



## Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

### Research Report

*The opinions, recommendations, and conclusions of the grantee are his/her own and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IREX or the US Department of State.*

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**Title: Islam, Identity, and Conflict in Central Asia and the Caucasus**

**University: University of Minnesota (formerly University of Notre Dame)**

**IARO2004-2005**

**Country of Research: Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan**

***Title of Research Proposal:***

**Islam, Identity, and Conflict in Central Asia and the Caucasus**

#### **I. Topic of Research**

My research investigates the phenomenon of changing religious identities and practices and changing religio-political attitudes among people of the former Soviet republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus. In in-depth cases studies of four countries in these regions (three of which are sponsored by IREX) I explore several problems of Islamic (or in some cases Christian) identity, political mobilization, and potential or actual conflict that are of interest both to pressing public policy debates and theoretical discussions. *First, to what extent is Islam becoming a more salient identity in these regions, and why? Second, under what conditions does Islamic identity become the basis for mass mobilization and violent conflict? More precisely, how, when, and why does Islamic identity become a factor in conflict? Third, why do we see great variation in the degree to which Islamic identities have spurred mobilization? And fourth, is political Islamicization at the social level a cause or consequence of violence and state repression?*

In the post-Soviet sphere, these questions are puzzling and pressing empirical issues. For example, we have little grasp of why Islamic identity become increasingly

salient and powerful in mobilizing Chechens in the second Chechen war. Will the pattern of Islamic militancy and Islamist political opposition we have witnessed in Afghanistan similarly occur in other cases where Islamic cultural and religious identities are strong?<sup>1</sup> If so, we should anticipate that nascent militant Islamist groups in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan will gain mass popular support over time. And yet, we still need to explain why do Islamists fail to mobilize the population in other cases where Islam nonetheless pervades society? Conversely, why has Islamic identity played little role in the conflict in Azerbaijan, and only recently been politically mobilized in Kyrgyzstan (and still to a lesser extent)?

My ongoing research explores these issues by theoretically and empirically analyzing the trends in Islamic identification, religious and political, taking place in Central Asia and the Caucasus since the late Soviet period. I look at the social level – the masses – to understand how identity plays out among ordinary people, and why religious identification has been changing. The data I am gathering also helps to explain why the trends differ from country to country and region to region. I also interviewed religious elites and some members of Islamist parties and movements (the Islamic Revival Party in Tajikistan, Hizb ut Tahrir members in Kyrgyzstan, and the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan), to try to understand what motivates Islamist elites to use religion as a source of political opposition.

## **II. Relevance and Contribution to Field**

Although I am still in the final data gathering and the writing phase of the project (which was designed to be a multiyear book project), it is clear that both academics and the policy community have great interest in my research and its conclusions. To date, despite much theoretical writing, there is very little empirical data and case study work on religion and politics and the rise and decline of Islamist opposition movements in these countries. News analysts often make vast generalizations without any clear data to support them. The state department and other government agencies are in desperate need of sound data and analysis to make sound policy judgments. For example, Washington many policy leaders were not sure about how to evaluate Uzbek government claims that the Andijan uprising was organized by a group of Islamic terrorists. Some think tank often experts assume that the same factors at work in the Middle East are at work in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

The research for this project enabled me to contribute in unique ways to my teaching and other university programs. In 2004-2005, I developed three new courses, one graduate and two undergraduate. The graduate course was called “Theories of Identity and Conflict.” The course integrated theoretical and case study readings on identity, especially religious and ethnic identity. A large segment of the course was devoted to arguments about Islam and Islamic identity and conflict, Islam and democracy, and empirical studies and counters to common assumptions about civilizational conflict (ala Huntington). I taught the class at Notre Dame in spring 2005.

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<sup>1</sup> Anatol Lieven (1998) and Gail Lapidus (1998) have written excellent studies of the first war, before Islam was increasingly mobilized. Matthew Evangelista and Valery Tishkov have written thorough studies of the later war (2002).

Second, I developed a class called “Religion, Ethnicity and Conflict in Eurasia, Africa and the Middle East,” for upper-division undergrads. I am now teaching this course at the University of Minnesota. The class deals with religious and ethnic conflict through case studies from these regions. It is the first such class to be taught at the University of Minnesota.

Third, I co-developed a class called “A Cross-regional Study of the ‘Islamic World’: Its History and Politics.” I was due to teach this class at Notre Dame with two other professors, one from history and one from theology/Middle East studies. Since I left Notre Dame, they will teach it without me in 2005-2006.

Finally, I organized a working group at the Notre Dame Kellogg Institute called “Islam and Politics.” We had a series of speakers, including Mark Tessler, Bob Dowd, Dan Philpott, Rashid Omar, myself, and Tolesan Ismailova. The series will hopefully continue at Kellogg in my absence. Carrie Wickham and some others were invited to come this year.

### **III. Approach and research methodology; list of research sites**

The IREX IARO Grant for my research project “Islam, Identity, and Conflict” was used between July and August 2004 and then in August 2005. The grant paid a stipend during that period, which helped to finance extensive field work and research during trips to Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. I split my IREX three-month grant into two summers simply because visa complication with the IREX Washington and Tajikistan offices prevented me from going to Tajikistan as planned in 2005. My trip to Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan was also delayed by over a month in 2004 because of bureaucratic complications in the IREX office. Overall, the IREX IARO grant contributed to an ongoing book project, by helping to further the in-country aspect of my research which I have continued since finishing the IREX grant.

The research conducted during these trips involved several stages: 1) background library research on the development of Islamist movements throughout the Muslim world, and especially in Central Asian and the Caucasus; 2) new field research in three countries, including: in-depth interviews with political and social elites in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan; the training of local research assistants to jointly carry out focus group interviews in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan; carrying out in-depth individual interviews with social elites in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan; and a content analysis study of the local press in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan; 3) the preparation of a draft article / theoretical paper explaining the success and failures of Islamism in Central Asia, and book preparations, 4) subsequent presentation of both the preliminary theoretical and empirical findings of the project in both policy/public and academic circles, and 5) subsequent development of both graduate and undergraduate courses that integrates the research with education.

#### **Original field research in four countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus (Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan)**

Country by country, my field research involved the following:

## **Uzbekistan:**

I spent about five months in Uzbekistan doing field work, one month of which in summer 2004 was funded by IREX. Uzbekistan is both the largest of my case studies and the most difficult to do research in. My first trip in March 2004 was interrupted by new restrictions on research and restrictions on working with Americans. In March 2004, Soros was closed, and a wave of fear swept Uzbekistan, until it became clearer whether foreigners were allowed to do research or not. After two months of waiting and petitioning the Uzbek embassy in Washington, the Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of Uzbekistan, and NGO registration officials, my Uzbek collaborators (Arslan Joldosov and Expert Center) and I deemed that it was safe to go ahead with my project interviews there. Joldosov's Center was re-registered with the government in May 2004 and had no problems continuing its research. I conducted training with Joldosov's staff in summer and fall 2004. We then completed the elite interviews, social elite in-depth interviews, content analysis of the press, and the focus group study by spring 2005.

The last three focus groups in Tashkent, the last in our study, were literally underway when the Andijan events – a government massacre of several hundred protesters in the southern city of Andijan -- began in May 2005. We had a problem with some respondent no-shows in these group interviews, but fortunately were able to finish the project before much news of these events had spread or affected attitudes towards Americans. My follow-up trip to Uzbekistan in 2005 has so far been cancelled because the US embassy personally warned me not to travel there. I did travel to Osh and Kara-su, Kyrgyzstan, on the Uzbek border, in late May-early June 2005. I interviewed several Uzbek refugees as well as Osh and Kara-su residents about the Andijan events.

In 2004, I had discussed with my Uzbek colleagues the possibility of carrying out a national survey in addition to the qualitative studies. Although surveys face many problems in Uzbekistan, we thought it might have some advantages in testing some results generated from the qualitative work on the larger populace. We began planning to begin on in early summer 2005. Mid-May 2005, however, saw a dramatic change in the situation in Uzbekistan, and presented a crisis for any Americans working in Uzbekistan. Because of the crisis in Andijan, we decided to hold off on our planned survey, which we had scheduled for summer 2005 until it can be determined if such a study is now feasible.

Uzbek research assistants prepared transcripts for me of all the interviews (about 2000 pages) and I have been reading and analyzing the interview data. I will be coding the transcripts for content analysis in the coming months.

## **Kyrgyzstan:**

I conducted about three months of field work in Kyrgyzstan in 2004 and a follow-up trip in May-June 2005. One month in summer 2004 was funded by IREX. I completed approximately 50 elite and expert interviews in several regions of the country (Bishkek,

Osh, Jalalabad). I conducted training of sociologist Elvira Ilibezova and her staff in 2004, whom I hired to work with me in carrying out the focus group study and the social-level in-depth interviews throughout the country. I trained assistants in Osh to work in the Osh, Batken, and Jalalabad regions as well as Bishkek.

We together set up and conducted social elite in-depth interviews, content analysis, and the focus group study by spring 2005. We translated all questionnaires and interviewer instructions into Uzbek, Tajik, and Kyrgyz, as well as Russian, so as to use the appropriate language for each region of the country. The 50 interviews and 14 focus groups (plus three pilot groups and three pilot interviews) took several months to complete. They were completed by early March 2005, and Elvira Ilibezova prepared transcripts for me of all the interviews by May 2005, and I have been reading, analyzing and beginning to code the transcripts for content analysis since then. I have approximately 1200 pages of interview text from Kyrgyzstan. I also did a content analysis of new articles on Islam in Kyrgyzstan from 1990 to the present.

### **Tajikistan:**

I have completed about 50 elite level interviews in Tajikistan during about research trips in 2003, 2004 and again in 2005. My interviews took place in both the north and central regions, Soghd and Dushanbe. I conducted about 30 expert interviews in these regions, and set up and began training of my research collaborators there. We are continuing the field work (including 15 focus groups and 50 social elite interviews) in fall 2005. I chose to work with a new group of research colleagues, Panorama, led by sociologist Tatiana Bozrikova. I had originally intended to work with "Sharq" Center, the most well-known research center in Tajikistan, led by Saodat Olimova, but after several months of discussion with Sharq, I had some serious reservations about the quality of their research. Given that director Saodat Olimova is frequently out of the country, doing consulting projects with international agencies and universities, she has little time to oversee her staff. After interviewing three other groups in Tajikistan in 2004, I resolved to change plans and train and work with Panorama. During my trip to Tajikistan in August 2005, I also consulted extensively with Tajik scholars, experts, and religious officials in Dushanbe about the development of Islam over the past fifteen years.

My research in Tajikistan has also been slowed and frequently interrupted by visa problems. IREX did not get me a visa in 2004. I eventually obtained one on my own, but it only allowed me just over two weeks of research. Consequently IREX helped me obtain a visa for 2005 that allowed me another trip in August 2005, only after many delays again.

I am currently in the process of discussing training with Tajik collaborators and setting up the in-depth interviews with social elites, and the focus group study. I initially planned to work with Saodat Olimova's research group, but because of scheduling problems, I will likely work with Panorama research group, which has extensive survey research experience. The delay in Tajikistan has meant that with winter approaching, we will likely have to wait until February or early March to carry out the project, since weather

prevents safe travel to the regions. I am planning a follow up trip to Tajikistan at that time.

#### **IV. Research findings and preliminary conclusions**

Based on the research to date, I propose several preliminary conclusions (with the caveat that completing the rest of the field work may alter these conclusions!). First, there seems to be no one, straight path to the political Islamicization of a society. Different countries, and different regions have followed distinct paths, although most share common problems: corruption, failed democratization/transitions, and high unemployment among youth, and some repression of religion (though not necessarily complete repression, as under some Soviet periods). Second, contrary to common views, anti-Americanism (or anti US imperialism) does not seem to be the driving force behind a rising support for political Islam across these regions. Third, those countries with a history or culture of being more traditionally Islamic are not the only countries susceptible to political Islam. Southern Kyrgyzstan and parts of southern Kazakhstan have become more fundamentalist, despite a history of late Islamification and a culture of weaker or less scriptural Islam.

Fourth, political Islamists, although drawing on the resources and ideas of transnational Islamist movements, use local issues, local framing of their ideas, and local networks to spread their message and build their network. Fifth, this rise in Islamism is often about ideas, beliefs, and ideology. For the followers at least, it is not simply about economic gain or power. Failed democratization and failed post-Soviet nationalism is feeding a turn to Islamism as the alternative, "purer" ideology. Finally, whether or not these Islamist movements become violent is largely dependent upon the state's response to them.

#### **V. Future research agendas**

In 2004 I wrote a draft paper laying out the theoretical framework of my argument for explaining the success and failures of Islamist movements in Central Asia. I tested the framework on the cases of Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Islamic Renaissance Party, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. I revised the paper in 2005, and will be sending it out for review by late 2005.

Once I have analyzed the full set of data in early 2006, I will begin the preparation of other articles (both a policy-relevant article and a case-study or theoretical article for an academic journal). As I noted in my grant proposal, I would be doing the writing and publication of articles and a book manuscript after the completion of the research, during a write-up leave in 2005 or 2006. Because of my recent move to the University of Minnesota, I had to postpone my leave time to 2006. So I will be doing most of the writing during 2006. I have been contacted by several press and series editors (from Cambridge, Princeton, Routledge, and St. Martin's among others) who have asked me to submit my work to them for an advance book contract.

As noted above, there are several parts of this ongoing project which I am carrying out in 2006. These include:

- Finishing the social interviews and focus groups in Tajikistan, which were delayed due to visa issues in 2004-05.
- Finishing a case study of Azerbaijan, which is already about 60% complete
- Making a research trip to Russia to research late Soviet-era policy on religion, and how it varies across the republics; and to investigate the growth of Islamist movements in the Russian territory of the north Caucasus and Tatarstan, to provide some comparative perspective.
- Writing of the book manuscript and articles (to be completed with university and a Carnegie endowment grant during sabbatical in 2006, after the end of the IREX grant period)

## **VI. Policy recommendations**

The policy recommendations I intend to draw up – and write up in a policy journal such as Foreign Affairs – will be based upon the conclusions of my final data analysis. Therefore, I would prefer not to make specific or definitive recommendations at this time.

Broadly, my research suggests that policy-makers consider the following:

- sponsoring (or continuing to sponsor) inter-faith dialogue programs
- providing a forum for dialogue between Islamists and secularists, or between Islamists and Christians in some cases, within the countries of Central Asia, to avert the growth of tensions
- providing literature and information on religious policy in democracies, and encouraging dialogue with the Central Asian governments, especially with those responsible for shaping religious policy
- carefully delineating and separating policies on Islam and policies on terrorism/terrorists, and waging an information campaign to explain US policy in the Muslim world to ordinary people
- focusing on local-level democracy-promoting and tolerance-promotion among local NGOs and civil society, to counteract or prevent anti-Americanism, which can eventually feed into support for radical Islam, as it has in other regions such as the Middle East