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**“Mosque and State in Central Asia: Can Religious Freedom Coexist with  
Government Regulation of Islam?”**

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Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C., Everett Price and Nathaniel Hurd,  
Senior Policy Advisors, Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe,  
presiding**

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PRICE: Good afternoon. Thank you—we're very glad to have you here. My name is Everett Price, and this is my colleague Nathaniel Hurd. On behalf of our chairman, Senator Roger Wicker of Mississippi, and co-chairman, Congressman Chris Smith of New Jersey, we would like to welcome you to this Helsinki Commission panel entitled "Mosque and State: Can Religious Freedom Co-Exist with Government Regulation of Islam?" Nathaniel and I will be moderating this panel together, he in his capacity as a Helsinki Commission senior policy advisor for religious freedom, and I in my capacity as senior policy advisor with responsibility for Islamic affairs in Central Asia.

The gravity of the situation facing religious freedom in Central Asia is underscored by the U.S. State Department's decision just last week to re-designate Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, alongside eight other countries, as *countries of particular concern*, or CPCs, for engaging in or tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. Turkmenistan and Tajikistan have appeared on the list for the past three years. A third Central Asian country, Uzbekistan, had also appeared on the State Department's list since 2016, but was upgraded this time to a special watchlist, reflecting modest improvements in its respect for the religious freedom of its citizens. Uzbekistan's positive trajectory of incremental reforms began following the death of the country's long-time strongman leader Islam Karimov in 2016.

Since that time, Karimov's successor, current President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has demonstrated his interest at opening the country to increase foreign investment in part by loosening some of the Karimov era's strictest regulations on public and private life. One element of this reform plan includes amendments to the national law governing religious affairs and institutions, which we understand the government is currently drafting and preparing for public comment. Nathaniel and I traveled to Uzbekistan last month to hear from Uzbekistani officials and civil society about the changes taking place there, particularly in the religious sphere. Despite the government's professed desire to enact more permissive regulations on religious life, the arguments opposing far-reaching reforms are cast in terms of national security and regime stability—namely, that the ebb of government control over religious will inevitably cede territory to religious-based political activism and potentially violent extremism.

Indeed, the terms of this argument are familiar in Central Asia, not to mention in other parts of the Muslim world, where Islam simultaneously occupied a revered position in national, social and private life, while also preoccupying national security agencies and regime loyalists who fear its potential to catalyze political opposition and terrorism. These concerns have some merit. In one of the most recent and dramatic incidents of Islamic extremist violence in Central Asia, this summer an ISIS-linked terrorist cell in Tajikistan carried out the horrific murder of four cyclists, including two Americans, in the southwestern Danghara District. Such incidents only reinforce the inclination of all five Central Asian countries to prioritize national security and their administration of religious affairs, in particular by strictly regulating and often outright co-opting and controlling Islamic believe and practice.

In a statement for the record submitted today to this briefing, the renowned international religious freedom monitoring organization Forum 18 underscored how Islamic institutions are subject to particularly invasive state interventions, compared with minority faiths, effectively

controlling Islam not just from the outside, but also from within. The statement reads: “These states have effectively subsumed the only permitted Islamic bodies into the apparatus of the state. The regimes control all clergy appointments, especially at senior levels, and remove clerics as they see fit. Some of them even dictate the sermons that imams are allowed to preach in the mosques they do permit to exist.”

Yet such a heavy-handed and security-minded approach violates the religious freedom of individuals that is enshrined in the national constitutions and international commitments of these states. The resulting dilemma begs the question that serves as the subtitle to this briefing today: Can religious freedom coexist with government regulation of Islam?

To help answer this question, we have convened a superb panel of Central Asia experts who have studied these matters from numerous angles and over dozens of years. Their remarks will help us to understand the reality of state regulation of Islam, and the intended and unintended consequences of this heavily centralized policy. They will also help us understand the terms of the policy debate between religious freedom and national security, and hopefully suggest ways to escape this binary that appears to propose a zero-sum tradeoff between the two.

I’m sorry to say that our fourth panelist, Peter Mandaville, has taken ill and will not be able to participate. We will genuinely miss his contribution, which was to focus on policy lessons from other approaches to state regulation of Islam elsewhere in the Muslim world.

First this afternoon we’ll hear from Professor Kathleen Collins of the University of Minnesota, who will provide a brief overview of her extensive research and of the mechanisms and consequences of state control of Islam in Central Asia. Next we will hear from Professor Emil Nasrutdinov of the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Professor Nasrutdinov will describe key conclusions from his research into radicalization, particularly in his home country of Kyrgyzstan, the only semi-free country in the region that applies somewhat less draconian approaches to Islamic practice when compared to other regional states. And finally, we’ll have Dr. Edward Lemon DMGS-Kennan Institute fellow at the Daniel Morgan School, who will explore the case of Tajikistan where he’s conducted extensive research into the state’s harsh counter-extremism policy.

I will refer you to your audience folders for their full biographies, which are impressive, which goes without speaking, of course. And unless my colleague Nathaniel has any comments, I will turn the floor over to Dr. Collins. Thank you.

COLLINS: Thank you very much. Good afternoon. Thank you for coming. And thanks especially to the Helsinki Commission and to Everett and Nathaniel for organizing this panel.

I will focus my brief remarks today on three points. First, religion in the Central Asian states, particularly Islam, continues to be the target of aggressively secular government policies. A few years ago, a young man I interviewed in Kyrgyzstan characterized the government as atheist oppressors even worse than the Soviet Union. The post-Soviet states are not any longer seeking to eradicate Islam, the way the Soviet Union was. However, despite some concessions to religious practice, government elites generally view any manifestation of independent Islam as

inherently political, radical, and a threat to their survival. Two caveats are in order, one of which Everett just talked about. One is that Uzbekistan has, over the past year or so, made some significant improvements under President Mirziyoyev, and things seem to be in process there to ameliorate the situation in terms of religious freedom for Muslims as well as Christians.

Second, there is also some variation, certainly regionally, *de facto* and *de jure*. My comments to initiate this panel are somewhat broad, sketching out the situation in the region. Turkmenistan still remains the worst-case scenario, as it has long been, and Tajikistan is still the best. And yet, many Soviet-style laws and practices on religion severely regulate Islam. The Soviet attitude of a sort of atheist suspicion of Islam I think still pervades the views of many government elites. These governments ban any political Islamic activity as extremist and terrorist, including not only violent organizations such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, but also the pro-democratic Islamic Renaissance Party in Tajikistan and the extreme, but nonviolent, party Hizb ut-Tahrir. Those accused of membership are subject to torture and lengthy imprisonment.

The governments also severely restrict or criminalize many ordinary, everyday religious practices, including religious education, even at home; possessing the Koran on one's cellphone, or one's laptop, or even in hard copy; possessing other religious literature; certainly proselytization; and various forms of Islamic dress. Furthermore, security services control or monitor imams' sermons, and even videotape mosque attendees. Unregistered mosques are frequently raided and closed. States have threatened, arrested, and occasionally killed popular imams who either preach an unsanctioned version of Islam—such as Salafism, Shiism, Tablighi Jamaat—or who raise a voice on political issues, whether it's about corruption or about the right for women to wear a hijab. Family members of accused or imprisoned extremists are also regularly threatened. As in the Soviet era, it's not just radicals but ordinary believers who become the victims of state oppression.

Second, religious oppression has fostered a widespread sense of injustice. In addition to corruption and other political and economic abuses, people are angered by unjust attacks on their identity and beliefs. I've seen this interviewing people across the region with a team of Central Asian colleagues. For example, one of our respondents, Tahir, believed that a free Islamic practice was essential to justice. He said: "Justice is necessary. And for there to be justice, people must live in faith." Another man, Alisher, linked the lack of justice to state secularism. He said: "There are many atheists. And they treat us believers badly. There is no justice. The situation is very bad." Shukrat exclaimed: "Everywhere justice is a problem. We need justice. Where there is no justice, evil things happen, like here. Justice is every person's demand!"

A man from the Fergana Valley explained: "Now the religious schools are gone. There is only one imam for 9,000 people. The mosque can't even teach people anymore." An older Uzbek woman, Nodira, observed that banning home religious teachers for women, *otinchas*, had been awful because now instead of them there are only a lot of extremists. Her colleague added that forbidding education caused youths to be drawn to radicals. They use religious as a weapon and lure children to their movements, she said. Likewise, one man noted that in government those who work in government cannot participate in the mosque. This is also generally true of school teachers, and students, and university students. One young woman even complained that

she was given a warning merely for carrying an Arabic language textbook in public. She had been trying to teach herself Arabic so that she could read the Koran.

Some link such forms of repression to politics. Abumalik from Dushanbe complained: “These officials who are preventing Friday prayer are also those who are opposing Muslim unity. If people would work according to the Sharia, then many problems in our country would be resolved, including corruption.” He was not an Islamist, but his words suggested that he saw repression of Islam as a fundamental political problem. Islamist propaganda clearly appealed to some. One man, attracted to Hizb ut-Tahrir’s ideas, said: “We want to live in a just and fair society. Nowadays there is no justice. But the caliphate was a just system.” And Erkin proclaimed: “There is no justice, not in Kyrgyzstan and not in Uzbekistan! They only talk about democracy. They oppress Muslims more now in comparison with the Soviet times, even though they talk about freedom of religion. It’s because of this that we should become an Islamic state!”

Third, repression of Islam has spawned opposition movements centered around politicized Islamic ideas and identity. Islamist movements target those angry at injustice. Their ideologies advocate Islam, whether an Islamic nation-state, the caliphate, or simply jihad, as the solution to injustice. We have seen this pattern take place across Central Asia for over three decades now. The latest wave of Islamist extremism involving Central Asians is the flow of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq since about 2014. Overall, estimates of foreign fighters from Central Asia number from about 3,000 to 5,000. The number on the whole seems low, but on the other hand, this is up to 20 percent of foreign fighters documented there. This is striking for a region far from Damascus, where transnational militant Islamism was almost unthinkable a decade or two ago.

On a per capita basis, from 2015 to 2017 Kyrgyzstanis and Tajikistanis were particularly high state contributors of jihadist fighters. In both countries, religious oppression has escalated significantly over the past ten years as each state has reneged on its commitment to democratization and, with that, to religious freedom. The case of Kyrgyzstan is telling. There, religious policy was liberal from the late Soviet era through the early to mid-2000s. During that time, Kyrgyzstan did not have a serious problem with radicalism. Yet, since about 2006, there has been a steady increase in repression of Islam, both legally and extralegally. This is particularly so amongst ethnic Uzbeks in the south. The killing of Imam Rafiq Kamalov and the arrest of his son, Imam Rashod Kamalov, both Salafis, generated extreme discontent at religious and political injustice. Kyrgyzstan subsequently became a significant source of recruits to Syria.

As of 2017, over 1,300 Kyrgyzstanis had joined militant groups there and, according to Radio Free Europe, about 30 percent of these jihadists came from the southern region where the Kamalov’s lived and preached. About 90 percent of those recruits are also ethnic Uzbeks. Over the past few years, ISIS and multiple Central Asian battalions, affiliates of al-Qaida, have all put forth radical anti-democratic ideologies which propose Islam as a solution to political and religious injustice, corruption, and the torture of Muslims. They specifically endorse violence. They deride Muslim democrats who have sought to work within the system, like the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan. Their propaganda videos call Central Asians with slogans such as: “do not be afraid to fight in jihad or the path of honor is jihad.” In one video, the leader of the Unity and Jihad Battalion, an ethnic Uzbek from southern Kyrgyzstan preaches:

Nowadays, Muslims face lots of hardships. Women are forced to remove their hijab. Having a beard is now a crime. Some Muslims say there is no need for jihad now, but who will defend Muslims in Palestine and Syria if there is no need for jihad?

Hundreds of such messages on social media lure Central Asians to fight.

In short, oppressing religious freedom is a major contributor to radicalism. When the state indiscriminately represses many or most expressions of Islam, some will inevitably turn to Islamist messages and solutions for a just life.

PRICE: Thank you very much.

Dr. Nasrutdinov.

NASRUTDINOV: Thank you. Thank you, Everett and Kathleen.

I would like to continue the discussion that has been started by Kathleen. Notwithstanding the criticism, I would still suggest that Kyrgyzstan remains the best country in the region, with regard to the freedom of religion, with the most liberal religious policy in Central Asia. At the moment, we have nearly 4,000 mosques in the country, and more than 100 madrasas. This is double the size of the number of madrassas for all other Central Asian countries taken together.

Research shows that it's madrasas which are governed and regulated by the special board of Muslims in Kyrgyzstan have a positive influence on reducing vulnerability of people to radicalization, since the curricula is standard. It teaches moderate, traditional Islam, which is very critical of the radical movements, particularly of the Salafi influence in the region. Perhaps the only area where madrasa education is lagging is in regard to Russian-speaking madrasas. For nearly 100 madrasas in the country, there is no single one that would teach subjects in Russian. Thus, we observe a large number of Russian-speaking Muslim population in the north of the country, including ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic minorities who are more vulnerable to influence of radical ideas because they often cannot simply understand the message given by imams on the mosques.

Yet, there are several influential religious groups, such as Turkish Hizmet, Nurjular, Sulaimanchiler, Southeast Asian Tablighi Jamaat, and several moderate Salafi groups, which are legal in Kyrgyzstan, while they have been banned in other Central Asian countries. This relative freedom of religion applies not only to Islamic groups, but also to other religious communities as well. There are nearly 400 Christian groups which are registered with the state committee on religious affairs. Once they are registered, they do not experience significant pressures. The only Christian organization that is banned in Kyrgyzstan is the church of Mormon. There are 90 names in the list of banned organization are all Muslim.

Kathleen rightly pointed to the complications of relations and more pressure on the religious communities from 2006. Yet, approximately from 2013-14, we see a bit of a reversal in the trend. This is caused mostly by the change of leadership on three levels. First of all, the president himself, the director the state committee on religious affairs, and the sort of grand mufti of the country. In the past there were major conflicts between the latter two, the state committee and mufti. But since 2014, most of these conflicts have been resolved and we observe quite a lot of collaboration. A third actor in this collaboration are international organizations, which successfully engage with the state and the religious communities in various projects on CVE, gender, conflict resolution, et cetera.

I would also maybe have a debate with Kathleen in regard to the high representation of Kyrgyzstani fighters in Syria, particularly the engagement of ethnic Uzbeks. I—as well as our experts—believe that figures for Uzbeks might be exaggerated, particularly by the Kyrgyz security officials who are mostly homogeneous ethnic Kyrgyz. A lot depends on what we look for as a source of information; therefore, these kinds of numbers mostly represent the outcomes of a specific security project [inaudible] which targeted only Uzbek communities in the period of 2013 and 2016, the exact same period when the statistics on Uzbeks went up. I agree that Uzbek communities in the south are significantly persecuted until nowadays, since the conflict or 2010, but there are a number of reasons why you should perhaps take the official statistics with a grain of salt.

But, the big question of ethnic Uzbeks being very important, we still see the Kyrgyzstani model as the most progressive and the most productive. This peaceful of model of groups can function freely. They do not see the state as an oppressor. They play an important role in drawing the practicing Muslim community away from the more radical influences. Yet, with all that, there are still many questions to consider, and issues. So last year we conducted research, a nationwide study of young people's vulnerability and their resilience to radicalization. We conducted this analysis across five major domains of young people's life—grievances, politics, religion, socialization, and psychology. Our research shows that the grievances are the most important factor of vulnerability. Young people who experience discrimination have the highest vulnerability score.

These scores are particularly high for young people who experience discrimination from the state officials and from the police. Such young people are much more likely to have strong desires to avenge others and justify violence for various purposes, including religious ones. Young people in Kyrgyzstan grow up seeing a number of social and state injustice, and very high levels of corruption around them. They name corruption and amorality as the biggest problems of Kyrgyz society. They see the state institutions and actors as predatory agents who use their privileged positions to make money from the rest of society. The theme of corruption and state predation make the core of many young people's radical ideas. Members of radical organizations can exploit such perceptions to recruit young people, by promising them the just Islamic alternative.

Young people also report a high degree of injustice and discrimination, particularly from police toward practicing Muslims. For young women, it is often related to their Islamic attire. Nonetheless, young people believe the situation with religion freedom and conditions for Muslim

populations in Kyrgyzstan are better than they are in the neighboring Central Asian countries, Russia, Western countries, and China.

PRICE: Professor, can I ask you to summarize the other elements of the vulnerability that you're talking about, just in the interest of time?

NASRUTDINOV: Young people's political ideas become more and more connected to their religious views. Nearly one-third of the survey respondents would support a more a religious candidate, and even introduction of a sharia law instead of a constitution. So, we see that in regard to the geopolitics, there is a very positive evaluation of the influence of Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, but negative evaluation of the influence of United States, Europe, and Iran. China is somewhere in the middle, with one exception, in regard to the evaluation of the Muslim in their own country.

The important role of religion is that religious leaders, religious imams, and religious scholars have a positive influence. Young people who obtain knowledge through personal, face-to-face communication are less vulnerable than the young people who obtain information on the internet. Socialization is important, and I can talk about this later.

PRICE: Thank you. Dr. Lemon.

LEMON: Thank you, once again, to Everett and Nathaniel for inviting me to speak on this panel. I'm going to focus particularly on Tajikistan, which reflects many of the dynamics that Dr. Collins introduced in her opening remarks. Three things may separate Tajikistan from the other countries within the region, maybe with the exception of Turkmenistan. First is the sort of severity of the state secular campaign against Islam. As Everett mentioned in his opening remarks, Tajikistan has been classified as a CPC for the past three years. And like the other countries in the region, counterextremism is not really about addressing security issues—although that is obviously part of it—but it is more sort of about the dynamics of authoritarian politics within the region. Effectively, it's a tool for the governments of the region to crack down on potential opposition to their role, and effectively secure their regimes. Obviously, some of these polices have the potential to counter extremism, but that's maybe a secondary objective.

So what have we seen in Tajikistan? We've seen particularly a focus on the visible signs of piety: the forced shaving of men with beards; campaigns against women wearing hijab; both official and unofficial campaigns. Women have been not allowed to wear hijabs in schools since 2007—both students and teachers. There have been a series of campaigns against men with beards. If there are 100 madrasas operating in Kyrgyzstan, every single madrasa in Tajikistan—the 19 that to my knowledge operated around five or six years ago—was closed by 2016. Students have been banned from studying Islam abroad since 2010.

And according to the official statistics issued by the Committee on Religious Affairs, last year alone in 2017, 1,938 mosques were closed in the country for not meeting with government regulations. In viewing this in some ways as being post-Soviet, the official statements said that these were turned into cultural centers, youth clubs—reflecting some of the policies that have



been seen under the Soviet Union. So I think that the first difference is really the severity of this, which takes a higher level than in other countries, with the exception maybe of Turkmenistan.

Secondly, as Dr. Collins mentioned in her opening statement, Tajikistan, until 2015, was the only country in the region with a legal faith-based party—i.e., the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan that emerged in the south of the country in the 1970s, became an officially registered party right before the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990, and participated on the opposition side during the civil war. The party was legalized as part of the peace deal of 1997 and held a sort of symbolic two seats in the country's 63-seat assembly. But particularly since 2010, the party came under pressure and ended up being declared a terrorist organization. And I can address during the Q&A the effects of that, but obviously the closure of the party which had—or claimed to have—at its height 50,000 members, was viewed many observers, including myself, as potentially detrimental to countering violent extremism in the country.

Third, as Dr. Collins mentioned, Tajikistan within the region is the highest per capita exporter of foreign fighters. The latest figures from a few weeks ago from the security services—which, again, need to be taken with a pinch of salt as Dr. Nasrutdinov has said—are 1,900 fighters. That would be a significant portion from the 3,000-5,000 or 4,000-6,000 fighters that are coming from the region. So, I think if Kyrgyzstan is maybe the best example of sort of model of state secularism in the region, Tajikistan is potentially the worst, maybe with Turkmenistan.

So is counterextremism productive? I think my research, along with Dr. Nasrutdinov's research and Dr. Collins' research, has indicated that grievances do play a key role. And I think not only in the messaging that extremist groups have been portraying the governments of the region as an enemy of Islam by citing specific examples of their policies: closing mosques and preventing men from growing beards, policies against the hijab, et cetera. These have definitely been picked up by extremist organizations, and specific experiences of grievances does seem to be one of the only underlying conclusions for much of the research on extremist recruiting within the region; the other being the importance of social networks, both personal and online, in sort of drawing people into these extremist organizations.

But I think another aspect in which state secularism in the region can be counterproductive is its sort of logic. Given that it's highly authoritarian, it's creating this false binary in many ways between a good, state-sponsored Islam that's local, and a bad foreign extremist Islam, that should be repressed. Its very logic is authoritarian, and it really does stymie critical thinking amongst the citizenry. This is part of a broader politics of authoritarianism within the region. The main effect of this authoritarianism is to try and create docile citizens who are secular, apolitical, and as Dr. Nasrutdinov mentioned, not only apolitical, but also potentially even anti-political who view politics, particularly when mixed with religion, as being a particularly dangerous thing. The governments of the region point to the Arab Spring as an example of this.

And effectively, what's being created are citizens—young people in particular, who form huge segments of society within the region—who lack critical thinking skills and lack a critical and deep understanding of religion. Some of the examples from my research, particularly

amongst Tajik labor migrants in Russia in 2014 and 2015, which was the height of the recruitment drive by Islamic State and other terrorist organizations in Syria, indicated that it's often these informal, community-based approaches that are much more effective in countering extremism than the heavy-handed approaches of the government.

One example from a number from my sort of fieldwork, particularly in 2015, is Sadriddin. He came to Russia, I think, in 2013. He was a young labor migrant, had few opportunities in his home village in the south of Tajikistan, had a very limited knowledge of religion. He didn't pray growing up; didn't particularly take an interest in religion. But eventually in Moscow, he came under the influence of Islamic State recruiters who began to draw him into the fold, talking about the need for the religious obligation to conduct jihad. Eventually Abdulrahmon, who was one of my interlocutors in my research, invited him to dinner.

Abdulrahmon was a Koran reader from the west of Tajikistan who studied in a madrasa in Pakistan and held an informal prayer group within the bazaar where he worked on the edge of Moscow. And he staged an intervention by pointing to specific examples within the Koran, the Hadith, that demonstrated that violence is only justified in very specific circumstances, and the contemporary circumstances we're seeing now perhaps do not justify violence. And eventually, through this process of communal intervention, he was brought away from that path, and decided not to join an extremist group.

So speaking to Nathaniel's original question of pointing to policies and different ways thing could be done differently, this focus on the community level and using communities as a tool not of authoritarian consolidation, as the presidents tend to use them, but as a tool in genuinely countering extremism, is something that would be very productive, along with trying to create citizens who can actually think critically about the simplistic messaging that they're getting from these extremist organizations.

HURD: Thank you. We'll now move into a period of discussion. It'll be a mixture of our panelists having the opportunity to respond to each other, to some of the points that have been made, some of the questions that have been raised. Everett and I will also have some questions for the panelists. And then we'll open it up to the audience. We'll start with those of you that are here in the room, and then we'll move to our Facebook viewers. So those of you that are watching online can type your questions there.

I'll start with Dr. Collins, whether or not you have any sort of initial responses to some of the points that were raised by Dr. Nasrutdinov.

COLLINS: Thank you. Thank you for your remarks, Dr. Nasrutdinov. I don't think I fundamentally disagree with anything you said. As I mentioned at the beginning, I was speaking broadly about major trends and problems in the region. Kyrgyzstan is a tough case to characterize, I think because there's a lot of regional variation within the country. So, the situation in the south of the country—in Osh, in Kara-Suu, in Jalal-Abad, Batken—is significantly worse than the situation in the north of the country. As you agree, the situation for ethnic Uzbeks is significantly worse along a number of dimensions, including ethnic repression

and exclusion, and problems with the largely Kyrgyz police force and the ethnic Kyrgyz-dominated government in the south of the country, which the north of the country has problems controlling.

The labor migrant phenomenon is largest in the south of the country. Remittances are highest for Osh and Jalal-Abad in the southern regions of the country, making that particular population the most vulnerable, whether they're in Moscow, or St. Petersburg, or Kazakhstan, or Turkey, to the recruiting and calls and networks of ISIS and other radical groups. So, there are many reasons for the ethnic Uzbek population, including religious repression as well as economic and ethnic repression, that lead them, I think, to be more a more vulnerable population at the call of ISIS.

I particularly highlight the religious phenomenon, the religious repression here in large part because the ethnic Uzbek population in the south, particularly followers of Rafiq Qori and Rashod Qori, are seen as Salafis. Salafis, while not banned and mistreated in the same way in Kyrgyzstan, are still not given the same sort of equal rights in Kyrgyzstan as mainstream Hanafi Islam. So, I think they face greater levels of persecution. And certainly, both the killing of Rafiq Qori and then the arrest and 10-year sentence of Rashod Qori have exacerbated the problem in the south of the country—ironically because Rashod Qori had actually openly spoken and has multiple videos out available on social media condemning ISIS. So he's a Salafist on the one hand, but on the other hand he has very specifically called on this following not to join ISIS.

Just a couple of other points, I think we all agree that the numbers, in terms of those who have actually gone to Syria as foreign fighters, are difficult to pin down. Certainly 1,300 is not a hard number—it's the number that I draw from the Soufan Group. I think to some extent it's corroborated by media reports by Radio Free Europe's data. And, they've found similar disparities in terms of ethnic Uzbeks versus ethnic Kyrgyz who have joined, also primarily from the south of the country, facing these broader issues of religious and political and economic injustice, like corruption.

The one other element that I would mention that I think give some credence to the numbers is that the largely ethnic Uzbek battalions that have been fighting, and continue to be located in Syria today, the Imam Bukhari Battalion and Tawhid wal Jihad Battalion, are led by ethnic Uzbeks, one from southern Kyrgyzstan originally. They put out prolific media—social media propaganda on various social media channels—whether it's Telegram, or YouTube, or Turkish social media platforms. They use those platforms to disseminate their message, largely in the Uzbek language, and to some extent as well in Russian. This gives some credence to the fact that they're drawing on those networks in particular, but I agree that the numbers are problematic, and we should not take the regime's numbers without questioning them.

HURD: Dr. Nasrutdinov, do you want to add anything?

NARUTDINOV: Well, I agree with Dr. Collins. And, again, I was not critical of the points that you were making. I was suggesting that we should take a bit more nuanced approach to this. The situation with the Uzbeks in the south of the country, as I said, right until now remains very, very problematic, and it is a major issue. But, there are issues that the grievances

of the Uzbeks might have developed due to this very difficult situation, which might be one of the major factors contributing to their vulnerability to radicalization.

There is no equal sign, between the two. This still needs further and deeper exploration, because what we are doing right here, pointing a finger at the very specific ethnic group without really strong evidence and without deep discussion, can have consequences for the group itself. This is the only thing that I've been pointing out—that we have to take a little bit more care and consideration. That's all. Thank you.

HURD: Before I initiate our moderator questions, were there any other points that were raised by fellow panelists that any of you want to respond to?

All right. I'll start our line of questioning by focusing on the topic of secularism. And it's something that several of you have already alluded to. In particular, government campaigns against or forcible removal of visible signs of piety—the hijab and beards—would be two evident examples of that. Debates about secularism, what it is, how it should be manifested in government policy, law, regulation, practice, is not something that's unique to Central Asia, of course. We're having debates and discussions about that in North America and in Western Europe. I immediately thought of the French amendment to its code of education back in 2004. The key line there was in public primary schools, middle schools, and high schools, the wearing of symbols or clothing by which students ostensibly manifest a religious affiliation is forbidden, which sounds more akin to what we've seen in some of the Central Asian countries.

Two initial questions for all of you: is there a kind of secularism that would be compliant with the international obligations that the Central Asian countries have made on religious freedom that might also match the Central Asian context? And secondly, as you look more globally, more broadly, are there models of secularism that you would commend to the consideration to the governments of Central Asia?

LEMON: I guess I can take that one. No. I think the form of secularism we see in Central Asia is a more extreme version of *laïcité*, as you say, the French form of secularism. It's been called by Ahmet Kuru a sort of assertive secularism whereby the state sits above religion and the state has the right to intervene in religious affairs, including personal and private settings, as well as public settings. So that's maybe a more extreme version than the sort of French model that talks about religious symbols in public places. So, it's a more extreme version of that.

I'm not an expert on different models of secularism outside of Central Asia, but I think some sort of model by which religion is afforded or religious freedom is tolerated; the actual words of the constitution come before the more restrictive religious laws that have been adopted within the countries; and that that takes precedent and people are able to practice religious freely in their own homes and in public places, would be a model that would be preferable.

HURD: Dr. Collins? Dr. Nasrutdinov?

COLLINS: I actually think that the model that Kyrgyzstan had more or less adopted prior to the 2008 religion law was actually working pretty well. There was an enormous amount

of pluralism within the country. Salafis, Tablighi Jamaat, Shia, multiple different Christian groups participated publicly, and were able to freely worship. They were not facing the type of fear and restrictions and repression that they have subsequently, which was initiated by the Bakiyev regime, but has been continued despite the change in government after 2010, and arguably has actually worsened, particularly in the south of the country, as we were talking about.

This has been, of course, in the context of the growth of ISIS, talk about counterterrorism measures, et cetera. But, as I suggested before, I think the adoption of a much harsher version of secularism modeled on laïcité, but also modeled on Soviet ideas of atheism, in fact has exacerbated the problem with religious extremism within Kyrgyzstan. If Kyrgyzstan were to go back 10 years, I think they actually had a relatively good model not just for Kyrgyzstan, but for the region more generally.

PRICE: Dr. Nasrutdinov, I'd like to hear your thoughts on this as well. But if I can just add one other question that I'd appreciate your help clarifying is, what exactly—and you alluded to it a little bit, but I was wondering if you could delve into it a little bit more—what prompted that change in the policy from I think it was 2006 – 2008 and then afterwards? And then you also said that it flipped back and headed, again, in a little bit more of a positive direction after 2010. What accounts for those changes back and forwards in terms of the trajectory?

NASRUTDINOV: OK. I think when we talk about Central Asia and we talk about the states, we cannot talk about the states in isolation from the discussion of specific leaders of the countries. This is all about personalities, including what is happening in Uzbekistan. This slightly positive change that is developing, again, is a reflection of a change in the personality of the leadership.

And, what has been happening in Kyrgyzstan in regard to religious freedom is exactly that in many ways. Askar Akayev, the first president, was very open-minded, democratic, and really didn't care about religion at all, so this was not on his agenda. That's why so many religious communities, both Muslim and Christian and other communities, were able to develop and flourish in such large numbers.

Then Bakiyev's regime really was the first regime that actually started repression by the government of religion. And the first law that Bakiyev introduced was the law on religious freedom, which in fact was actually in many ways limiting the freedoms of citizens. But again, we see that when Atambayev came to power, Roza Otunbayeva didn't do much. When Atambayev came to power, in the first couple of years he was still trying to figure out what to do. One kind of positive thing that can be said about Atambayev was that he was open to the discussion with the expert community. He had the Security Council, and he created a number of groups of experts who had been working on these issues and have been advising him on these specific issues.

Particularly as a result of this collaboration, there was this positive change that began evolving in 2013 and 2014. As I said, the formal State Committee on Religious Affairs director was removed and replaced, and the mufti was replaced, and the two started collaborating much

better. And then what we see, while this positive change was still evolving, Atambayev was quite critical of the hijabs and Muslim attire, and he produced quite a lot of negative remarks in regard to religion.

Now the new president, Sooronbay Jeenbekov, is believed to be himself a practicing Muslim who prays five times a day and generally supports Islamic communities in many ways. He has organized a number of interesting conferences and invited a number of interesting international expert(s) and speakers to talk about these issues. At the moment we really are seeing very little pressure, and he's also a distant relative of our present mufti, which is a big thing in Central Asia. So, at the moment, we see this positive change.

One last thing I would like to mention besides these personality styles at the top level, is the important role is played by civil society. For example, one of the main groups that lobbied and very actively promoted the right of girls to wear hijab in school is the group called Mutakalim. This is a female organization that fights for the right of Muslim women. I can suggest that whatever has been achieved in regard to this freedom—and Kyrgyzstan today is the only country in Central Asia which allows girls to wear hijab to schools, right; no other country allows that—is not the product of the specific politicians or the president, or even the muftiate. It is the outcome of the many years of struggle that this feminist organization put into this. They took the minister of education to court a number of times. They have protested in front of the Ministry of Education. The civil society has contributed quite a lot to that kind of form of secularism, which is a bit distant from French *laïcité* but closer to a more American version of secularism.

**HURD:** Underpinning a lot of what we've discussed already today is the fundamental question of meaning. So people, whether they're in Central Asia or Western Europe or elsewhere, have big existential questions once they hit the age of reason.

This intersects, I think, with two things. One, state control or branded Islam, where the imams are state funded, state trained, state approved, where the content of their sermons are in some cases literally provided by the governments. So what people are receiving when they go to the mosque is, as some of you already noted, effectively government propaganda. It doesn't have a particularly strong religious character and doesn't necessarily address these big existential questions that people have about themselves and about life.

This also brings us to education, and all of you have touched on the lack of healthy, vibrant religious education in the countries of Central Asia. Broadly, what would healthy religious education look like in the Central Asian context? What would it look like at the private level? What should the government's relationship be to it?

And then a version of the question that I asked earlier: are there models, including outside of Central Asia, where you think there are large Muslim communities and the religious education looks like the kind of thing that you would hope to be replicated, or at least considered, in Central Asia?

And a third question is: can you perhaps say a bit more about the lack of substance that people are receiving at school, that that they're receiving at mosque in response to these big existential questions they have, which in turn makes them perhaps more vulnerable, more susceptible to the allure of what they might encounter from more extremist individuals or groups, particularly when they travel abroad for work to places like Russia?

This is a question for all the panelists.

LEMON: Three questions for each. I guess I'll go with the first and the third.

So, as I mentioned, before 2010 I think there were almost 3,000 Tajiks studying Islam abroad, and there are a number of madrassas operating in the country, and there still is an Islamic university I think with 2,000 places. There's certainly much more demand for Islamic education than there is supply. There are still, from my understanding and from some reports, some sort of unofficial underground—although that's a misleading term that dates back to the Soviet Union—there are still unofficial lessons, and, certainly in some villages within the country, the government views that as a potential security threat within Tajikistan.

I think a model would be, obviously, providing more Islamic education, providing some—I know that in the past they introduced in high school, I guess middle school—some sort of theology and Islamic morality classes. That may be a good opportunity. But as I said, speaking to the third question, education within Central Asia in general, Tajikistan in particular, is about producing citizens who are not critical and will not resist or question authority and power. I think there's a genuine view that Islam and Islamic morality poses a threat to regime security, so I think it's trying to persuade the government that Islam isn't necessarily anti-state and it's not necessarily anti-status quo; and that they can loosen the reins on religion and promote religious education, and it doesn't *ipso facto* mean that their power will be threatened. In fact, if they opened up to a more pluralist system like Kyrgyzstan has, it would reduce the pressure and reduce some of the injustice that's existing within society, and maybe even allow Islamic civil society to develop and take on some of the roles that the state's incapable of doing as we've seen sort of through processes like kashar (ph) in Kyrgyzstan and is already existing in Tajikistan.

NASRUTDINOV: Yes, and in Kyrgyzstan the major problem faced by students of madrassas is the lack of certification and licensing. Because Kyrgyzstan is a secular country, the Ministry of Education refuses to give licenses to religious institutions. What we have as a result is that students usually go to madrassas after completing the ninth grade of school. Then, having completed the degree at the madrassa, they are not able to obtain a certificate of secondary education, and thus they cannot continue, their education into the higher education institutions. This has been a problem, for all madrassa graduates. And the madrassas themselves are open to collaboration: they want to introduce secular subjects into their curriculum just to get that secondary education certificate for their own graduates.

Yet, the state is still kind of lagging behind on these issues and not really working properly. So far only one institution has been granted a license: the Islamic University of Kyrgyzstan, one of the eight higher education madrassas. There is one more pilot project that

was introduced by the State Committee on Religious Affairs, and that is kind of a theology college on the basis of one of the universities, where students who obtain a degree in religion also obtain a certificate in secondary education. I think resolving this issue would help a lot the graduates of Islamic educational institutions to integrate better into life, and to have both professional careers and religious careers developed together, where they would not be isolated only to religious life.

In regard to introducing religious subjects into secular schools, this also has been on agenda. This is already the second year that the Ministry of Education is piloting a project on introducing a subject called the history of world religion into the curriculum of regular secular schools. The results are yet to be evaluated and seen, but there is this initiative, and hopefully it will take proper ground.

COLLINS: Thank you for pointing to that issue. Religious education, as well as education more broadly, I think is an enormous challenge for the Central Asian states to deal with. In approximately a hundred focus groups that my Central Asian colleagues and I did across the region over the course of several years, the vast, vast majority of participants pointed to a desire for any religious education, better religious education, and religious education within the framework of an otherwise-secular school system. So, they're not talking about a desire to send their children just to madrassas, something along the lines of what we've seen in Pakistan or Afghanistan emerge over the past several decades. They want their children to get basic theological instruction within the context of the school system.

Given that there are no religious schools that also teach secular subjects for the most part across the region—again, Kyrgyzstan has a few minor exceptions, but across the region it's something that's broadly banned and seen as threatening to the governments of the region—I think that is a key area in which we can think about looking at models elsewhere. And I actually would propose the U.S. as a relatively good model in this respect. Religious education, religious schools, religious institutions that run, own, and teach religion as a theology together with the whole range of secular subjects have been something that have been part of the religious and civil system in the United States since our founding.

The Catholic school system, of which I'm a product, is actually a quite healthy example in this regard. And I think it would be very interesting to see Central Asians and directors of Central Asian schools come and have a dialogue with teachers and administrators in the Catholic school system here to see how it works. Ninety percent of the school day goes toward secular subjects, but religion is also taught as a theology.

And on that point, I just want to emphasize that what people are not looking for is for their kids to go to study Islam in the secular state-run, state-controlled school system as a science, as the study of atheism in the way that it was during the Soviet period, in the way that quite frankly still is across much of the region. To the extent that religion has been introduced in the school system, it's been introduced in this very Soviet-style fashion. People want their kids to learn morality and they want them to learn their beliefs, but they want them to learn those beliefs within a sort of healthy, otherwise secular context. That's what the vast majority of the population I think wants.



HURD: I think just another example from the U.S. system. You mentioned the Catholic school system, but in addition there are families here in the United States that send their children to public schools, but then their own religious community has something set up to sort of supplement that. So, they're certainly getting religious education at home, but they're also getting it from a community entity that supplements whatever it is that they're receiving in the public school system.

COLLINS: And it's not encumbered by all these restrictions that have been put in place across Central Asia in terms of how you have to get permission on who can teach, and whether or not teaching religion through the churches or through the mosques or in the home is actually legal or illegal. So, at the current moment across much of the region for one to teach—to send one to a grandparent or a neighbor or an atinga (ph) is actually extraordinarily risky when most of us would agree that that's just sort of a normal, healthy part of the moral upbringing of a child.

PRICE: I think all of you have talked about the post-Soviet legacy that heavily influences the state's approach to religion. I was wondering what you make of the generational shift that seems to be impacting all post-Soviet republics these days of a generation of kids who are now adults who have grown up without any living memory of the Soviet Union. Is that impacting attitudes towards religion at the popular level? And will that have an impact on the way that government and administration relates to those issues?

LEMON: As an anecdote, I was at a wedding in 2013 in the Vanj mountainous district in Tajikistan, and there were separate tables between the young guys, many of whom were labor migrants. They were back from the summer, and they would not touch alcohol, and they were on one table. Then there were the sort of bad young guys, as they labeled them, who sat next to them, and they were all drinking. And then there was the sort of old Soviet generation sitting on the third table, and they were, again, drinking.

And I think that certainly that's an anecdote, but we are seeing especially among the younger generation an increasing interest in religion. I think that's, in the case of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in particular, mediated through these processes of going to Russia, where ironically, religion is more free and they are able to meet practicing Muslims from a broader community, and they're able to with fewer risks either register for official religious training in Russia or convene informal prayer groups, a number of which I attended in Moscow in 2014 and 2015.

I think there is this societal Islamization. From the view of the governments this is inherently political, and it's linked to a political radicalization and seen as a threat. But I think there is a genuine demand amongst the population, as shown through Dr. Collins' surveys in religious education, in morality. And, that is in part mediated by this move from a Soviet to a post-Soviet system.

NASRUTDINOV: I totally agree with Dr. Lemon. For many purposes of convenience, I tend to oversimplify matters by categorizing this sort of debate into difference between several

generations. And again, I think this is like oversimplification, but still it's easier to perceive a larger picture this way.

I distinguish the older Soviet generation—this would be the generation of my grandfathers who were born before the Soviet Union or in the early Soviet years when religion was still free, right. They were the ones who, like my grandfather, went to madrassa, learned to read and write in Arabic, memorized a portion of Koran, before the things going bad in 1920s and '30s and religion became prohibited. So the elderly community were among the first ones who in the 1990s, as soon as religious freedom returned, went back to their religious practices. For example, my grandfather became a muldo (ph) imam for the Tatar community in the south in Kyrgyzstan.

And then the second generation, I call them the Soviet generation. This is the generation of my parents. These are the ones who were born, brought up, raised, and matured into this Soviet atheist, anti-religious propaganda. They were already in their 40s and 50s when the Soviet Union broke up, and having spent their entire life believing that religion is a prejudice and a fairy tale—something which is but a negative—they were among the ones who had the most difficult time returning to religion, or going to religion. This is the generation that is really missing in churches and in the mosque nowadays.

And then the third generation—this is what I refer to myself—is a transitional generation. We went to school in the Soviet time, but then we're still young enough and still open to ideas when the Soviet Union broke up—I was 17. And many in my generation came to religion via a detour of the bad '90s with the drugs and alcohol addiction, criminal engagement, et cetera. So for many of representative of my generation, those who survived '90s, right, they – for them religion was a salvation from all these difficult and bad habits.

And then you have the independent generation. These are the kids who grew up in the '90s or late '80s, so the ones who were not brainwashed with the Soviet propaganda at all. So for them religion was really their choice. The parents did not impose it on them, but it was one of many choices in regard to this new kind of forms of identities that suddenly became available after the breakup of the Soviet Union. For them, they see religion as a choice and they respect it as a choice of others.

And then you have the new Millennials—my children. For my children I try to teach them and I try to raise them with the sort of religious perspective on life.

It's kind of a cycle that goes back in some ways is the observations. That's my perspective.

PRICE: Dr. Collins, maybe you could also address from the bureaucratic standpoint how entrenched these practices are from the Soviet Union's legacy and whether they're subject to change with kind of generational evolution.

COLLINS: Yes, thank you.

Well, it's an interesting question. Nathaniel and I were having a conversation earlier about some comments that are still made by the older generation who tend to still dominate amongst government elites and within the bureaucracy. This mentality of Soviet atheism and fear and suspicion of religion, I think, still pervades those who are in positions of power. And that, I think, continues to influence policies such as Tajikistan's sort of public campaign against the hijab. You see a milder version of this taking place in Kyrgyzstan, where government elites seem to feel the need to speak out against the Arab version of the hijab invading our country versus the sort of traditional Islam and the traditional way that Kyrgyz women are supposed to dress. These statements coming from government elites, I think, reflect that very Soviet sort of bureaucratic atheist understanding and suspicion of what religion is actually all about.

As both the previous speakers have said, there is this growing gap between the elites and the youth, particularly those who were born in the post-Soviet era. Something that's not always taken into account in much of what is written about Islam in the region, is that we now have an entire generation who was born after the Soviet Union collapsed. So, we've seen significant generational turnover in terms of youth's views about Islam, about politics, and about corruption. It's the younger generation who've grown up entirely in a system where the educational system is pervaded by corruption, and I think that's across the region; one of the issues where there isn't a whole lot of variation. That pervades how they view the world. I think, not for everybody, certainly, but for quite a number of people it causes them to see Islam in some way as a solution to a lot of their problems, as a solution to injustice, and as a solution to political/economic corruption and repression of many sorts.

Another point which I would emphasize that Dr. Nasrutdinov mentioned earlier is the access to social media. This is, again, more so the case in Kyrgyzstan than in some of the other republics, where access to social media is higher. But youth, since they can't receive religious education or there's not enough access to sort of normal religious education, they're going online. This is happening across the region. It's happening in Russia. It's happening in Azerbaijan. So, to get their questions about Islam answered, they get online and they listen to various forms from the moderate to the extreme that are posted online in their languages—in Russian and Kyrgyz and predominantly in Uzbek. And this is affecting how they're viewing the world, how they're viewing their social and political problems, and how they're coming to view—at least a certain percentage of them—religion as a solution to that.

Again, I don't think the youth perspective that religion should be part of the public space and civil society is not something that should be seen necessarily as threatening. It can evolve in a healthy and pluralist way, as it had in Kyrgyzstan prior to the Bakiyev administration and their adoption of a new law on religion. But unfortunately, by government elites it is still seen as something that's very threatening that needs to be controlled and repressed.

HURD: Thank you.

Everett and I have many more questions and I sure could be here all day with a fruitful conversation with our panelists, but we want to make sure that we give our audience members an opportunity to ask questions. I have a colleague here with a mic. If you could tell us your name and affiliation, if you have one, and then please ask your question. Thank you.

Q: Thanks. I'm Alex Tiersky, also of the U.S. Helsinki Commission.

As the policy advisor with responsibility for counterterrorism, I want to tell you how instructive I found this discussion. I've really learned a tremendous amount from your presentations and the discussion. Thank you very much.

I have two questions. The first actually derives from the set of questions that my colleague Everett just asked you about the Soviet legacy that we've talked about for a while. What we haven't talked about is any kind of active Russian engagement with the elites in Central Asia. Obviously, the Soviet legacy is one thing, but the Kremlin seeks to take a mantle on counterterrorism internationally, and I imagine that's the case in Central Asia as well. I'd love to hear from you a few thoughts on the Kremlin's perspective on sharing what we might call worst practices in the regards of this conversation.

The second question I would like to ask is: you've made it quite clear that from the expert perspective that the governmental view or the governmental repression of the free practice of Islam and the free practice of religion in Central Asia is counterproductive from a counter-extremism perspective. But what none of you have said is whether the governments believe that they are doing something that is being effective or not; in other words, if they think they're winning and pushing extremism beyond their borders, it makes it much more difficult for us to convince them to take a different approach. Thank you.

LEMON: Well, on Russia, obviously, there's a shared understanding of this problem, I think we can say, between the security services in particular. And they're the ones, really, who are often driving the more interventionist policies, certainly within the Tajik case, along with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and, obviously, Committee on Religious Affairs and other institutions. I think there's a shared understanding of this problem: there's a good and a bad Islam, and Islam is something that needs to be regulated because it, like other parts of civil society, poses a threat to regime security.

But I think there's also a practical dimension to this, and this operates both multilaterally and bilaterally, formally and informally. Through things like the RATS—the Regional Anti-Terrorism (sic; Terrorist) Structure—or through the SCO, which is based in Tashkent. There's a CIS counterterrorism center, and they share lists. They're like a sort of Interpol-lite in that they have lists of wanted extremists and extremist groups, and they participate in extraditions both formally and informally of accused extremists, many of whom are opposition members residing within different republics within the region. I think there's certainly cooperation there.

And the second question was on counter-extremism as being counterproductive?

Q: Whether the regimes believe that it is.

LEMON: Oh, whether the regimes believe it. Well, in my research I find it very difficult to have meetings, and I had some very early on in 2010 with some people from certain structures within the Tajik government on this issue. I think it's difficult to glean intentions here. We all

want to say that there's nefarious intent. It's difficult to say and disprove whether these people genuinely believe what they're doing or not. I think, from my conversations with various Tajik officials through the years, there is a genuine belief that Islam does pose a threat and that the steps they're taking—whilst they may not be ideal—are the best way to sort of keep a lid on the problem.

NASRUTDINOV: Perhaps I could answer the two questions together on the example of Kyrgyzstan.

All the repressive politics, particularly in regard to banning specific religious groups, have started with Russia. Russia has been thoroughly open until the late 2000s, and it was in 2008 when they started banning basically all groups. There are only four versions of religion that remain: Orthodox Christianity, traditional Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism. Everything else was to be banned.

Besides banning, one illustrative example is the banning of Tablighi Jamaat, the Southeast Asian group. Russia was the first one to ban it. Then it made the recommendations to the CSTO—Collective Security Treaty Organization—to ban them as well.

And the first one to follow was Tajikistan. It banned them in 2009. Immediately on that year 60 members of the movement were arrested, and since then the persecution has started.

Kazakhstan kept thinking until 2013. And after the events in Atyrau in 2011 they decided to ban it as well.

Kyrgyzstan today remains the only country where Tablighi Jamaat is still legal. It's still withstanding the pressures from the other members of the CSTO, including Russia. Particularly illustrative are the remarks of our former President Almazbek Atambayev suggesting that we are keeping everything under control and at the moment, we see a more of a positive influence of the group rather than the negative; that's why we keep it legal.

Same can be said about the Turkish groups, such as Nurcular and Hizmet. There is quite a lot of pressure from the Turkish government to ban them after the coup attempt in Turkey. And yet, Almazbek Atambayev also said that we are keeping everything under control, and to the degree we believe that these group has more positive influence for us.

So it's hard for me to tell for the governments of neighboring countries, but at least in Kyrgyzstan the government is kind of listening. For example, on the questions of Tablighi Jamaat, they have taken serious consultations with international experts including Alexey Malashenko, for example, and many local community experts—whereas in neighboring countries it's more authoritative decision-making as to just banning everything.

One more influence that comes from Russia is through propaganda and media. Again, there is a specific age group, like the Soviet generation, like my parents—like my father, who retired two years ago. And since then he's been hooked on Russian TV and Russian propaganda

completely. So this is the group that is brainwashed by this continuous Russian media and Russian propaganda, and a lot of that anti-religious sentiment also comes via that channel.

COLLINS: I would certainly agree with all that's been said so far, so I won't add too much to that.

I would note that I've had conversations with members of the State Committee on Religious Affairs in Kyrgyzstan for about 10 years about Tablighi Jamaat, and they constantly feel as though they should ban it. They haven't quite done it yet. They've resisted the pressure from Russia and across the region to brand this religious community as a terrorist and extremist organization, thankfully, so far.

Jehovah Witnesses are another example. The repression started in Russia, and you subsequently see the adoption of similar policies towards the Jehovah Witnesses across the region. So Russia, I think, is a particularly nefarious influence within the sphere of religious affairs across the region.

Do the governments believe they're winning? It's difficult to say. I strongly suspect, though, that given the changes that we are starting to see within the Uzbek regime, that there are at least some significant players as well as many of the younger generation who are starting to come up through the ranks within the Uzbek government who were in graduate school with me in the 1990s. And they increasingly, I think, believe that the repressive policies of President Karimov's regime were, in fact, counterproductive. And it will be interesting to see whether or not the changes in Uzbekistan have any sort of ripple effect across the region.

PRICE: I think that's very interesting because anecdotally I've certainly heard from some Uzbek interlocutors that they feel that these examples that people point to of Uzbek nationals who have committed acts of terror abroad have been radicalized while abroad in Russia and think that they were not radicalized within Uzbekistan, and they take that talking point to kind of underscore the efficacy of their domestic policies. But I don't know how to square that with what we've discussed today.

HURD: Yes, please. Back.

Q: Catherine Cosman, formerly Helsinki Commission a hundred years ago and more recently U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

My questions also have to do with Russia. I would not say that the policies of Russia towards freedom of religion are all that much better than that of the Central Asian countries, sadly, especially after 2014 and that series of laws that they passed, and the types of Russian Orthodox radicals—I think is a fair way of characterizing them—who are, many of them women, in important positions of power, including, unfortunately, the Ministry of Education. But that's another question. I think Russia has a very important influence on many levels in what's going on in Central Asia.

Also, vis-à-vis migrants, of course, the overall picture of their treatment is pretty bad, but I have heard that in some cities in some areas in Siberia, and oddly enough in Chechnya, there are some Uzbek migrants who are imam khatibs, so in other words in influential positions. One of Kadyrov's chief advisors on religion apparently is an Uzbek. Whether that's something to be proud of is another question.

Also, because I think it's important to ask, which religious figure or Muslim-related religious figure in Russia is admired by the millions of Central Asian migrants? And I've heard, unfortunately, that it is Kadyrov who is the most-admired figure. I hope I'm wrong and I hope you can contradict me on that.

So, in short, the picture about freedom of religion in Russia is very complicated. I would end my little disquisition with saying that we should also look at the international instruments for a good definition of freedom of religion; i.e., the U.N. and the OSCE. I think that should be mentioned, especially at a setting like this. Thank you.

HURD: Do any of the panelists want to respond?

LEMON: No, when I said that Russia is better, I didn't mean in terms of the legal framework, which I agree is just as bad. I think for certain Central Asian migrant communities that I spent time with, perhaps because they were away from home communities where surveillance networks are very extensive—mostly informal through local mahallas and informants and family members even—that they felt that the state wasn't quite as interested, perhaps, in them, and sort of as pervasive in its sort of surveillance networks. But I certainly wouldn't say that Russia should be upheld as a beacon of religious freedom. That would not be the case.

In terms of who the Tajik migrants who I spent time with admire, he's not an Islamic leader, but Putin himself is obviously revered amongst many of the migrant community as the archetypal strongman. I think Kadyrov—there's a lot of sympathy amongst the migrants who I know towards him as being, again, an effective leader who's brought stability to Chechnya.

I think within my experience within Moscow there's certainly a tension between the mosques and the muftiate, which is Tatar-led, although there are some North Caucasians in the administration, and the Central Asian migrant communities. I know a lot of people were turned away or no longer enjoyed attending or wanted to attend the very few mosques in Moscow because often parts of the service were in Tatar and they didn't understand. Some of it was in Russian. But they preferred often to have their own informal prayer groups, as opposed to going to the official institutions that they viewed as being less welcoming to them.

NASRUTDINOV: In regard to Kyrgyz practicing Muslim population, I think the religious authority is constructed along ethnic lines, significantly. So the most popular and famous religious scholars are all ethnic Kyrgyz. The most well-known scholar is Chubak Ajy Jalilov, who is a former mufti, and he is followed by Abduskhonar Matev (ph), who is a former [editor?] of the Kyrgyz Islamic University. The two are very active inside Kyrgyzstan. They are very active with lectures in their own mosques and in other mosques, and produce a lot of visual

materials on CDs and online. They are also very popular among Kyrgyz migrants in Russia, and they regularly travel. The muftiate organizes trips for them, and you have gatherings in City Crocus Hall in Moscow where it brings together up to 6,000 Kyrgyz labor migrants just to listen to the two.

Surprisingly, another interesting figure who is popular in Kyrgyzstan is Shamaledou Idin (ph), who is a Tatar modern Islamic scholar from Russia. He's been coming to Kyrgyzstan with lectures almost every year, he and his wife. She is also quite popular among the female community particularly. They gather large crowds, and have a fairly strong fellowship in the country.

COLLINS: Yes, I certainly agree. The situation with Russia is very complicated, and we're talking about millions of migrants who are living there. They're broken into different ethnic communities. They live in different cities of Russia. Some of them have greater access to internet than others. And even within Central Asia itself, it's interesting that so many people express both popular views of Russia, in large part based on the Russian media that they have access to, and correspondingly very negative views of the United States, increasingly so, over the past 10 to 20 years.

At the same time, they also have expressed in both focus groups as well as my survey research, a desire to introduce various elements of Sharia into the legal system, or to have some sort of Muslim democracy, or to model their system on Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, which they see as pure and less corrupt and a good Islamic form of life.

So those views often seem very contradictory: how can one admire Putin and at the same time want a government based on what they see as the Arab model, which, of course, many people have not had any particular experience with? So it is certainly something very sort of difficult to pin down.

I agree with the comments that the other panelists have made. I just want to address your question as well, Everett, about the Uzbek government's talking points. I think those are the talking points across the region as well, that to date we've kept the lid on extremism within our country by the policies that we've had in place over the past decade to two to three decades.

I'm not sure that these governments are quite as naïve as all that. Certainly there're some people who firmly believe in repression. But I do think that there are others—and again, it's probably the younger generation—who are attuned to what's being disseminated in social media, whether it's Gulmurod Khalimov's video where he defects from the OMON in Tajikistan and says that one of the reasons of his defection is because of the abuse and torture of Muslims and religious repression in Tajikistan. That's central to the reason that he left Tajikistan and joined ISIS.

Following his departure, you start to see the numbers of Tajiks peaking as fighters in Syria. Certainly, dozens and dozens and dozens of videos that are put out by other primarily ethnic Uzbek, or mixed ethnically, but led by ethnic Uzbeks in Syria also continually harp on



that same message. It's not all about Syria. It's about both Syria as well as the religious repression and the situation for Muslims at home.

So, it's hard for me to believe that the Central Asian elites are completely naïve to the problems that have been created by religious repression at home. I would hope that that is underlying some of the changes and push for reform within Uzbekistan today. Tajikistan might be another matter. I'm not sure that they're convinced yet.

HURD: Do we have any more questions from the audience?

Q: Jeff Bell, National Endowment for Democracy.

I was very interested to hear Professor Nasrutdinov talk about the role civil society has played in encouraging better attitudes towards religious freedom in Kyrgyzstan. And I would just be curious to hear if the panel could talk about perhaps what both religious and secular civil society could be doing better or is doing well in all the countries.

I understand, of course in Tajikistan there's very little leeway to do much. But it would still be interesting to hear. Thank you.

NASRUTDINOV: Well, I think the question was addressed mostly to my colleagues, like whether this is happening also in other countries.

LEMON: It was also to you about what civil society has done.

NASRUTDINOV: Oh, civil society. I'll give you specific examples.

For example, one of the leaders of this group, Mutakalim, the leader is Jamal Frontbek-Kyzy. What she did is that she, at the beginning, she established her organization specifically with the agenda of hijabs in schools and workplaces in mind. It took her two years to get it registered, through a lot of hurdles particularly even from the muftiate, which were making obstacles for her. Yet they succeeded.

Since they've registered, they've been taking school directors, ministers of education, to court regularly, and they've provided legal assistance and continuously supported these cases. Over a number of years, this has accumulated. Eventually, there's this big story where a minister of education did ban hijabs completely in school. They took him to court. They won the case. His ban was removed. He himself was fired. It was two days ago that the law was introduced that allows girls to wear not a hijab, but kind of a veil.

Another interesting case was when Jamal was invited to attend a U.N. meeting in Turkey. And when she was passing by customs at the Manas Airport in Bishkek, the customs officers asked her to remove hijab because on the ID, she was without hijab, and said you can remove it, pass it, and then put it back. And she said, no, I'm not removing it. So they wouldn't let her pass the customs until when she said OK, you're free not to let me pass, but I will make it such an international scandal, so you will be sorry about it.

Eventually they did let her in. What she did, as soon as she came back, was she started collecting signatures, because in order to change the law you need to have 300,000 signatures. She collected 300,000 signatures in the country. She initiated the law. Everybody signed except for one. This was a minister of international affairs—he categorically refused to do that.

So she waited. And it was 2008, I think, when we had SCO meeting—Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting—in Bishkek, where the leaders of all these SCO countries were supposed to come. She made a call for all Muslim women to come out and block the main road from the airport to the city. This would be such a big scandal that everyone became really, really concerned. The Ministry of International Affairs wrote to her, saying, OK, I will sign the paper; just call the meeting off. And she said, no, until I see the paper with the signature, I don't call it off. She receives the permission with his signature in the last moment, and she calls the protest off.

This is how they've struggled—it didn't come nicely. It didn't come easily. These are just a couple of examples.

LEMON: As you say, in Tajikistan the space for civil-society engagement in religious policy debating secularism is limited. In the mid-2000s, the OSCE actually sponsored this sort of religious-secular dialogue at the time when the opposition was still legal. This was an ongoing series of conferences organized in Dushanbe, but also in Germany, between religious authorities, members of the government, members of the opposition, and scholars, and those sort of debates around policy actually took place then. That was a different time.

Sort of moving back towards that would be certainly something that would be welcomed. But I think, under the current circumstances, the government would be reluctant. And, the only sort of civil-society events and programs was obviously focused on CVE and violent extremism. Even though, as we've mentioned, in terms of the radicalization process, perhaps secularism is more to blame than religion in terms of many of the recruits not being particularly religious before being recruited. That seems to be one of civil society's only in to this issue, but it's obviously from a negative perspective.

COLLINS: I'll just add that two countries where Christian-based groups were actually quite active in civil society until more recent restrictions have gone into effect are Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. And there you saw, over the course of the 1990s and 2000s, the proliferation, especially in Kazakhstan, of groups with a Christian basis to them, affiliated with churches or sometimes independent of churches, that did a whole range of basic civic activities, including set-up centers for individuals with drug addictions or alcohol addictions, for homeless women. These dealt with that whole range of what we would consider faith-based organizations and those sorts of activities until many of them started to fear new government restrictions on proselytism and on children participating in religious organizations or activities.

There's now, I think, quite a bit of fear, particularly on the part of minority Christian groups, particularly Protestants—Baptists, evangelicals and others—in Kazakhstan, and to some extent in Kyrgyzstan as well, that by engaging in those sorts of activities, by having children

present, for example, at youth camps or summer camps, that they will be banned by the state or sort of come under really quite crippling fines from the state.

In one case in Kazakhstan, I believe it was a year or two ago, there were Christian women who were simply providing sort of hospice services. But they had Bibles present at the scene, and they were charged with proselytism and then were given crippling fines.

So I think there's a failure on the part of the governments to realize that religious organizations, whether Christian or Muslim, can engage in a healthy range of civic activity that society as well as the state would actually benefit from.

NASRUTNIDOV: Let me just quickly add the clarification that the law that she initiated, Jamal Frontbek-Kyzy, was on allowing women to take photos for passport with a hijab. That was now supported.

HURD: Thank you for the questions and thank you for the interesting responses. Everett and I will ask one question apiece and then we'll wrap things up.

My question is particularly for Dr. Collins and Dr. Nasrutdinov. We've talked about some of the differences between Kyrgyzstan and the rest of the region. But I'm wondering if, in the areas of law, policy and regulation, whether one of the primary differences is that of a lack of full implementation, as opposed to the actual substance of the law and the policy and regulation. For example, in the area of registration, all religious groups and religious schools are required to register with the state commission on religious affairs.

There are a number of groups that continue to have problems gaining registration—the Ahmadiyyas, Jehovah's Witnesses, et cetera. I'm wondering whether or not you think, at least at the level of sort of law in particular, it's more a matter of the government just making a decision to not as fully and comprehensively apply the law as in some other countries, as opposed to the law itself.

NASRUTNIDOV: Well, in case of Kyrgyzstan, the latest amendment to the law on religious freedom was in regard to proselytization in public spaces, which is, I think, now almost supported and passed through the parliament, which bans proselytization or any kind of religious propaganda outside in the street, at houses, and in public places. What is interesting is that in the informal discussions that we had with the State Committee on Religious Affairs, we as an expert community always were against this kind of amendment, and we battled. We have discussed this with the state committee on a number of forums.

One of the informal kind of justifications that the members of the committee gave is that this is really a law that's supposed to work against conversion. They see conversion from Islam to Christianity as one of the major issues, and they see these leading to kind of social conflicts evolving at the level of the village, community, and even families. This is how they perceive the conversion from Islam to Christianity.

Therefore, they suggested this law is mostly targeting specifically groups like Jehovah Witnesses, who knock the doors and proselytize actively on staircases. But while suggesting that this is against Christian groups, it is also affecting Muslim groups such as Tablighi Jamaat, who also knocks the doors. Therefore I said, well, if they simply invite people to the mosque, then this is OK? If they do not proselytize and if they do not preach at the door, this is fine?

So, it's a policy that is targeting everyone, but specifically addressing the Christian community. In some ways there is this bias: it is not open, and it is not specifically explicitly stated. Yet it is there, right? And as it has been mentioned, particularly in regard to registration, there are now nearly 400 organizations which are registered—Christian organizations—with the state committee. Yet Mormons, for example, struggle. They still did not register themselves.

Numbers are important. The law works in such a way that to register an organization, you have to have a certain number of followers in a particular settlement. That is very difficult to have somewhere in the village in Kyrgyzstan, in the remote area. This way, the government creates these artificial obstacles for the communities to register and be legal and function properly.

COLLINS: Thank you.

I would add to that that in some cases, Kyrgyzstan's law on religion, which is actually quite harsh including the more recent amendments and restrictions on proselytism, don't necessarily distinguish it from the rest of the region.

On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan historically is sort of laissez faire in actually implementing the law. Often this works to the benefit of believers. So, for example, you pointed to another issue, which is registration. Registration of religious communities is not easy in Kyrgyzstan, and the law seems to be designed to prevent particularly new religious groups, whether Christians or sort of non-mainstream Muslims, from actually registering their churches or their mosques.

On the other hand, implementation is often quite weak. So you see house churches existing across the country where people gather and worship in private within sort of small churches that exist behind the walls of particular houses on small streets. It's incredibly hard to find them, which speaks to the fact that they're doing so in fear, even though they can exist. There are really sort of two sides to the coin. The legal framework is not very good. The implementation is generally quite bad. But people still exist and believe in practice in a certain amount of fear, because they know that the situation could become harsher.

I think the same is true with the case of the Hizb ut-Tahrir Party, which was banned as extremist. The legislation is not terribly different from the legislation on extremist organizations elsewhere in the region, and yet the implementation is typically much softer in Kyrgyzstan. It's gotten worse, I think, under President Bakiyev and since, but Hizb ut-Tahrir members are typically arrested. Perhaps they're fined, briefly detained, and then released, as opposed to thousands of them being arrested and given 15- to 18- to 20-year prison sentences, the way they are in other countries in the region.

HURD: Dr. Nasrutdinov, I especially appreciated your comment about the government sort of seeing itself as an arbiter of harmony and that part of its responsibility was to prevent discord. It was very striking in the meetings that we had with government officials in Uzbekistan—there was a very similar theme. There didn't seem to be, or at least we didn't hear, a recognition and acknowledgement that in a multi-religious country, where people have strong views about theology, the nature of reality, morality, et cetera, there are going to be disagreements and disputes. This is just a normal thing that comes with a multi-religious country, but that there isn't this sort of inevitability that it will result in violent conflict, and that nonviolent conflict is actually not something to be afraid of; but anyway, appreciated those comments.

PRICE: I wanted to ask about another caution that we heard during our trip and that many of you have alluded to, and that is about the specter of political Islam. I was wondering to what extent you all see this as a present or a prospective threat that the regimes of the region perceive. Are there currently political Islamic movements that are popular and salient within societies? Or is this just a concern about if there were an opening, that there would be an easy coalescing around Islamic themes in terms of political opposition?

LEMON: I guess you need to understand sort of what they mean by political Islam. Do they mean sort of officially registered Islamic parties, or do they mean sort of the influence of Islam within politics? I think they take quite a broad definition of political Islam that sort of any ways in which religion can have an effect on politics, be it sort of formal or informal, is potentially a threat to their security.

Obviously, within the Tajik case, they had a(n) Islamic party till 2015, and gradually conflated the Islamic Renaissance Party with groups like ISIS, said they were a conveyor belt to extremism, merged the two categories together, and eventually blamed the organization for a coup and banned it.

Now, constitutional amendments two years ago, in fact, now prohibit the reestablishment of religious party in Tajikistan. So, at least under the current administration, it's difficult to envisage the reemergence of the faith-based party. I think that would be probably the case across the whole region, maybe with the possible exception of Kyrgyzstan, and that's maybe again viewed through the lens of regime security. And if there were to be an Islamic party, then it would be a potential threat, although you could maybe envisage the setting up of a pseudo-party, as we've seen in other parts of the region where each parliament is filled with parties, but they're all effectively sort of constructed by the regime. So, we may see in the future the construction of an Islamic party, but it may be sort of in non-oppositional terms.

NASRUTDINOV: I think it's important to look at the specific influences and groups that's popular in the country. In Kyrgyzstan, the most popular group is the Tablighi Jamaat, and it's by nature apolitical. It's one of the reasons why it is legal and popular in many other parts of the world, including the United States. Non-engagement with politics is one of the core principles—a kind of a pacifist attitude where you just accept the government. It is the belief

that through your own religious practice that you change the world, not through direct engagement with the politics.

The Turkish groups see engagement in politics also in a slightly kind of long-term perspective. A number of representatives of Fethullah Gülen movement who work in Turkish [inaudible] schools in Kyrgyzstan, stated in their interviews that they see their graduates as the future elite of the country because it is not cheap to study in such schools. Therefore, it's mostly higher/middle-class-income community who can afford them. Thus, these are the ones who will be the future bureaucrats, the future state officials, the future kind of businessmen of the country, and they will have this kind of more pro-Turkey, pan-Turkic vision.

The Salafi groups that we have are also predominantly moderate, classical, and also apolitical Salafis. Yet there are a number of more active political groups, but few of them are banned, but also in numbers they're not as popular as just kind of moderate Salafis. Here they also claim not to be engaged in politics.

The way they see the religion interfering into the politics is through the practices of people who are already politicians. And we have a number of parliament deputies, such as Tersimbai Bekirulou (ph), for example, who regularly made kind of pro-religious public statements in parliament and lobbied certain laws, such as allowing two wives and legalizing second marriages, et cetera.

Finally, we see kind of the engagement with the politics is through just generally wider appreciation of a more religious approach to politics. As I've mentioned, one-third of our respondents stated that they would support a candidate with stronger religious views. Another third suggested that they would support the introduction of Sharia law. One of them might not even understand what Sharia law means, but this whole sentiment is there. More and more young people believe that religion should be a part of politics. But again, this is not a part of any specific group or ideology that is being presented.

COLLINS: I'll just add that, yes, I agree in general that governments do exaggerate the threat of political Islam, which they tend to equate with radicalism, violent extremism, across the region. It's a convenient way of labeling all potential political opposition and maintaining very strict control over the country.

Political Islam of any stripe is extremely weak in all of the countries. Certainly in Tajikistan, where it was most vibrant with the Islamic Renaissance Party, since that party was banned, it's virtually nonexistent, at least openly, there as well.

I would also add that I think, again, the repression has led to the growth of extremism. And it's this conjunction of repression, otherwise extremely difficult political economic conditions, pervaded by corruption, and the exposure, whether it's in Russia, as being a labor migrant, or through the internet to these social-media videos that are spreading, disseminating the message that political Islam of some stripe is the solution to your problems.

So, I think there is a growth in sympathy for—or attraction to—these ideas of radicalism, whether as ISIS or some other variant of that. The numbers certainly are small. I don't think they're in any way a threat to the Central Asian regimes themselves. But small numbers, even several thousands, going to Syria or to Afghanistan or a handful of individuals coming back and waging attacks like we saw in Tajikistan in July, or in Moscow or in Istanbul or New York, are still a problem that I think that we should be concerned about. At the moment, I think they're primarily likely to stay within Afghanistan or Syria and not return home, in large part because the security services at home are so restrictive.

The third point I would add is that I do think that there has been, with this generational change, a growing sympathy for ideas of sort of soft political Islam, or sort of the normal public presence of religion, Islam in particular, in public political life, whether that's through support for having some form of a religious party, as we saw was just banned in Tajikistan. I think that sentiment is broader. It exists in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan as well for adopting some ideas of Sharia, again, with not necessarily knowing what Sharia means, but equating Sharia with justice and with a lack of corruption and cleaning up the corruption in the country.

I did surveys in Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan, as well as the focus groups across the region, and that was sort of a persistent theme. And mine were probably a few years before yours, Dr. Nasrutdinov, but I think at the time we found close to 20, 25 percent, depending on the question, of support for certain ideas of Sharia being implemented within the political system; not necessarily calling for an Islamic state, certainly not calling for a caliphate, but calling for the most part, for a sort of broader, healthier role for religion, Islam in particular, within society.

HURD: Thank you.

Thanks to our panelists for a very rich and educative discussion.

Thanks to our audience members, those of you here in person and those of you watching online; as well as thanks to some of our colleagues behind the scenes who make events like this possible, in particular our hearing and other events coordinator, Jordan; Stacy, our communications director; and Alexa, our intern.

Thanks very much, and have a good evening. (Applause.)

[Whereupon, at 5:01 p.m., the briefing ended.]