



Uzbekistan: The Invention of Nationalism in an Invented Nation

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Since 1991, when Uzbekistan became independent of the Soviet Union, the subway system in Tashkent, the capital, has undergone some changes. The Lenin station has been renamed Independence Square. The Komsomol (Communist Youth Organization) station has been renamed Yashlik, Uzbek for "youth." The Peoples' Friendship station kept its name, but the decorative seals that depicted socialist friendship have been plastered over. Throughout the system, Uzbek-language signs have been stenciled above Russian-language signs. Such changes can be expected in a newly decolonized nation, along with the redesign of the state seal and flag, the establishment of a national airline and tourist office, and other trappings of contemporary nationhood.

Yet, in addition to these routine steps toward nation-building,¹ Uzbekistan and the other former Soviet republics of Central Asia are simultaneously engaged in the more difficult and less common enterprise of nationalism-building. In decolonized countries, this process usually begins *before* independence. According to Ernest Gellner, "It is nationalism which engenders nations, not the other way round"; Eric

1. Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Nation-Building in Uzbekistan," *Central Asian Survey* 15, 1 (1996): 23-32.

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Hobsbawm agrees, “nationalism comes before nations.”² The Czechs of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, to pick an early and paradigmatic example, mobilized for generations before gaining independence.³ Even colonial entities such as Indonesia or Nigeria, whose boundaries were drawn by outsiders, witnessed nationalist movements in one form or another prior to the abolition of foreign suzerainty. This is not to suggest a return to the primordialist view that nations emerge from ancient communal identities—just that national independence is generally viewed by all sides as a concession to nationalist movements.

Uzbekistan, by contrast, had almost no nationalist movement prior to independence in 1991. Unlike most decolonized nations of the twentieth century, Uzbekistan was both created and granted independence at Moscow’s command, not through nationalist mobilization. Indeed, what little evidence exists on the subject suggests that neither of these moves was particularly popular among the people of Uzbekistan. As a result, nationalism in Uzbekistan and the other former Soviet republics of Central Asia presents an interesting contrast to the usual pattern of nationalism in decolonized nations, in two ways. First, nationalism is being developed by the state, not against the state. Rather than emerging among elites in civil society and directed against the colonial regime, nationalism in Uzbekistan is emerging within a state structure created by the colonial regime, and indeed is directed by the very personnel who were appointed by and served in the colonial regime. However, this has not prevented the state from engaging in nationalist themes analogous to those in decolonized nations with a greater history of anti-colonial nationalist mobilization—with the exception of the “independence movement” theme that is so prominent in other new nations.

This absent theme, Central Asia’s second exceptionalism, creates a logical and historical gap between putatively primordial Central Asian “national” identities and the present condition of nationhood. Where most other new nations exalt the anti-colonial movement and the national

2. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1983), p. 55; Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 10.

3. See, for example, the phases sketched in Miroslav Hroch, “From National Movement to the Fully-Formed Nation: The Nation-Building Process in Europe,” in Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny, eds., *Becoming National* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 60-77.

mobilization for liberation, Uzbekistan actively suppresses the memory of the small nationalist movements that existed in the early 1920s and the late 1980s, prior to the creation of Uzbekistan in 1924 and its independence in 1991. In this regard, nationalism in Uzbekistan more resembles the “official nationalism”⁴ of the Soviet era than the anti-colonial nationalisms of other newly independent nations.

This article examines the major themes of the emerging ideology of nationalism in Uzbekistan through official literature—writings of President Islom Karimov, the state encyclopedia, and government billboards—interviews with government officials and academics, and secondary literature on independent Uzbekistan. I identify four primary themes: a territorial nationalism linked with the elevation of “national” heroes; a linguistic nationalism associated with the halting removal of Russian from official communications; a religious nationalism involving the cultivation of a state-controlled Islamic identity; and a cultural nationalism used to present state domination of society as regionally authentic. I then examine the absent theme of independence movements in Uzbekistan, and the implications of this absence for the study of nationalism.

The Invention of Uzbekistan

In 1924, Joseph Stalin, then commissar of nationalities in the new Soviet Union, drew most of the lines in Central Asia that now mark international boundaries. Far from acknowledging existing nationalist sentiments in the region, these lines were intended to thwart them, as part of Stalin’s search for “an antidote to, a reliable bulwark against, the nationalist tendencies which are developing and becoming accentuated” in Central Asia⁵—nationalism here referring to the Pan-Turkic revolts promoting a Central Asia-wide identity known as the “nation” (*millat*) of Turkestan.⁶ Stalin, his collaborators, and successors sought to replace

4. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 83-111.

5. Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question* (New York: International Publishers, 1942), p. 168.

6. Ingeborg Baldauf, “*Kraevedenie*” and *Uzbek National Consciousness* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University, Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, 1992), p. 13; Serge A. Zenkovsky, *Pan-Turkism and Islam in Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 148.

Pan-Turkic nationalism with more easily manipulable nationalisms—Kazakh, Kirgiz, Tajik, Turkmen, and Uzbek, each of which was granted a “national” homeland with such convoluted borders and multi-ethnic populations that it would not form the basis for nationalist mobilization.⁷

Local elites in Uzbekistan mobilized quickly around the new “national” identity,⁸ and expressions of this identity were institutionalized in the political and cultural organizations of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, just as other officially recognized groups became reified through Soviet nationality policies.⁹ Over the next half-century Uzbek ethnic sentiment appears to have fulfilled Stalin’s vision—perhaps even too well, as Uzbek-ness grew into an identity that could be, and was, juxtaposed against other ethnicities in critiques of Soviet inequality. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, foreign observers wondered whether this sentiment would translate into a mass independence movement.¹⁰

Such a mass movement did not materialize. Instead, in 1991, Central Asian independence was imposed from Moscow. The previous year, the Communist Party of Uzbekistan had won 88 percent of the parliamentary

7. The relationship of these Soviet “nationalities” to existing Central Asian identities is hotly debated, with some scholars suggesting the Soviets tried to stay relatively faithful to the findings of ethnographic research, and others suggesting that the Soviets ignored the stated identities of the people of the region. See Ingeborg Baldauf, “Some Thoughts on the Making of the Uzbek Nation,” *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique* 32, 1 (1991): 79-95; Donald S. Carlisle, “Soviet Uzbekistan: State and Nation in Historical Perspective,” in Beatrice F. Manz, ed., *Central Asia in Historical Perspective* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1994), pp. 111-21; Steven Sabol, “The Creation of Soviet Central Asia: The 1924 National Delimitation,” *Central Asian Survey* 14, 2 (1995): 225-41; Yuri Slezkine, “The U.S.S.R. as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism,” *Slavic Review* 53, 2 (1994): 414-52.

8. Baldauf, “Kraevedenie”.

9. Philip G. Roeder, “Soviet Federalism and Ethnic Mobilization,” *World Politics* 43, 2 (1991): 196-232; Slezkine, “The U.S.S.R. as a Communal Apartment”; Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993).

10. Nancy Lubin, *Labour and Nationality in Soviet Central Asia* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 225-42; William Fierman, “Cultural Nationalism in Soviet Uzbekistan,” *Soviet Union* 12, 1 (1985): 1-41.

seats contested in a semi-free election.¹¹ On 17 March 1991, with the Baltic regions already quitting the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan voted 93.7 percent in favor of *remaining* in the dwindling union.¹² In August, Uzbekistan's Communist Party chief, Islom Karimov, supported the attempted coup d'état that marked the Soviet Union's last stand.¹³ When the coup failed, and it became clear that the Soviet framework was untenable, Karimov changed course. Within two weeks, the Uzbekistan parliament, under Karimov's control, reluctantly voted for independence.¹⁴

Karimov quickly became a patriot. Eight years after independence, he continues to rule the country as an unlikely champion of Uzbekistani nationalism. Nationalist ideology is now pursued with the same intensity, and many of the same techniques, once devoted to the promotion of socialist ideology. The invention of tradition, one of the crucial elements of the new ideology, appears to have progressed farther in Uzbekistan than elsewhere in Central Asia, partly because the nation has more historic elements to draw on, and partly because Uzbekistan has managed to avoid the economic and political catastrophes that have engulfed some of its neighbors.

“National” Heroes

“Feeling for one's homeland (*vatan*) is greater than all things,” a large billboard proclaims in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. Billboards with nationalist slogans are common throughout the country, and the word “*vatan*” appears in many of them. But what constitutes the *vatan* of Uzbekistan? One clue comes from the national heroes selected since independence to represent the great tradition of Uzbekistani independence.

11. Anatoly Khazanov, *After the USSR: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Politics in the Commonwealth of Independent States* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), p. 138.

12. *Izvestia*, 27 March 1991, pp. 1, 3; translated in *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 43, 13 (1 May 1991): 23.

13. Jonathan Grant, “Decolonization by Default,” *Central Asian Survey* 13, 1 (1994): 51-58.

14. “Only after [Karimov] said, ‘Well, is there no applause?’ did our People's Deputies shout and clap.” Tahir Qahhar, “Uzbek Literature,” *World Literature Today* 70, 3 (1996): 612; see also Martha Brill Olcott, “Central Asia's Catapult to Independence,” *Foreign Affairs* 71, 3 (1992): 113.

The two rulers lionized as national heroes are Amir Timur (1336-1405, known in the West as Tamerlane) and his grandson, Ulugh Bek (1394-1449). Both appear constantly in official communications, and each has his own subway station in Tashkent (formerly named October Revolution and 50 Years of the Uzbekistan S.S.R., respectively). Each appears in quickly rendered statues around the country, replacing Marx and Lenin. Amir Timur's mausoleum appears on the back of the 10-som bill, and Amir Timur's 660th birthday was celebrated in a Soviet-style gala in the fall of 1996 at which Karimov and foreign dignitaries shared their vision of Amir Timur's contributions to Uzbekistan.¹⁵

Both Amir Timur and Ulugh Bek are featured prominently in the new history textbooks being prepared for use in the country's schools, in place of the Russo-centric and anti-capitalist Soviet texts. Akhmadali Askarov, an archaeologist who chairs the committee rewriting these texts, argues that Amir Timur has been misunderstood, long depicted as a blood-thirsty conqueror when he was in fact a thoughtful and enlightened conqueror. In the revisionist account that will appear in the new textbooks, according to Askarov, Amir Timur had great respect for his Ottoman enemies (the standard account focuses on the Ottoman ruler whom he captured and displayed in a cage); Amir Timur saved Western European and Russian civilizations by defeating the Ottoman and Mongol armies (the standard account holds that this rescue was unintentional); and Amir Timur sponsored some of the greatest architectural achievements of his time (the standard account balances this with his destruction of architectural monuments, attacking even a mosque built by his wife before he was informed that it was built in his honor).¹⁶

The canonization of Ulugh Bek involves less revisionism. Ulugh Bek was a pioneering astronomer who built a giant sextant in order to make detailed observations of the stars' locations. Astronomers from around the world relied on these observations for centuries, long after Ulugh Bek was

15. Laura Adams, "Celebrating Independence: Arts, Institutions, and Identity in Uzbekistan," Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of Sociology, University of California at Berkeley, 1999; Ken Petersen, "Celebrating Amir Timur," *Central Asia Monitor* 5 (1996): 14-15.

16. Akhmadali Askarov, lecture at Tashkent State Economic University, 28 July 1997. For a relatively sympathetic version of the standard account, see Beatrice Forbes Manz, *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

assassinated and his observatory destroyed by religious leaders opposed to modern science.¹⁷

The irony is that these “national” heroes were not Uzbeks. Amir Timur and Ulugh Bek belonged to a separate branch of Mongols. They spoke a different dialect of Turkic and conducted high-culture business in Persian. In fact, they fought *against* the Uzbeks. Timur defeated them; Ulugh Bek did not. Timur’s dynasty struggled for a century and a half to keep the Uzbeks, who were migrating from the north, out of the land that is now called Uzbekistan. The local population was not expelled when the Uzbeks finally conquered the region in the early 16th century, and it is fair to call both groups the ancestors of present-day Uzbeks. But while Amir Timur and Ulugh Bek are “national” heroes, the Uzbeks of the same period are not prominent in Uzbekistan’s nationalist ideology. For example, Muhammad Shaybani (1451-1510), the Uzbek leader who completed the conquest of present-day Uzbekistan, has a relatively minor presence in the new nationalist pantheon. According to Edward Allworth, Shaybani was condemned to obscurity, and Amir Timur underwent “conversion to Uzbekhood,” in the 1940s, as Soviet historians sought to reconstruct a safe history for the recently created socialist republic of Uzbekistan. The problem, from the Soviet perspective, was that the Uzbeks of the 14th and 15th centuries were the scourge of Russia, defeating its kings and sacking its lands. Rather than revisit this unpleasantness, Soviet historians drafted Amir Timur and his successors as stand-in Uzbeks.¹⁸

Post-Soviet nationalism in Uzbekistan is following in the same ideological tradition, even as it tries to rid itself of Russo-centric historiography. Government ideologues state that the people of Uzbekistan are not “ready” for the Shaybanids, who are scheduled to be rehabilitated in several years.¹⁹ It is unclear whether Uzbeks actually believe the half-century of Soviet flattery, that Amir Timur was ethnically one of them. The official *Encyclopedia of the Republic of Uzbekistan*

17. Aydın Sayılı, *Ulug Bey ve Semerkanddeki İlim Faaliyeti Hakkında Gıyasüddin-i Kâşî'nin Mektubu* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1960).

18. Edward A. Allworth, *The Modern Uzbeks* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1990), pp. 238-45.

19. Laura Adams, personal communication, 1 July 1998.

does not attribute an Uzbek identity to Amir Timur and his descendants.²⁰ One scholar suggests, rather, that Amir Timur's current status stems from his ability to govern a multi-ethnic empire without cultural impositions.²¹ A more mundane explanation might be that Amir Timur and Ulugh Bek are convenient focal points for the tourism industry that Uzbekistan is counting on to attract hard currency and international attention. Both rulers had their capital and built their monuments at Samarkand, which Stalin gave to the Uzbek S.S.R. Perhaps, then, for purposes of public relations, *vatan* refers to a place, not a people. The new ideology might not be Uzbek nationalism so much as Uzbekistani nationalism—territorial rather than ethnic nationalism, a tension that Rogers Brubaker has identified throughout the former Soviet Union.²²

Fortunately for the tourism industry, Uzbekistan is rich in historic sites. Stalin's 1924 borders gave Uzbekistan the lion's share of Central Asian monuments, including the capitals of the last three kingdoms of Russian Central Asia: Khiva, Bukhara, and Kokand. To commandeer these sites as part of a nationalist legacy, however, the Uzbekistan government must overlook their resolutely non-national nature. The last khans of Kokand, for example, were ethnically Uzbek but had no loyalty to the nation that the Russians later would call "Uzbekistan." Their loyalty was more local in nature, and they frequently fought with other Uzbek khanates. Even more problematic is Bukhara, which celebrated a "2500th anniversary" along with Khiva in 1997—Samarkand had its 2500th jubilee in the 1960s or it surely would have been included as well. Historically, Bukhara has been a center of Iranian culture. Early in the twentieth century, many of the first books and newspapers to be published in Bukhara were in Tajik, a Persian-based language unlike the Turkic languages that predominate in Central Asia.²³ Even in the late 1990s, unlike elsewhere in Uzbekistan, I found that many self-identifying ethnic

20. *Uzbekiston Respublikasi Entsiklopediia* (Tashkent: Qomuslar Bosh Tahririyati, 1997).

21. Kenneth Weisbrode, "Uzbekistan in the Shadow of Tamerlane," *World Policy Journal* 14, 2 (1997): 57.

22. Rogers Brubaker, "Nationhood and the National Question in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Eurasia," *Theory and Society* 23, 1 (1994): 47-78.

23. William L. Hanaway, Jr., "Farsi, the Vatan, and the Millat in Bukhara," in Edward Allworth, ed., *The Nationality Question in Soviet Central Asia* (New York: Praeger, 1973), pp. 143-50.

Uzbeks in Bukhara speak some Tajik.²⁴ The new state of Tajikistan has even made hopeless irredentist claims on the city. Only a territorial nationalism allows Uzbekistan to claim Bukhara's jubilee as part of its national heritage. At the same time, ethnic nationalism allows the government to claim, in the new *Encyclopedia*, that only 4.0 percent of Bukhara province is Tajik,²⁵ less than the national proportion of 4.7 percent (though greater than the 1989 Soviet census figure of 3.1 percent).²⁶

Linguistic Nationalism

"Know, all humankind: the greatest curse is enmity; the greatest blessing, amity." This lofty sentiment comes from the poetry of Mir Alisher Navoi (1441-1501), and is inscribed in the cupola covering a large statue of him in central Tashkent. Navoi's romantic poetry is of such great renown that newly married couples commonly lay flowers at the feet of this statue—a Soviet-invented tradition that has survived into the post-Soviet era.

Navoi has been adopted as the third great national hero of Uzbekistan, of the same stature as Amir Timur and Ulugh Bek. Like them, Navoi is represented in statues throughout the country. He too has a Tashkent subway station named after him, although his was designated in the Soviet era. Lines from Navoi's poetry frequently are inscribed on billboards, and the Tashkent statue of Navoi appears on the back of the 5-som note. Yet, Navoi's inclusion in the nationalist pantheon runs counter to the territorial nationalism symbolized by Amir Timur and Ulugh Bek. Navoi was born and died in Herat, in present-day Afghanistan, and spent only a handful of years in the land that is now Uzbekistan. Navoi's position in the pantheon comes rather from his standing as the greatest poet in the Uzbek language.

As with Amir Timur and Ulugh Bek, however, this identification is a retronym. Navoi did not consider himself an Uzbek, a term reserved

24. See also Ludmila Chvyr, "Central Asia's Tajiks: Self-Identification and Ethnic Identity," in Vitaly Naumkin, ed., *State, Religion, and Society in Central Asia* (Reading, England: Ithaca Press, 1993), p. 248; Richard Foltz, "The Tajiks of Uzbekistan," *Central Asian Survey* 15, 2 (1996): 213.

25. *Entsiklopediia*, p. 621.

26. 1989 U.S.S.R. *Population Census*, English-language CD-ROM edition (Minneapolis: East View Publications, 1996).

in his day for certain nomadic tribes. He did not like the Uzbeks, labeling them “bloodthirsty” in one of his writings. Navoi’s wonderful and innovative poetry was written in Chagatay Turki, a related but distinct language. According to Allworth, Navoi was first claimed for the Uzbek literary heritage in the 1920s by a leading Uzbek scholar, Abdurrauf Fitrat, whose book *Specimens of Uzbek Literature* sought to link Uzbek and Turki cultural accomplishments to create a general Central Asian identity. For this and other displays of Central Asian nationalism, the Soviets deemed Fitrat ideologically unreliable and executed him. Then in the 1940s the Soviets did an about-face, resurrecting Fitrat’s hypothesis (though not his reputation) with a volume on Navoi entitled *Father of Uzbek Literature*.²⁷

Post-Soviet nationalism in Uzbekistan has continued in this path. Ironically, given Navoi’s distaste for the Uzbeks of his day, his legacy is being corralled for the second strain of nationalism-building: the re-valuation of the Uzbek language. Since late 1989, just before independence, government communications began to be switched from Russian to Uzbek, as did street signs and other official notices. The by-laws of the Uzbekistan Advocates Association, the country’s first independent bar association, founded in summer 1997, were written in Uzbek.

To emphasize the break with the Russian language, the government of Uzbekistan is abandoning the Cyrillic alphabet for the Latin. Posters are on sale teaching Latin letters through common words or country names, such as G for Gollandiya, Russian pronunciation for Holland. As of mid-1997, this shift was limited primarily to billboards and store-front signs. Some street signs have been converted, though there aren’t many street signs in Uzbekistan. Almost all newspapers and books still use Cyrillic.

Not everybody in Uzbekistan, however, speaks Uzbek. According to one survey, fewer than 5 percent of Russians in Uzbekistan—who still comprise almost 10 percent of the population—are fluent in Uzbek.²⁸ Other non-Turkic minority nationalities—Koreans, Armenians, and so

27. Allworth, *The Modern Uzbeks*, pp. 37, 226-31.

28. Valery Tishkov, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and after the Soviet Union: The Mind Aflame* (Oslo: International Peace Research Institute; Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development; London: SAGE Publications, 1997), p. 126.

on—are similarly unlikely to have learned Uzbek. Many Turkic peoples, whose languages are generally mutually intelligible, also appear to use Russian as the medium of inter-ethnic communication. Another affected group is the unknown number of well-educated Uzbeks who are more comfortable speaking Russian than their own ancestral language. Advanced education was conducted, until very recently, largely in Russian; some families raised their children in Russian because, under the Soviet Union, fluent Russian was seen as a prerequisite for upward mobility. Even President Karimov and some members of his cabinet reportedly took Uzbek language lessons to brush up on their native tongue.²⁹

According to the ideology of linguistic nationalism, non-Uzbek-speaking Uzbeks may be viewed as traitors. I witnessed an ugly scene, similar to ones that other scholars have reported, in which an Uzbek academic, speaking Uzbek for nationalist purposes (though most of his own writings are in Russian), berated his Uzbek translator for her poor knowledge of the Uzbek language. Even if they do not suffer persecution, non-Uzbek speakers in Uzbekistan find themselves on the outside of the emerging sense of nationhood. Russian lawyers, for example, will need to hire translators to participate in the new bar association; when the legal system is fully converted to Uzbek, they will be unable to practice law at all. Yet it appears that few Russian-speakers in Uzbekistan are learning Uzbek. There is little infrastructure to support Uzbek education for adults, and many non-Uzbek speakers do not *want* to learn Uzbek. “Are you joking?” a college-educated Russian in Tashkent responded when I asked if he planned to learn Uzbek. “I’d rather improve my English.” I heard similar comments from several Russian-speaking Uzbeks as well.³⁰

This stubbornness is apparently widespread enough to have put a crimp in the campaign for linguistic nationalism.³¹ The transition from Russian to Uzbek in government communications was supposed to have

29. S. Frederick Starr, “Making Eurasia Stable,” *Foreign Affairs* 75, 1 (1996): 88.

30. A similar trend has been documented in neighboring Kazakhstan. David D. Laitin, “Language and Nationalism in the Post-Soviet Republics,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 12, 1 (1996): 4-24.

31. William Fierman, “Independence and the Declining Priority of Language Law Implementation in Uzbekistan,” in Yaacov Ro’i, ed., *Muslim Eurasia: Conflicting Legacies* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), pp. 205-30.

been completed in the 1990s; now it has been postponed until the next decade, and some people in Uzbekistan feel it will not be implemented fully for at least a generation, precisely for the reason that linguistic nationalism might waste the contributions of a good portion of the country's educated workforce, while simultaneously irritating the still-influential Russian state, which takes an active interest in the fate of Russians in the "near abroad." In his latest book, President Karimov toes a careful line, promoting Uzbek ethnic identity while denouncing unspecified instances of ethnic chauvinism: "Fortunately, the maturity, wisdom, humanism, and open-heartedness of the Uzbek people ... were a great barrier to the goals of these groups on the path of extremism."³²

Politically Neutered Islam

"To love one's homeland (*vatan*) is a matter of faith," reads another slogan repeated on billboards throughout Uzbekistan. The saying comes from a *hadith*, a saying of the Prophet Muhammad, although most Islamic scholars consider it fraudulent.³³ While it may be surprising that the former Communists who still run Uzbekistan should promote a saying of the Prophet, it is telling that they should pick a little-regarded *hadith* that serves the purposes of ideology-building. A large part of the new nationalism concerns Islam—but a version of Islam that is politically neutered.

The centerpiece of this approach is the term "*ma`naviyat*," spirituality. The year after supporting the attempted Communist coup, Karimov waxed lyrical about the need for spirituality: "Human beings need spirituality like they need to breathe air and drink water. Like a traveller in the desert who quenches his thirst at a life-giving spring, humanity is also in constant, sometimes painful and arduous, search of a spiritual source."³⁴ Karimov has continued to speak on the topic, and scholars report an increasing emphasis on the concept of *ma`naviyat* since the middle of 1996. Karimov's latest book includes a chapter explicitly

32. Islom Karimov, *Uzbekiston XXI Asr Bosafasida* (Tashkent: "Ozbekiston," 1997), p. 79.

33. I thank Professor Alan Godlas for looking up this *hadith* in Isma`il ibn Muhammad al-`Ajuni al-Jarrihi, *Kashf al-Khafa'* (Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath al-`Arabi, 1968), vol. 1, pp. 413-14.

34. Islom Karimov, *Uzbekistan: The Road of Independence and Progress* (Tashkent: "Ozbekiston," 1992), p. 62.

linking *ma`naviyat* to the new nationalism: "We consider the restoration of our spiritual values to be a natural process consisting of the growing understanding of national identity and a return to the people's spiritual headwaters, to their roots."³⁵ High-school students now take courses on *ma`naviyat*.

Yet this concept of *ma`naviyat* has little to do with the Islamic concept of *ma`naviyat* as it has developed through centuries of theological debate. In the Islamic tradition, *ma`naviyat* refers to the inner dimension or essence of humanity, and is specifically linked to faith, the acceptance of the word of God. In contemporary Uzbekistan, by contrast, *ma`naviyat* refers more to external and visible aspects of human behavior, and is linked not with faith but with ethics. It is used as the antonym for unprincipled self-interest, much in the same way that Soviet ideology contrasted the interests of the proletariat with capitalist individualism. Indeed, it seems to serve the same ideological purpose, namely exhorting and justifying individual sacrifice for the greater good.³⁶

Karimov's writings on spirituality rarely mention Islam, and then only in the context of historical heritage. When he cites Islamic precedents, seeking to link his version of *ma`naviyat* with some of the greatest scholars in Islamic history, the list includes only figures who are safely dead by a half-millennium or more, ignoring hundreds of years of living tradition.³⁷ Current usage of *ma`naviyat* seeks to draw legitimacy from an alleged Islamic precedent while portraying Islam as an archaic museum-piece. What the regime apparently fears is Islam being viewed as a viable alternative ideology. Activist Muslims in Uzbekistan, who sought a greater role for Islam both socially and politically, have been subject to severe repression. The leader of Uzbekistan's outlawed Islamic Renaissance Party, Abdullah Utaev, disappeared in 1992. The leading religious official in the city of Andijan, Abduvali Kori Mirzaev, was arrested in 1995 and has not been heard from since. Other religious activists are in jail, in exile, or operating under close scrutiny. Bearded

35. Karimov, *Uzbekiston XXI Asr Bosqasida*, p. 140.

36. Alan Godlas, "*Ma`naviyat* and *Ma`rifat* in Islamic Tradition and in Contemporary Uzbekistan," paper in preparation. Officials in neighboring Kazakhstan and Kirgizstan are reportedly promoting similar ideologies, according to Edward Allworth, "The Hunger for Modern Leadership," in Edward Allworth, ed., *Central Asia*, 3rd ed. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 596.

37. Karimov, *Uzbekiston XXI Asr Bosqasida*, p. 140.

men are harassed and arrested on suspicion of Islamist sympathies.³⁸ Government sensitivity on religious topics is so great that hundreds of Uzbekistani students were recently recalled from Turkey because of alleged religious influence.

The government cites security concerns for banning Islamic activism, pointing to the terrible civil war in neighboring Tajikistan as an object lesson. Karimov uses the English words “fundamentalism” and “extremism” in his recent Uzbek-language book to describe Islamic activism. “The Americans and our other Western friends represent these [Islamic] currents as democratic,” says Professor Hamidullah Karamatov, chair of the President’s Council on Religion. “But the basis of the movement was not democratic. It was a fight for power and authority, both governmental and civil.”³⁹

The government has taken up this fight not just by promoting a non-Islamic version of *ma`naviyat*, but also by supporting non-political Islamic activities. Regulations limiting pilgrimage to Mecca have been eased.⁴⁰ Selected Islamic sayings, such as the one about loving one’s homeland, have been plastered on billboards. Religiously significant artifacts and sites are mobilized for touristic purposes and national pride. The Islamic crescent and star appear on the new state emblem in place of the Soviet five-pointed star. Religious speakers are permitted on state-run television, though their comments presumably are vetted meticulously.

Perhaps the state’s clearest step into the religious arena has been the restoration of the Naqshband mosque complex outside Bukhara. Bahauddin an-Naqshband (1318-1389), a native of that region, founded one of the largest and most influential Sufi orders, now represented throughout the Islamic world. By supporting the renovation and presiding at the re-opening ceremony, Karimov clearly wished to signal the

38. Salimjon Aioubov, “The Significance of Wearing a Beard in Central Asia,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Newline* 2, 109, Part I, 9 June 1998; *New York Times*, 28 January 1998, p. A4; *Washington Post*, 27 September 1998, p. A31; Human Rights Watch, “Republic of Uzbekistan: Crackdown in The Farghona Valley: Arbitrary Arrests and Religious Discrimination,” May 1998, <http://www.hrw.org/hrw/reports98/uzbekistan>.

39. Hamidullah Karamatov, lecture at Tashkent State Economic University, 30 July 1997.

40. At the same time, Saudi funding for Islamic groups in Uzbekistan has been banned, according to Karamatov.

legitimacy of this particular set of Islamic beliefs and practices as against the alternative Islamic heritage asserted by the opposition. The fight for power that Karamatov mentioned is also a struggle over tradition.

Building a Great State

“Uzbekistan’s future is a great state.” This is the second most common billboard in Uzbekistan, after Coca-Cola advertisements (apparently the president’s family owns the national Coca-Cola franchise). The “great state” slogan appears next to highways, on school buildings, even in Karakalpak translation on official sites in the semi-autonomous Karakalpak region of the country. The most innocent interpretation of this slogan is a desire for improvement in the general welfare of the nation.

An unintended reading of the slogan, however, might take the “great state” to refer to expansionist impulses, a “Greater Uzbekistan” similar to “Greater Serbia” or “Greater Israel.”⁴¹ The official *Encyclopedia* notes that more than 1 million Uzbeks live in Tajikistan, half a million in Kyrgyzstan, and a third of a million each in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.⁴² Uzbekistan has displayed few indications of expansionist policies, but there are officially sponsored instances of cultural attachment “To Turkestan,” the entire Central Asian region, as one song’s refrain has it on state-run Uzbek-language television. The government billboard slogan, “Turkestan is our common homeland,” seems intended to refer to cultural boundaries rather than political ones.

Another sinister reading of the “great state” slogan might take it to refer to the power of the state apparatus. Although this too may not be the intended meaning, it seems an accurate prediction. The state not only remains the dominant player in all aspects of life of Uzbekistan, but a large factor in the emerging nationalist ideology. President Karimov’s “five principles,” which outline the country’s post-Communist ideology, lean heavily on state power, justifying this tendency on the basis of “the concrete situation, mentality, traditions and the way of life of the Uzbek

41. Martha Brill Olcott, “Uzbekistan: Central Asia’s Instinctive Imperialist,” in Martha Brill Olcott, *Central Asia’s New States* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1996), pp. 113-37.

42. *Entsiklopediia*, p. 51.

people.”⁴³ Of special interest are the role of the state in the emerging capitalist economy and the post-Communist political system.

In the economic sphere, Karimov has been an outspoken opponent of “shock therapy” transitions from socialism to capitalism. His go-slow approach, outlined in a 1993 booklet, was couched in terms of tradition:

Our choice of the road of transition to market economy to a decisive extent stems from a comprehensive consideration of national and historical factors, i.e., traditional way of life of the people, their outlook, thinking, customs and rituals. The people of Uzbekistan are historically characterized by their communal form of self-organization, which is rooted in the traditional lifestyle of the people.⁴⁴

Note the use of the non-ethnic phrase, “the people of Uzbekistan,” as opposed to “the Uzbek people.” Tradition, Karimov argued, justified the state’s active role in the economy. Indeed, for this and other reasons, Karimov suggested that agriculture, Uzbekistan’s leading economic sector, never should be privatized. “Private land use has been historically alien to the Muslim population of Central Asia,” he wrote. “To preserve land as a state property and to refrain [from] its privatization seems to be the only expedient solution.”⁴⁵

In the political sphere, too, the slowness of reforms has been justified in terms of tradition. In an August 1996 speech marking the fifth anniversary of independence, Karimov admitted that political reforms have been “lagging behind the scope and efficiency of reforms” in other sectors. Part of the problem, he noted, was that political institutions “should correspond to the national specific features and mentality of the people.”⁴⁶ On other occasions Karimov has been more explicit, as in his 1993 comment: “It is not necessary for us to adopt Western democracy

43. Islom Karimov, *Address by H.E. Mr. Islom Karimov, President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, at the 48th Session of the United Nations General Assembly* (Tashkent: “Ozbekiston,” 1993), p. 16.

44. Islom Karimov, *Building the Future: Uzbekistan—Its Own Model for Transition to a Market Economy* (Tashkent: “Ozbekiston,” 1993), p. 27.

45. Karimov, *Building the Future*, p. 95.

46. Islom Karimov, *Hozirgi Bosqichda Demokratik Islohotlarni Chukurlashtirishning Muhim Vazifalari* (Tashkent: “Ozbekiston,” 1996), p. 59.

spiritually alien to us. We shall have our own, national democracy.”⁴⁷ “[O]ur traditions are different,” another government official told a journalist in 1993. “Uzbek people are very kind, but it is dangerous to give [them] things like democracy.”⁴⁸ “Because Uzbekistan is an Eastern country, it has a different democracy and cannot accept all things” from the West, political scientist Sadulla Otamuratov explained in a lecture in 1997. “Our government is developing its own way that is appropriate for our country.”⁴⁹ Askarov, the archaeologist in charge of re-writing Uzbekistan’s history books, stated the case even more strongly. The historical model for Eastern democracy, he argued, is the council of elders, a political system based not on competition but on respect, such as the respect of the son for the father and the student for the professor. People are not allowed to go out and say anything they please, because that would lead to civil war.⁵⁰ The civil war in neighboring Tajikistan is an oft-used object-lesson in this regard, though it is unlikely that Tajikistan’s troubles resulted from an excess of democracy.

Whether Uzbekistan’s citizens agree with their government’s cultural justifications for authoritarianism is unclear. Independent surveys in 1993 and 1994 found just under half of the respondents calling a free press and political competition important; 56 percent was willing to trade political freedoms for economic benefits. At the same time, more than 60 percent of respondents felt it was important that people should be able to “freely express their political opinions” and “say whatever they want, even if what they say increases tensions in society”—opinions that do not express Uzbekistan’s allegedly “Eastern” cultural standards.⁵¹

Uzbekistan’s history, it is true, provides little precedent for democratic governance. From emperors and khans to tsars and

47. Khazanov, *After the USSR*, p. 143.

48. Dilip Hiro, *Between Marx and Muhammad: The Changing Face of Central Asia* (London: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 187.

49. Sadulla Otamuratov, lecture at Tashkent State Economic University, 2 August 1997.

50. Askarov lecture, 28 July 1997.

51. Nancy Lubin, *Central Asians Take Stock* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 1995), pp. 4-5; United States Information Agency (USIA), “In Uzbekistan, Checkered Views of Democracy” (Washington, D.C.: USIA Office of Research and Media Reaction, Opinion Analysis M-89-95, 15 June 1995), pp. 4-7.

politburos, the region has lived under an almost unbroken succession of autocrats. The few attempts at reform have been short-lived. In the early twentieth century, when many parts of the world began to experiment with limits on state power, small groups of young activists managed to win constitutional reforms in semi-autonomous Bukhara and Khiva. Within two months, however, the reforms were swamped by reactionary forces and the activists were arrested or exiled. The current ideology of nationalism downplays the reformers and bestows the label "Eastern democracy" on the reactionaries.

At the same time, Karimov supporters and ideology-builders wish to emphasize the compatibility of Uzbekistan's political institutions with international standards. They are quick to point to the democratic nature of Uzbekistan's parliament, where four parties are represented. However, I have not been able to find an Uzbek, even the political scientist Sadulla Otamuratov, who can name all four parties without assistance. Only a third of survey respondents in 1994 could name *any* party in the country.⁵² Karimov's August 29, 1996, speech on democratic reforms made special mention of human rights and urged cooperation with international human-rights organizations.⁵³ But the next day, the representative of Human Rights Watch in Tashkent, a British citizen, was jailed. According to the U.S. State Department's annual report on human rights, "two senior officials intimidated and verbally abused him, and accused him without basis of illegally possessing narcotics and firearms. He was forced to spend the night in a cold jail cell in his underwear"; the government later apologized for the incident.⁵⁴ Some foreign observers interviewed in Tashkent say that the country slowly is becoming more democratic, and that it is starting to live up to the human-rights discourse that it quickly adopted after independence. One example is the founding of the first independent bar association in August 1997, which was heralded at its first congress as a step toward the emergence of civil society and the

52. William Fierman, "Political Development in Uzbekistan: Democratization?" in Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott, eds., *Conflict, Cleavage, and Change in Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 398.

53. Karimov, *Hozirgi Bosqichda*, pp. 60-61.

54. United States Department of State, *Uzbekistan Report on Human Rights Practices for 1996* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 30 January 1997).

professionalization of the legal system. Another example is the regular flow of human-rights complainants to the offices of the United Nations Development Program in Tashkent; they come now with little fear of retribution. Yet, to read democracy and human rights back into the national history of Uzbekistan would take some doing.

Monopolizing Nationalism

“History should be treated as the living memory of a nation, since that is what it truly is. Since there can be no talk about humanity without memory, similarly there can be no future for a nation deprived of its national history.”⁵⁵ These comments imply both that a “national” history exists, and that each nation has a single history. The first implication projects a contemporary national identity backward through time, foisting “Uzbekistani-ness” on such enemies of Uzbeks as Amur Timur and Ulugh Bek, now national heroes, and on non-national entities such as the khanates of Khiva and Bukhara. The second implication attempts to undermine alternative national histories, such as the Islamic identity proposed by the outlawed Islamic opposition. Both implications are part of the state project to create a nationalist ideology post hoc, after independence.

Given the unusually statist origin of nationalism in Uzbekistan, it is striking that the themes of Uzbekistani nationalism are basically the same themes found in other decolonized nations: the jumble of territorial, ethno-linguistic, religious and political heritages manipulated or reconstructed for present purposes. This isomorphism with global nationalist themes confirms the prediction made by John Meyer and his colleagues about the changes that would occur in a hypothetical island society if it were “discovered” by the modern world: it would start counting its members, classifying them according to age, gender, wealth, rights, etc.; it would face pressure to promulgate a constitution, economic plans; it would have to build an airport, power plants, paved roads.⁵⁶ Uzbekistan has had almost a century of experience with constitutions, economic plans, power plants, and even with “national” institutions. But with regard to nationalism, Uzbekistan approximates Meyer’s hypothetical island.

55. Karimov, *Uzbekistan: The Road of Independence and Progress*, p. 62.

56. John W. Meyer, John Boli, George M. Thomas, and Francisco O. Ramirez, “World Society and the Nation-State,” *American Journal of Sociology* 103, 1 (1997): 144-81.

Casting about for models in the early 1990s, the Karimov regime sought to conform to contemporary standards of nationhood—and to solidify his rule—by developing a nationalist ideology, using the building blocks available from the Soviet past and from the experiences of other decolonized nations.⁵⁷

Where Uzbekistan veers from global isomorphism, however, is in the missing theme of the independence movement. While virtually all other decolonized countries glorify the nationalist mobilization that led to independence, Uzbekistan has little material to work with. As discussed above, the creation of Uzbekistan in 1924 and its independence in 1991 were due primarily to external factors. Yet small nationalist movements did exist in the years prior to these landmark events. One of the most remarkable aspects of the official nationalism currently being developed in Uzbekistan is the suppression of these precursor movements. For example, Abdurrauf Fitrat (1886-1938), the scholar and politician who agitated for religious and political reform in the 1910s and 1920s, and who was purged by the Communists in the 1930s, is not a national hero in post-Communist Uzbekistan. I saw no Fitrat statues or stamps and little official recognition of his contributions; the only street named after him in Tashkent is a one-block alley. Similarly for his entire generation, known as the *Jadids* (the moderns), whose pioneering activism in the early part of the twentieth century earned them persecution by the old guard (the khanates and tsarists) and then purges by the new (the Soviets). Although intellectuals are beginning to study the *Jadids* and are free to write about them in academic journals—according to one report, the *Jadids* are adequately represented in new high-school textbooks⁵⁸—the official nationalism pays them scant attention. For example, the *Jadids* are scarcely mentioned in the 1997 official *Encyclopedia*, less than a page of text under the heading of educational reform and three pages on the emergence of modern Uzbek literature.⁵⁹ The encyclopedia does not mention the *Jadids*' political activism, their achievements and setbacks, reciting instead a sketchy Russo-centric account of the last decades of the

57. See historical parallels of this borrowing of nationalist ideology in Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

58. Ken Petersen, "History in the Remaking: Jadidist Thought in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan," *Central Asia Monitor* 4 (1996): 23-30.

59. *Entsiklopediia*, pp. 376-77, 525-27.

khanates and a fawning account of the Soviet conquest of the region.⁶⁰

More recent nationalist precursors are buried even more cruelly. In the late 1980s, a handful of intellectuals formed an illegal group, *Birlik* (unity), to protest the Soviet treatment of Uzbekistan. Among their first mobilizing issues was the unexplained death of Uzbek recruits in the Soviet military, but the movement's deeper goal was autonomy, and later independence, for Uzbekistan.⁶¹ *Birlik* activists were not the only ones in the *glasnost* era to voice Uzbekistani grievances, and it is unclear what impact these protests had on Soviet policies. Even Karimov and other Communist Party officials sought to improve the region's standing vis-à-vis Moscow, although they opposed the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Observers also noted increasing indications of Uzbek cultural pride beginning in the 1970s.⁶²

Birlik and other protestors provided an inspiring pre-history for Uzbekistani nationalism—one that has been thoroughly ignored by the official nationalist line on the end of the Soviet era, which retroactively places the Uzbekistan S.S.R. Communist leadership in perfect harmony with the allegedly pro-independence sentiments of the people of Uzbekistan.⁶³ The problem is an obvious one: Soviet-era officials such as Karimov remain in power, inventing a nationalist tradition, while the Soviet-era opposition such as *Birlik* remains in opposition. After independence, *Birlik* was suppressed, its leaders arrested, beaten, refused medical treatment, and exiled.⁶⁴ It also suffered the ignominy of having its name stolen for an official “*Birlik*” movement, an in-house version stripped of its past and its purpose.

What clearer allegory could there be for the invention of tradition in independent Uzbekistan: the appropriation of the past, literally in this case, for contemporary political ends. Each of the themes I have tried to document in Uzbekistan's official nationalism operates on a similar basis:

60. Ibid., pp. 156-68.

61. See, for example, coverage of a *Birlik* congress in *The Independent*, 28 May 1990, p. 6.

62. James Critchlow, *Nationalism in Uzbekistan* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1991); Fierman, “Cultural Nationalism.”

63. *Entsiklopediia*, pp. 184-87.

64. Fierman, “Political Development,” p. 392; Ahmed Rashid, *The Resurgence of Central Asia* (Karachi: Oxford University Press; and London: Zed Books, 1994), p. 79.

Amir Timur and Ulugh Beg are appropriated as “national” heroes, while the actual Uzbeks they fought against are downplayed; Alisher Navoi is mobilized in the service of Uzbek linguistic nationalism, despite Navoi’s distaste for Uzbeks; ancient precedent is cited in support of state control over Islam, while contemporary Islamic movements are suppressed; and reactionary political regimes from the past are labeled “Eastern democracies” in order to justify authoritarian state power.

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