOs—like secular NGOs and those associated with other religions—engage in multiple sectors and types of activities, ranging from charity to development. Mutakalim, which was established in 2000, supports women's rights, including by helping women improve their economic opportunities and by promoting a positive image of women's lives. Another NGO, in Uzbekistan, focuses on education; one of its staff members, who was interviewed for this report, said he “shares wisdom and helps Muslims to stick to the right Islam,” advising people to stay away from Islamic groups that justify violence and misbehavior. One NGO fundraises for sick children and provides assistance to orphanages, while another helps Muslims to develop their businesses and find investors. Additionally, a Tashkent-based NGO has been fighting COVID-19 by assisting those who have lost a job or who are sick and lack necessary medicine; this NGO started as a group of eight people and now has more than two hundred members.

The Motivations and Main Activities of MCSOs

The presence of increasingly active MCSOs in Central Asia lies at the confluence of several factors. One is a growth in religiosity over the past thirty years that has stimulated expressions of piety such as charitable giving and participation in Islamic charitable foundations. A second factor is the increase in global religious exchanges and the evolution of communication technologies, which have spurred and facilitated the engagement of third parties (in particular, wealthy individuals) in independent Islamic institutions and produced what researcher Mona Atia has described as “pious neoliberalism”—that is, the merging of wealth and piety in a social system that part of the local population judges to be flawed.¹² MCSOs make it possible to translate into concrete form the vision of an Islamic message, offering answers to a wide array of social problems and to combine religious values with social work.

This section of the report discusses the two main types of activities carried out by MCSOs—charity work and development assistance—and then examines how they are intertwined with religion as a motivating factor.

CHARITY WORK

The growth of inequalities in Central Asian countries has been fertile ground for the development of charitable practices. Many MCSOs in Central Asia describe themselves as being engaged in charitable work designed to help individuals and families experiencing social difficulties. They conduct their charitable initiatives in the name of the Islamic principle of *ihsan*, which obliges Muslims to provide assistance to needy people, in particular through *zakat*, a form

of almsgiving that requires people to contribute a percentage of their wealth (usually 2.5 percent) to community development. The *zakat*, which according to some estimates is paid by almost half of the Kyrgyzstani population, is generally contributed in one of two ways: either by giving money or by responding to a specific need of the community—for example, by providing material goods.¹³ People paying *zakat* turn to a member of the local clergy, such as an imam, to determine which people in the community are in need.

The *zakat* may be distributed beyond the local neighborhood if there is a need to respond to some specific issue or incident, such as a natural disaster, in another part of the country.¹⁴ Arab charitable foundations redistribute *zakat* collected in their own countries to other parts of the Muslim world, including Central Asia. The management and impact of *zakat* in Central Asia are therefore a part of a global trend, and the geography of the distribution of *zakat* has evolved by being more integrated into a notion of spurring socioeconomic development of the larger *ummah* (the global Muslim community).

Another important source of funding for charity is *fitr-sadaka*, a minimum fixed amount paid by each household before the Qurban Eid prayer. In Kyrgyzstan in 2019, *fitr-sadaka* donations amounted to half a million dollars. This money is distributed as follows: 50 percent to the needy in the settlement where it is collected, 20 percent to the region, 15 percent to the surrounding oblast (province), and 15 percent to the muftiate. The muftiate has a special office that



A volunteer in protective suit carries an oxygen concentrator to help a suspected COVID-19 patient breathe at her apartment in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on July 24, 2020. Muslim civil society organizations have mobilized to help provide care and medicine and to mitigate the economic impact of the pandemic. (AP Photo/Vladimir Voronin)

accepts requests for assistance in the period before collection and then distributes the funds accordingly.

Central Asian MCSOs often conduct activities that target particular groups or causes; indeed, many MCSOs have been created in response to specific needs. For instance, some associations have been created in Uzbekistan to support migrants working in Russia or Kazakhstan by giving material assistance and advice to their families at home. MCSOs may also be established in response to temporary emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has seen the creation of several MCSOs to mitigate the economic impact of the crisis through financial support to the most vulnerable families or to provide medicine to people affected by the pandemic. Individuals or groups receiving assistance may also be chosen based on geography. For example, a

charitable foundation in Kazakhstan focuses its activities on villages in remote rural areas, where living conditions are typically harsher than in urban areas. Financial aid can also take the form of support for religious practice for poor people; for example, people living in homes for the elderly in the cities of Astana and Almaty received free vouchers from mosques to cover the costs of participating in the hajj and *umrah*.¹⁵

Despite the variety of charitable work conducted by MCSOs, in contexts where civil society faces restrictions and where the government mistrusts independent religious activities, the number of beneficiaries of the work of MCSOs may be small. Most large-scale aid in the region is provided by institutions over which the state has more control, including mosques and muftiates, which are the main recipients of zakat.

DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE

The second major pillar of Muslim civil society engagement consists of development activities of the kind conducted by secular and other religious CSOs. The growing number of MCSOs engaged in development rather than charity reflects a more general shift in Islamic economic thought across the Muslim world: whereas Islamic economists in the 1960s emphasized the concept of redistribution as the foundation of social justice and Islam, the notion of social justice has slipped progressively into a concept of equal opportunity instead of economic equality or equal income.¹⁶ This has led MCSOs to increase their efforts to help people become economically independent, on the assumption that fostering self-reliance and economic empowerment is better than leaving people dependent on charity.

The interviews revealed three main sectors of development work in Central Asia. One focus is education, which faces significant challenges throughout the region due to underinvestment since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Several MCSOs support imams in teaching underprivileged children and children from large families as a way of empowering them by giving them the skills to succeed. The Kerege Foundation in Kyrgyzstan runs cultural and educational programs and collaborates extensively with the Ministry of Education. Islamic foundations in Kyrgyzstan build secular schools.

The second major area of engagement is economic. Some MCSOs aim to stimulate economic development by supporting the creation of new jobs or new Islamic companies and start-ups, attaching piety to efficiency and professionalism.

The third main area of activity is contributing to the maintenance of urban infrastructure by, for example, constructing irrigation facilities, bridges, or paved roads. Where the state cannot ensure adequate infrastructure, MCSOs often organize *khashar* (labor-intensive projects in which members of the public voluntarily participate) on the eves of Islamic holidays such as

Ramadan and Qurban Eid; these are announced in mosques and at least one person per household is expected to participate.¹⁷

In the past decade, some Arab foundations working in Central Asia have responded to government pressure and tighter government control by switching from constructing mosques and madrassas to less politically sensitive work, such as building roads, hospitals, and schools and other activities of a purely developmental nature. This change of focus has improved their standing with both state authorities and local communities. Some Arab foundations also invest in local businesses; for example, the coal mines in Sulyuktu, a city in the province of Batken in Kyrgyzstan, were bought by Saudi foundations, which then transferred ownership to local Salafis to give them a source of sustainable income. Similar types of investment projects have included helping local people set up currency exchange businesses and computer stores.

Some interviewees said they consider charity and development not as polar opposites but as two sides of the same coin and noted that their organizations intentionally combine the two types of activities. For example, representatives of the Muftiate of Kazakhstan explained that they believe it is necessary to support efforts to strengthen the solidarity among Muslims that is inherent in Islam by combining charity activities with development initiatives such as education programs.

THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF MCSO ACTIVITIES

Most MCSOs regard Islam as a fundamental component of the development of society and of their initiatives and activities. A common narrative is that Islam, both as a religion and as a cultural force emphasizing justice and equality, cannot be relegated to the private sphere but must also be included in the public sphere. MCSOs insist on the compatibility between Islam and civil society and contend that Islam, far from being an obstacle to development, contains the elements needed to form a civil society.

Although many [Muslim civil society organizations] make the dissemination of Islamic values an integral element of their activities, few combine charitable or development work with explicitly religious activities such as preaching, except in institutions such as mosques that are expected to conduct such activities.

The consensus among interviewees was that Islam should be applicable to all facets of daily life; “means no harm”; and helps society to be strong, united, and more spiritual. They view Islam as an essential element in the *muashirat*, which is the regulation of normal relations within a family and of humans’ relations with nature and the animal world. Hence, by providing social services, MCSOs contribute to the Islamization of the population in terms of both religious observance and ethical conduct. According to the Muftiate of Kazakhstan, for example, activities conducted at mosques, which are frequented by an increasing number of young people, encourage the development of purity (*chistota*) and stimulate the acquisition of knowledge and moral and material improvement within society.

Poverty is often associated with other social problems, such as domestic violence, alcoholism, drug use, crime, and even illiteracy. Reconciling social welfare with Islamic values is seen by several MCSOs as an important religious duty that contributes to the preservation of social harmony and the improvement of relations between individuals and the community. Representatives of Kerege Foundation referred to Prophet Muhammad’s last *hutbah* (sermon) about showing respect to women to assert that Islam can play a role in resolving contemporary social gender issues. A representative of the muftiate in Almaty suggested that Islam as a unifying force could help address the issue of regional divisions in Central Asia in general as well as within individual countries.

Many interviewees focused on issues within their own countries and saw religion as interwoven with patriotism and the enhancement of local history and culture. They see Islam, with its long history in the region, as coming from the ancestors of the Central Asian people and therefore as an enduring and integral part of social life. In Kazakhstan, for example, a charitable foundation bases its work on the promotion of Islamic values and the spiritual traditions and customs of local people, and it considers Islamic ethics and a Muslim upbringing (*vospitanie*) to be essential elements of a well-regulated state and a healthy society.

Nonetheless, although many MCSOs make the dissemination of Islamic values an integral element of their activities, few combine charitable or development work with explicitly religious activities such as preaching, except in institutions such as mosques that are expected to conduct such activities. The line between aid and development activities and the preaching of Islam is not always clear, as exemplified by an MCSO that, according to one of its representatives, supports the development of education in Uzbekistan and teaches students in its own classroom while providing lunches and iftars to help Muslims “stick to the right Islam.” In most cases, however, MCSOs maintain a strict separation between their charity or development work and preaching, and they do so chiefly because only authorized institutions are legally permitted to preach and teach Islam. Most MCSOs are not allowed to teach Islam and so do not conduct such activities, fearing government repression if they flout the law.

Muslim Civil Society and the State



Central Asian governments tend to have an ambiguous relationship with MCSOs. On the one hand, by their very presence and their activities, as well as their capacity to highlight real or perceived faults within the local social and economic system, MCSOs can seem to the political authorities to be delegitimizing the state and to be challenging how the government manages the country's political, economic, social, and religious sectors.¹⁸

The state's defensive approach toward MCSOs is a part of a larger defensive stance toward all civil society, including its secular components. However, MCSOs are perceived by political authorities as more of a threat than their secular counterparts due to their links to political Islam. Even though most MCSOs in Central Asia do not engage in politics, activities carried out in the name of Islam are nonetheless often perceived as politically charged.

On the other hand, the work performed by MCSOs helps often overburdened states reduce the number of people seeking assistance from them and thereby decreases the risks related to underdevelopment and popular frustration. Additionally, overly strict policy against MCSOs could put the government at risk of being perceived as anti-Islamic; this was the case, for example, with the Karimov regime in Uzbekistan.

Since independence, Central Asian secular states have attempted to control the narrative surrounding Islam. This has resulted in governments monitoring Islamic institutions and civil society actors linked to them, such as mosques, charitable foundations, and mahallas, and trying to prevent the resurgence of Islamic civil society actors and practices

suppressed under the Soviet regime, such as the *waqf*, a form of endowment that typically involves donating real estate for religious or charitable purposes. Governments have increased their efforts to control religious practice and activities, even philanthropic ones, in an effort to undercut independent Islamic actors. Authorities have sought to counter the growth of independent MCSOs by supporting structures over which they have more control, such as the muftiates and government-organized NGOs. These organizations have enjoyed government financial support and less burdensome bureaucratic procedures, whereas independent actors have been subject to close scrutiny, harassment, and even closure.

The level of authoritarianism in Central Asian political regimes, however, has varied significantly from one country to another. After the fall of the Soviet Union, civil society and the practice of religion were granted more freedom in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan than in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, where restrictive laws on freedom of religion were passed in the 1990s, leading to the persecution of religious believers, especially Muslims. The balance between restrictions versus freedoms has continued to shift, as shown by the increasing authoritarianism in Tajikistan, where, since the second half of the 2010s, the autonomous space for both secular and religious expression and activity has been greatly reduced, although experts close to the government deny that religious organizations have been forced to close. The ability of MCSOs to obtain funding and the ways in which that funding is regulated by the state also varies from country to country. Although civil society is closely monitored throughout the region, Kyrgyzstani organizations, and to a lesser



Uzbekistani workers wait at a Moscow airport on May 20, 2020, to buy tickets for an evacuation flight following the COVID-19 outbreak. Assisting migrant workers and their families is one of the specific needs Muslim civil society organization attempt to address. (Photo by Sergey Ponomarev/New York Times)

extent Kazakhstani organizations, have greater leeway to conduct activities, whereas there are greater restrictions on sources of funding in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In Tajikistan, imams report that the contents of charity boxes have been appropriated by state officials, undermining mosques' ability to engage in charitable activities.

Apprehension on the part of Central Asian authorities toward religion and its potential to drive activism has resulted in an approach mainly based on maintaining the Soviet paradigm of an ambiguous separation between religion and state, where religious actors have little or no right to intervene in state affairs, but where the state exercises close control over religion in the name of guaranteeing respect for secularism.

Overall, Central Asian governments' political authoritarianism and their suspicion of independent Muslim

organizations and their activities have led many MCSOs to master a "bilingual" narrative toward development and Islam. Several interviewees noted that their MCSOs employ secular development language by emphasizing their commitment to international aid standards such as impartiality, neutrality, and nondiscrimination and their close work with the local community. They also highlight the common ground they share with secular organizations. Some MCSOs promote an almost invisible Islam that focuses on the unique strengths and qualities of being a Muslim organization in a way that does not call into question the values and principles of mainstream development as endorsed by the state. Yet for almost all MCSOs, such strategies do not overshadow the overriding religious dimension of their action, which, although discreetly expressed, constitutes the essence of their existence and their activities and sets them apart from other secular and faith-based organizations.

The capacity of some [Muslim civil society organizations] to form a network of economic, cultural, and religious institutions able to act in multiple sectors and to reach remote geographic and social spaces may make them appear to bypass the state and act as almost a surrogate for government services.

MCSO RELATIONS WITH THE STATE

MCSOs, by their very presence, engage the state. The majority of MCSOs, through their humanitarian engagement, invite comparison with existing government services and might even be seen as a tacit criticism of the effectiveness of government policies.¹⁹ Moreover, the capacity of some MCSOs to form a network of economic, cultural, and religious institutions able to act in multiple sectors and to reach remote geographic and social spaces may make them appear to bypass the state and act as almost a surrogate for government services. This approach does not necessarily mean opposing the state, as exemplified by the Aga Khan Development Network, which has been able to work in the most remote areas in Central Asia, including in the Pamir Mountains in Tajikistan. Yet, whether they are seen as cooperating with or opposing the state, MCSOs are a factor in the transformation of local communities at the grassroots level.

Although some MCSOs describe their relations with state structures as good, many MCSOs have only a limited relationship with the government. A majority of the interviewees representing NGOs said they keep a low profile and have no relations with the state. Although some deny any antagonism toward state administration, for them, interaction with the state is rare and most often indirect. For example, it may be limited to the use of state-produced literature, such as in education.

The aggregation of multiple concerns about Muslim civil society has fed its stigmatization both by local governments and to some extent by the international community and does not take into account the diversity of Central Asian Muslim civil society. This raises many questions about the MCSOs' views of the state and its policies, and about their ambitions, or lack thereof, to shape the state, economy, and society along Islamic lines.

DOMESTIC PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED BY MCSOS

Some interviewees expressed a positive view of the local situation, particularly those representing MCSOs with close connections to the government, such as the muftiates. For a jamaat in Nur-Sultan, the Kazakh government has succeeded in positioning Kazakhstan among the thirty most developed states and created optimal conditions for continued improvement. Institutions well connected to the government are often the most reluctant to identify and talk about challenges their society is facing, and they sometimes even deny that there are problems.

However, most interviewees from MCSOs expressed a range of criticisms about the current situation in their country, at both a moral and a material level. Many denounced moral wrongs in Central Asian societies, such as corruption or misappropriation of government funds, which they deemed incompatible with the values of Islam. While corruption within the state and society is one of the main grievances of people in Central Asia, Islam is viewed as more capable than government of responding to these issues.

Additional sources of complaint were unaddressed economic and social issues, such as education, health (including in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic), and unemployment, particularly in rural areas where there is a need for both job creation and better training for employment. These complaints reflect a widespread frustration in Central Asia, especially among youth, that their education does not help them find jobs.

Several interviewees highlighted a perceived lack of state commitment or even inaction in several social sectors, in particular in emergency situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Others, like a representative of a CSO engaged in supporting Uzbekistani migrants, denounced government refusal to admit to problems,

such as when President Karimov openly criticized migrants but never initiated a policy to assist them.

Criticisms leveled by members of MCSOs against political authorities are often a call for increased dialogue and cooperation between the state and civil society, including its Muslim component. They recognize the state as an important, if not indispensable, force with its financial and decision-making capacity. Yet the centralized and omnipresent nature of the state was also pointed to as a hindrance to the involvement of Muslim civil society. Representatives of MCSOs emphasized that through their knowledge of the local context and of specific local problems, they are in a better position than the state to respond to and assist the local population, whereas government decision-makers are seen as unaware of local issues, including fraud and corruption.

Many interviewees from MCSOs called on political authorities to allow more political and civil freedom in the country because they believe it is appropriate for nonstate actors and the population, not just the government, to participate in the development of civil society. For some interviewees, it is precisely the lack of independent civil society and real dialogue with the government that threatens stability and development and fuels radicalization. They expressed the view that authoritarianism could lead to a polarization within society. For them, governments should recognize the views of civil society, the value in conducting meetings and dialogue, and the need to cooperate in addressing societal issues.

State monitoring of funding sources for CSOs was a criticism voiced by many interviewees, who said that enhancing the ability of MCSOs to engage depends on giving them the financial sustainability with which to increase their autonomy and expand their capacity. For example, some called for the low monthly salaries of imams (around \$100 in Kazakhstan) to be increased. They believe that dependence on state funding significantly restricts the autonomy of Muslim civil society and forces MCSOs to represent government interests rather

than those of civil society and citizens. Many interviewees suggested creating concrete means to promote dialogue between the government and civil society, to identify issues for discussion, and to devise solutions based on MCSOs' knowledge of the local context.

MCSOS' ATTITUDES TOWARD GOVERNMENT POLICIES ON RELIGION

Central Asian governments' fears with regard to Muslim civil society are fueled in part by allegations that MCSOs may be inclined to question the principle of secularism. Responses from the interviewees showed that their approaches to secularism and views on the political role of Islam are very diverse.

Some of the MCSO representatives were extremely cautious about Islamic engagement with politics. From their point of view, social change should come from the progress of the individual and not from collective political action. This attitude leads them to oppose any politicization of Islam and to insist that the principle of separation of religion and state is sacrosanct. They endorsed Central Asian governments' approach of seeing their countries as predominantly Muslim states populated by multiple ethnicities with different religions, and they criticized states such as Iran where this approach has been questioned.

For other interviewees, basing political decisions on religious principles would lead to discrimination against non-Muslim ethnicities and to the advent of a rigid Islamic state, which could provoke negative reactions from foreign countries. They expressed the view that the role of Islam, as important as it is, should therefore be confined to the grassroots level in order to avoid the threat of religion taking precedence over political interests and dictating government decision-making. Some endorsed strict state monitoring of religion to prevent the rise of uncontrolled extremist movements and potential threats to the country's stability and security. A representative of a jamaat based in Karaganda, Kazakhstan, deplored what he viewed as insufficient state control in Kazakhstan, where he believed the

first religious laws passed after independence gave too much prominence to Islam, thereby allowing many different variants to develop.

However, the daily reality in Central Asia does not necessarily match the strict secularism that the governments try to impose and instead reflects a part of the population's desired inclusion of religion in political, economic, and social spheres. Most interviewees supported the idea that there is space for Islam in state structures and in decision-making processes. Even representatives of some of the structures closest to the government, such as the Muftiate of Kazakhstan, argued that they should be consulted more by political authorities on certain questions. A representative of a jamaat in Kazakhstan's capital also expressed the view that giving more of a role to Islam in government decision-making, combined with improved education at the grass roots, would boost social and economic development. Others were convinced that a more prominent role for Islam would help the state better understand the social needs of the population and that state financial support for MCSOs is very helpful. These propositions align in the sense that they do not seek to challenge the state or fundamentally change it, but rather to see the state and Islam coexist.

There was open criticism of state control and interference in religion, and some MCSOs questioned the capacity of the state to properly address overlapping social and religious issues. A member of a Muslim startup NGO based in Uzbekistan asserted that the state's work should be confined to the secular domain and that the state lacks the capacity to manage societal issues related to religion, such as the Islamic economy. Overall, an increased role for Islam was justified by multiple arguments, including the contention that social involvement in religion is based on a link between an individual's Muslim identity and societal development and the claim that Islamic views on economic and social justice would help authorities understand and address social issues and stimulate economic development.

MCSOS' VIEWS ON DEMOCRACY, SOCIAL ISSUES, AND FOREIGN ACTORS

While secular civil society is often associated with progressive ideas about defending democracy and human rights, the values espoused by Muslim civil society are less well understood. The growing commitment of MCSOs to charitable and development activities has led them to seek to reconceptualize their relationship with liberalism and conservatism and to reassess the relationship between religion and modernity, "since religion is often treated as antimodern, while development is decidedly a modern project."²⁰ The interviews revealed a broad range of views of and approaches to democracy; social issues, including gender; foreign states and the possibility of working with them; and Western development models. However, many MCSOs fall between liberalism and conservatism, claiming to be inspired by liberal models but also asserting that Western values, secularism, and a dependence on development models are to some extent inappropriate to the Central Asian historical, cultural, and socioeconomic context and may undermine the identity and moral fabric of local societies.

Most interviewees supported the principles of a democratic system and a market-based economy. Their respect for democratic principles challenges the widely shared misapprehension that MCSOs support authoritarian models inspired by strict sharia standards and instead reflects the interviewees' belief in Islamic concepts of *shurah* (consultation), *ijma* (consensus), *maslahah* (general welfare), and *ijtihad* (individual interpretation), which support the combination of Islam and democracy.

At the same time, MCSOs are disappointed with the conservative and traditional approach to faith and believe it should be modernized. Many MCSOs in Central Asia adhere to a principle of cooperation with other components of civil society, in the name of the values of democracy and human rights. A moderate approach has also been fueled by the disillusionment of many individuals with Islamism, caused among other things by the violence of the Islamic State and the Taliban.



Women provide aid to Kyrgyzstani refugees in the town of Batken, in southwestern Kyrgyzstan, on May 3, 2021. (Photo by Vladimir Voronin/AP)

However, many interviewees viewed local values as no less important than Western-inspired conceptions of democracy and human rights and rejected outside influence, arguing that there is no one perfect model of democracy. They viewed democracy as variable, with both positive and negative sides, and felt that each country should follow its own path. This type of discourse is not, however, specific to MCSOs, but also reflects a more general approach among local populations and has been used in official state rhetoric since independence. Like governments in Central Asia, many MCSOs in the region assert that local cultural and national values must be adhered to. The interviewees argued that local values are no less good than those supported and propagated by foreign states and that Western values may be incompatible with local traditions. Some MCSO representatives dismissed completely the idea of cooperating with foreign states, contending that only local institutions should build a state.

The interviewees showed less diversity in their approach to gender issues. A representative of a charitable foundation in Kazakhstan argued that political affairs are more of a concern for men than for women and that women should focus on family issues and home life. In Kyrgyzstan, mahallas, mosques, and the Tablighi Jamaat take a conservative approach to gender. Some Islamic NGOs, however, have a more open discourse: in Tajikistan, the director of a former Islamic NGO denounced local clergy who insisted that women should be obedient to their husbands, while in Kyrgyzstan, the progressive MCSO Mutakalim has made gender equality one of its major goals and has even tried to persuade the conservative Muftiate of Kyrgyzstan to establish a department for women's affairs.

Opinions also varied concerning their countries' foreign relations and willingness to engage with

Many of the representatives of [Muslim civil society organizations] see the key to their success much less in isolationism than in openness and dialogue beyond national borders, including secular and democratic entities.

foreign entities. Most interviewees supported developing foreign relations with multiple countries at the same time, using a variety of approaches to do so. The religious nature of MCSOs led some to prioritize developing relations with Muslim countries such as Turkey and some Arab countries, especially the United Arab Emirates, that have demonstrated the capacity to combine a Muslim identity with economic modernity and development. Yet the religious background of a foreign country was seldom seen as a prerequisite for developing relations. A majority of interviewees argued that historical ties were important, especially with Russia, and recognized the necessity of developing good relations with China, as well as with Middle Eastern countries. Many said that they are inspired by different models and would like to take the best ideas from different states to contribute to local development.

Many of the representatives of MCSOs see the key to their success much less in isolationism than in openness and dialogue beyond national borders, including secular and democratic entities. This feeling is particularly pronounced among representatives of development NGOs, who think that they can derive more benefits from links with Western-oriented counterparts.

The animosity toward the United States that is apparent in many Muslim countries, especially in the Middle East, was not apparent among the interviewees. A large majority thought that developing relations with the United States would be an asset and expressed appreciation for the capacity of the United States to provide economic support for their countries that could help create jobs, to initiate innovative and successful programs on education, and to provide humanitarian support.

Nonetheless, several interviewees also criticized some US policies and actions. Washington was criticized for interfering in the internal affairs of foreign countries, particularly in the Middle East. They also criticized what they viewed as a double standard on the part of the United States, which is willing to criticize the mistreatment of Muslims in China but has not supported Muslims in other parts of the world, such as in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Despite these criticisms, none of the interviewees saw the United States as being against Muslim countries in general. Interestingly, the most negative views emanated from the structures closer to the government, such as a jamaat that focused its references to the United States on concerns that US movies would incite violence and that US policies would harm Islam.

Conclusion



In the three decades since the countries of Central Asia became independent, Muslim civil society has developed significantly despite the secular and, to varying degrees, authoritarian frameworks of governments in the region. The results of the survey conducted for this report showed that while there is a wide diversity among MCSO structures regarding their approaches, objectives, relations with political authorities, and views toward the international community, some patterns are evident and should inform cooperation with MCSOs.

Muslim civil society in Central Asia has much in common with the rest of civil society in terms of a desire to help society based on grassroots knowledge of local contexts. The interviewees from MCSOs, however, tended to focus more than secular NGOs on contributing to local development and social welfare rather than on holding governments accountable or promoting global issues such as democratization and human rights. However, like their secular counterparts, MCSOs must work within the relatively small space available to civil society in the region, and so their status runs the gamut from structures organized in cooperation with and supported by the state to small, independent or underground groups that work outside of government control. Most MCSO interviewees said they wanted to contribute to local development in parallel with and not against the state, although many expressed a desire for more inclusion of Islamic elements in government structures and decision-making processes.

Most interviewees from MCSOs viewed their activities as an expression of their religion and as integral to its practice; they also stressed the importance of working within local cultures and traditions. Islam is viewed as fundamental to local development and to the promotion of an active

civil society, as an integral part of daily life, as an essential component of efforts to tackle social issues, and as a regulator of familial and social relations. Many believe that Islam provides a firmer basis for responding to local issues and building a strong and vibrant civil society than does the philosophy of secular CSOs. One recurrent observation was that secular organizations are more involved in activities emanating from or directly supported by foreign organizations and therefore have lost their ties to local populations and their understanding of local contexts. Most MCSOs in Central Asia do not draw inspiration from or model their activities on foreign structures, despite their positive views of other countries, including the United States, and their openness to working with them.

While a few of the interviewees expressed support for progressive goals such as gender equality, more appeared to reflect a rising tide of conservatism in Central Asian societies. Some political circles in Central Asia have been promoting conservative nationalist views and policies that they argue are based on local traditional cultural and religious values, and many of these views are widely supported by the public. For example, Kyrgyz voters in 2016 approved a constitutional change that explicitly defined marriage as a union between a man and a woman, effectively banning same sex unions. This growing conservatism in society may support the development of conservative MCSOs.

While the survey did not include any potentially radical elements of Muslim civil society, many interviewees did raise issues connected to the potential for individuals to be radicalized. Many believed that MCSOs could assist governments in preventing radicalization, particularly by promoting moderate messages, strengthening education, and addressing societal issues that



Ethnic Uzbek women pray at a mosque in the southwestern Kyrgyz city of Jalal-Abad on June 10, 2011. (Photo by Vladimir Voronin/AP)

could make people more vulnerable to recruitment by radical groups. Nonetheless, governments still view MCSOs with suspicion and fear that political Islam could threaten their hold on power. Indeed, most Central Asian governments have used their perception of the so-called threat of religious fundamentalism and violent extremism to justify policies of control, censorship, and repression of religious structures and believers, and have developed a legal environment that is often hostile to all MCSOs, whether moderate or not. Such an approach, although intended to bolster security, may actually do little to prevent radicalization and could instead be counterproductive. Three decades of such policies have undermined the independence of religious institutions and encouraged a privatization of Islam, demonstrated by the growth of Muslim civil society underground, outside of government control.

Interviewees confirmed that such groups are increasingly active and involved in many types of activities.

Notwithstanding these commonalities, the survey also showed that, like Muslim civil society in other regions of the world, MCSOs in Central Asia are diverse. This finding contradicts the view, common in the West, that MCSOs are a homogeneous group of organizations focused mainly on religion. The results of the survey clearly testify to a wide variety of objectives, working methods, attitudes toward and relations with government, opinions about the international community, and views on national and foreign policy. Notably, MCSOs in Central Asia expressed a generally positive view of the United States and an openness to working with US structures, even if at the same time they criticized specific US policies and actions.

MCSOs are likely to be increasingly important actors in Central Asia, where their numbers and the demand for their activities are growing. For Western policymakers, as well as for governments in the region, understanding how and why MCSOs work, how they interact with local communities, and how they view their role vis-à-vis governments and other entities can help inform possible cooperation with them. Although there are potential obstacles to working with MCSOs in Central Asia—including concerns about vetting for possible connections to radical groups, about local government regulations, and about working methods that may not match donor requirements—MCSOs have the potential to bring their local connections and knowledge to bear in making local governments and Western-funded policies and programs, particularly those concerning development and social assistance, more effective.

To make the most of this potential, the United States and other Western governments, development and assistance organizations, and NGOs should consider taking four steps.

First, they should make an effort to learn more about the diversity among MCSOs and the increasing role that Muslim civil society actors are playing in Central Asia. This means going beyond generalizations and stereotypes to understand their objectives and impact on development in the region and how they might support US and Western objectives.

Second, Western governments, donors, and NGOs should reach out to MCSOs in ways similar to their efforts with secular or other religious NGOs. They should engage with MCSOs on issues on which they share common interests, such as local economic and social development, fighting domestic violence, community stabilization, and countering violent extremism. This engagement could be done through dialogue and coordination on mutually reinforcing programs or by working together to launch new programs. It could also build on the constructive role that many MCSOs have played in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the trust they have built with local communities as a result.

Third, Western embassies and donors should do more to press the governments of Central Asia to respect the constructive role played by civil society, including MCSOs, by opening more space for their activities. Governments in the region should be urged to amend restrictive legislation and policies concerning NGO registration and foreign funding to bring them in line with international human rights standards, including ensuring freedom of expression, religion, and the media.

Fourth, the United States should engage other countries, international organizations, and donors about working with MCSOs in the region in order to exchange information and coordinate cooperation with MCSOs, as well as to assess any potential risks related to working with specific MCSOs and any connections they may have to radical groups.

Notes

1. This report is based on research that was supported by the United States Institute of Peace. In February and March 2021, the authors participated in a series of dialogues on Muslim civil society hosted by the Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, the European Neighborhood Council, and the Hollings Center for International Dialogue, where they discussed their preliminary findings and presented a draft manuscript of this report. A summary of the dialogues was published as “Emerging Forms of Islamic Civil Society in Central Asia” in May 2021 and included extensive passages of the authors’ draft report.
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PEACEWORKS

NO. 181 | DECEMBER 2021

When they turn their attention to Central Asia, Western policymakers and development practitioners tend to ignore Muslim civil society or to assume it is monolithic and tied to violent extremism. In reality, however, Muslim civil society organizations in Central Asia are highly diverse in terms of activities and structures, are usually politically moderate and supportive of democracy, and are open to working with global development actors that respect the local Islamic social and cultural context. Under the suspicious gaze of repressive states, they conduct both charitable and development activities that reflect their Islamic principles but do not antagonize secular-minded governments. Based on interviews with dozens of representatives of Muslim civil society in four Central Asian countries, this report reveals the existence of an active and diverse sector that defies easy generalizations and deserves closer inspection.

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