

American Foreign Policy Council



EURASIA

COUNTRIES

Turkey
Azerbaijan
Kazakhstan
Turkmenistan
Uzbekistan
Kyrgyzstan
Tajikistan
Russia

Regional Summary

Situated at the intersection of Europe and Asia, the countries of Eurasia have long grappled with the competing pulls of secularism and Islamism. Today, regional states find themselves under new pressure from resurgent grassroots Islamist sentiment, which has exploited the failings of the area's largely-authoritarian governments—and flourished in spite of heavy-handed official responses.

In the west, Turkey is in the throes of significant geo-political transition. Since its founding as a largely-secular republic by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1919, historically-religious Turkey often has struggled to reconcile the facets of its national persona. With the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2003, however, the country has hewed a more overtly religious—and Islamist—direction. Nevertheless, Turkish Islam remains significantly more moderate and less insular than the variants of the religion practiced elsewhere in the Muslim world (such as Saudi Arabia). This, in turn, has made the country a sporadic target of jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda, notwithstanding the AKP's active support of Islamist ideas and practices.

Comparatively, however, the authoritarian regimes that populate the so-called “post-Soviet space” of the Caucasus and Central Asia face a far greater challenge from Islamism. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was fol-

lowed by the emergence of six new majority-Muslim countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus. It also saw the rise of newfound religiosity among the previously-captive Muslim populations of the Soviet Union. Ever since, regional regimes have struggled to contain, and to control, the Islamist currents present in their respective societies, often resorting to violence in order to do so.

The geo-strategic location of Azerbaijan, located on the shores of the Caspian Sea and flanked by Iran and Turkey, has made it an attractive target for Islamist elements. In particular Iran, which itself has a sizeable Azeri minority, has been implicated in fomenting instability there, either directly or operating through proxies such as Hezbollah. Also notable is Azerbaijan's proximity to Russia's restive North Caucasus republics, which made it a hub for extremists operating in Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia. Gulf states likewise have exerted their influence over Islam and political discourse and Azerbaijan, with Saudi Arabia in particular operating through charities as well as civic and religious institutions to promote its puritanical Wahhabi creed. These drivers have led to an increasing radicalization of religion in Azerbaijan in recent years, even as the government of President Ilham Aliyev has succeeded in charting some notable counterterrorism successes.

Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan suffer from similar problems posed by spreading Islamist sentiment. In particular, Hizb-ut Tahrir and other grassroots Islamist organizations have come to pose a considerable ideological challenge to regional regimes (most directly in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan). Violent jihadism, too, is in evidence, with al-Qaeda and the affiliated Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) now active in the region. Both (and especially Uzbekistan) have responded to these trends in heavy-handed fashion, which has contributed to alienation among international partners and served to aggravate the local grievances that feed instability. Yet both have also demonstrated surprising flexibility and innovation in devising "soft power" strategies for countering the appeal of Islamist ideas.

Tajikistan, which waged a protracted civil war against Islamists during the 1990s, continues to struggle with religious extremism. A recent uptick in Islamist violence has shed light upon the Islamic re-awakening now taking place in the country—and on its potentially violent manifestations. Both Hizb-ut Tahrir and the al-Qaeda-affiliated IMU are active in Tajikistan, and their message and militancy have been amplified by growing religious sentiment and expression within Tajik society. Observers have cautioned that these ingredients could make Tajikistan a "hotbed" of religious militancy that could spread throughout the region.

Islamism in Kazakhstan, by contrast, is far less pervasive, in both its violent and nonviolent forms. Islamist ideas and practices have found purchase in the country via three distinct routes: as an import from neighboring China, from the Ferghana Valley, a regional extremist hotbed, and as a result of the teachings of Hizb-ut Tahrir. Terrorist activities, however, are few and far between, and as a result the Kazakh government has tended to toe a softer line toward Islamist movements at large, although the country boasts an elaborate counterterrorism infrastructure.

Comparatively, Turkmenistan has been untouched by the Islamic extremism endemic to its neighbors, in large part because of the strange, authoritarian cult of personality of president Saparmurat Niyazov, or “Turkmenbashi,” which prevailed from the republic’s independence in 1991 until his death in 2006. The practice of “folk” Islam, a Sufi-related variant of the religion, is widespread in Turkmenistan, and—coupled with state efforts to coopt religious discourse, both during the Soviet era and under Niyazov—has helped dilute the appeal and reach of Islamism.

It is Russia, however, that can be said to have been hardest hit by Islamist militancy. After two decades, and despite considerable efforts, the Kremlin has failed to neutralize the violent Islamism that permeates its restive South Caucasus republics. Rather, fueled by assistance from foreign mujahideen and by the Russian government’s own heavy-handed tactics, Islamist militancy in the republics of Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia remains both resilient and dangerous. This radicalism, moreover, has increasingly spread eastward into the Russian heartland, where the country’s traditional, moderate strain of Tatar Islam now increasingly finds itself in competition with extreme Salafi interpretations of the religion. Innovative grassroots responses to this trend on the part of Russian authorities, however, are not yet in evidence.