

American Foreign Policy Council

TURKMENISTAN

QUICK FACTS

Population: 5,291,317 (July 2016 est.)

Area: 488,100 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Turkmen 85%, Uzbek 5%, Russian 4%, other 6%

Religions: Muslim 89%, Eastern Orthodox 9%, unknown 2%

Government Type: presidential republic; highly authoritarian

GDP (official exchange rate): \$36.57 billion (2015 est.)

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (January 2017)

OVERVIEW

Over a period of centuries, Islam in Turkmenistan has become an unusual blend of Sufi mysticism, orthodox (Sunni) Islam, and shamanistic Zoroastrian practices. The cult of ancestors is still observed, and reverence for members of the four holy tribes (the owl) is still strong. Popular or “folk” Islam is centered around practices and beliefs related to Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam that originated in Central Asia. The veneration of holy places, which are generally tombs connected with Sufi saints, mythical personages, or tribal ancestors, continues to play an active role in the preservation of religious feeling among the population.

The pervasive nature of folk Islam, together with the Soviet-era repression of religion and the authoritarian nature of the country’s political system, have acted as barriers to the growth of Islamist ideology in Turkmenistan. Thus, the leadership has sought to capitalize on the popularity of Sufism in order to encourage religious beliefs to conform to local popular practices, effectively combating the emergence of Islamism. As in other

parts of Central Asia, the distinction between religious and “national” rituals is blurred in Turkmenistan. Since the perestroika period of the late 1980s, the leadership has attempted to co-opt Islam as a fundamental component of its overarching nation-building campaign.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

In much of Central Asia, the broad process of re-Islamization that took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s was accompanied by the emergence of political movements that espoused a greater adherence to Islamic tenets. In Turkmenistan, however, there has been no movement to introduce elements of *sharia* or to establish parties based on Islamic principles. The vast majority of the population appears to prefer to disassociate religion from politics altogether, and would be unlikely to lend support to any attempt to replace secular with religious rule, especially if it were to involve a political struggle.

Perhaps more than any other factor, the desire to perpetuate religious beliefs and practices that are widely regarded as “national” traditions in Turkmenistan has disempowered Islamism—an ideology calling for change—as a potent force for social mobilization. Turkmen generally view Islam as a crucial part of national culture, encompassing a set of local customs that sets them apart from outsiders. As such, Islam has a significant secular component that has made it relatively immune to politicization and the penetration of Islamist ideologies. “Folk” Islam (*Islam-i halq*) rather than orthodox Islam (*Islam-i kitab*) is dominant, and is primarily concerned with the celebration of life cycle rituals, the observation of the principle of sacrifice, and the preservation of mystical beliefs. The practice of shrine pilgrimage (*ziyarat*) is at the heart of Islam in Turkmenistan.

To be sure, some of the most widespread practices among Turkmen believers are considered heretical by purist Muslims, such as warding off the evil eye through the use of plants and amulets or performing pilgrimages to the graves of local Sufi saints. As Central Asia expert Ahmed Rashid points out, fundamentalists have criticized Sufi followers to little avail for diverging from the commands of the Koran and tolerating non-Islamic influences.¹ The inherent tension between folk Islam and an Islamist ideology that calls for greater orthodoxy has served to stymie any potential popular support for the latter.

Despite the apparent dearth of Islamist activity, the closed nature of polity and society in Turkmenistan has made it difficult to definitively ascertain the presence or absence of Islamist groups, and has also given rise to speculation that Islamist activity may in fact exist within the former Soviet republic. For example, official reports on an unexpectedly fierce two-day battle that broke out in a northern suburb of Ashgabat in September 2008 provided little information, prompting Russian media and some Western wire services to make unconfirmed assertions that the violence was insti-

gated by Islamist extremists.² Similarly, despite reports that the Islamist group *Hizb-ut-Tabrir* has won converts in Turkmenistan's labor camps and prisons, a significant presence in the country has yet to be established.³ No other Islamist group is known to have a presence in Turkmenistan, and no terrorist attacks tied to Islamist groups have been reported on Turkmenistani soil since independence.⁴ In addition, there has been no noticeable penetration of the Islamic State into the country. This is at least partly due to Turkmenistan's geographic and political isolation, as well as its form of Islam, which is mild even by Central Asian standards.⁵

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

In addition to the popular nature of Sufism, the cultural changes that the Soviet Union forced upon the Turkmen population provides a second explanation for the limited appeal of Islamist groups. Some analysts have argued that the Soviet legacy is the key factor hindering the present-day development of Islam and Islamism in Central Asia, given that the region was isolated from the rest of the Muslim world—including its intellectual centers—for more than seventy years.⁶ During Soviet rule, Islam in particular was rejected as contrary to modernization, with the consequence that all but a handful of mosques were either closed or turned into museums of atheism. The clergy was persecuted and religious literature was destroyed, all Islamic courts of law, *waqf* holdings (Muslim religious endowments that formed the basis of clerical economic power) and Muslim primary and secondary schools were liquidated. Local shrines acted as the real centers of religious life in the absence of functioning mosques during the Soviet period, thereby ensuring that they have remained an important part of worship in Turkmenistan.

However, while it is undeniable that the aggressive anti-religious campaign launched by the Soviet authorities placed even greater distance between Central Asian Islam and the Islam practiced in “mainstream” Muslim countries in the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia and Africa, Islamic doctrine had never firmly taken root in Turkmenistan as it had in other Muslim areas, including the older, sedentary territories of Central Asia. Well before the Bolshevik Revolution, the Turkmen, like other nomadic peoples, preferred to pray in private rather than visit a mosque.⁷ A mobile lifestyle necessarily favored a non-scriptural, popular version of Islam while naturally curtailing the presence of professional clergy. As the expert Adrienne Edgar has noted, any man who could read and recite prayers was given the title of *mullah*, or cleric.⁸ Particularly in the nomadic regions, teachers of Sufi orders, or *ishans*, played a more influential role than the *ulema* (Muslim scholars). The independent Turkmen tribes lacked Muslim *kadis* who judged in accordance with Islamic law, with the result that sharia only held sway in the sphere of family law, and was implemented by *mullahs* at birth, circumcision, marriage and funeral ceremonies.⁹

In the twenty-first century, Turkmen continue to be governed less by Islamic law than by tribal customary law, or *adat*, which has been passed down for many centuries. As the majority of Turkmen do not practice their religion in a formal or institutional way, mosques remain conspicuously empty, including one of Central Asia's largest and grandest mosques, the Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque in former President Niyazov's hometown of Gypjak, which, despite its capacity to hold 10,000 worshippers, is sparsely attended.¹⁰

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

The strict state control of religion is a third, albeit less important, reason why Islamism has thus far failed to attract a significant following in Turkmenistan. Were Islamist groups to appear in Turkmenistan, state security forces would most certainly act swiftly and firmly to repress any and all manifestations of their activities.

In order to prevent the emergence of Islam as a locus of oppositional activity, the Turkmen leadership has acted to thoroughly co-opt the official religious establishment. Beginning in the late 1980s, Saparmurat Niyazov, who was first secretary of the Communist Party of the Turkmen SSR from 1985-1991 and then Turkmenistan's first president from 1991 until his death in 2006, sanctioned the revival of Muslim practices while simultaneously striving to keep religion within official structures. Thus, Niyazov endorsed the construction of mosques, the teaching of basic Islamic principles in state schools, the refurbishment of holy places and the restoration of Islamic holidays. Whereas in 1987 there were only four functioning mosques in the Turkmen SSR, by 1992 that number had risen to eighty-three, with another sixty-four mosques under construction.¹¹ By 2016, Turkmenistan had more than 400 registered mosques, although it is unclear how many Muslims make use of them.¹² In 1991, Turkmenistan's first *madrassah* (Islamic seminary) was founded in Dashhowuz to help alleviate the country's acute shortage of trained religious clergy. Shrine pilgrimage was acknowledged by Niyazov as a fundamental component of Turkmen identity and even as an expression of patriotism. Seeking to improve their Islamic credentials, both Niyazov and his successor, Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov, have made pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina.

While the Turkmen government did promote Islam in particular ways, it promoted a very controlled version of Islam. The state banned religious political parties and required that religious communities register with the government. In 1994, the government created the *Gengesh*, (Council for Religious Affairs, and currently replaced with the Committee for Work with Religious Organizations).¹³ All senior Muslim clergy belong to the *Gengesh*, of which the chief *mufiti*, appointed by the president, is also the deputy chair.¹⁴ *The Gengesh* controls the hiring and firing of all clergy in Turkmenistan,¹⁵ thereby allowing the state to exert control on religious matters down to

the village level.¹⁶ In 1997, the government cracked down on Islamic activity and began closing down mosques throughout the nation. This move virtually incapacitated all institutions of Islamic learning in Turkmenistan.¹⁷

These restrictions endure to this day. Congregations that are not registered are prohibited from gathering publicly and disseminating religious materials, with violators subject to penalties under the country's administrative code. The Dashowuz *madrasah* was closed in 2001, and in 2005 cutbacks were made at the Faculty of Muslim Theology at Magtymguly Turkmen State University, which remained the only official institution for training *imams*. Regular reshuffling of Muslim leaders by the state also keeps clergy in check; from 2003 to 2016, Turkmenistan went through five chief *muftis*, with other Muslim leaders being rotated at a similar rate.¹⁸

To an even greater degree than other Central Asian Muslims, Turkmen have been unable to travel and receive an education in *madrassahs* abroad. The government has aimed to restrict the population's contact with fellow believers abroad by limiting the number of Turkmen Muslims—including secret police and state officials—performing the *hajj* to Mecca each year to 650 pilgrims, which represents less than a seventh of the quota allocated by the Saudi authorities.¹⁹ As of 2016, the number of Turkmen allowed to perform the Hajj had decreased to 188, due to fears of radicalization.²⁰

As in other Central Asian states, Turkmenistan's authorities have sought to limit unwanted Islamist trends by promoting a vision of Islam that is concerned with the preservation of tradition. In similar fashion to neighboring Uzbekistan, the national leadership has attempted to capitalize on the popularity of Sufism in order to encourage religion to conform to local popular practices as well as to combat the emergence of Islamism. So long as orthodox Islamic doctrine rejects and condemns some Sufist practices, such as the veneration of local saints and local shrine pilgrimages²¹ as idolatrous, it is held that the promotion of Sufism will serve to dampen any inclination among Turkmen believers to support the more purist—and potentially Islamist—forms of ideology.²²

Consequently, the leadership of Turkmenistan has taken some steps to foster the Sufi tradition and incorporate it into the regime's larger nation-building project. Thus, the Niyazov leadership provided the mosque and mausoleum complex of the twelfth-century Sufi scholar, Hoja Yusup Hamadani, with a modern-day reconstruction. Located in the Mary *oblast*, this holy site is one of the most important places of shrine pilgrimage in Turkmenistan, even remaining open during the Soviet period, albeit under strict control. Likewise, rather than seeking to prohibit local pilgrimages to sacred places, both the Niyazov and Berdimuhammedov governments have encouraged it, even providing free accommodation for pilgrims in some instances.²³ In 2009, citing fears concerning the spread of swine flu, Turkmen authorities barred aspiring Muslim pilgrims from making the *hajj* to Saudi Arabia altogether, urging them instead to sojourn to 38 sacred sites across the country, although most of the sites had

historical or cultural rather than religious significance.²⁴ As of 2016, the government of Turkmenistan has shown no signs of easing pressure on Muslims, with censorship, educational, and legal restrictions remaining tightly in place.

Under Niyazov, the state-sponsored form of Islam in Turkmenistan underwent an unusual twist when the president made his extensive cult of personality a centerpiece of religious practice by configuring himself as a prophet with his own sacred book, the *Rubnama* (Book of the Soul). Niyazov regularly urged his country's citizens to study and memorize passages from the *Rubnama*, making it required reading for university entrance and for work in the public sector, which remained the country's top employer. *Imams* were obliged to display the *Rubnama* inside mosques and to quote from it in sermons, or face possible removal or even arrest. In direct violation of *sharia*, Niyazov even ordered that passages from the *Rubnama* be inscribed alongside passages from the Koran on the walls of the cathedral mosque in Gypjak; an inscription above the main arch reads: "*Rubnama* is a holy book, the Koran is Allah's book."

In 2003, the country's long-serving senior Muslim cleric and deputy chairman of the *Gengesh*, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, was replaced for expressing dissent by repeatedly objecting to the *de facto* status of the *Rubnama* as a sacred book on a par with the Koran, and to its extensive use in mosques. In 2004, he was sentenced to 22 years in prison on treason charges, but was granted amnesty in August 2007.²⁵ Upon his release, Ibadullah thanked the president and accepted a post as an adviser at the president's State Council for Religious Affairs, thus remaining under the close supervision of administration officials. Since coming to power in 2007, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov has gradually phased out the cult of Niyazov's quasi-spiritual guidebook for the nation.²⁶

Under the new president, the state's presence is still pervasive at all levels of religious institutions. *Imams* are still selected by the government via the Commission for Work with Religious Organizations (the successor organ to the *Gengesh*)²⁷ and the security service. While *imams* are no longer required to recite an oath of allegiance to the president during sermons, they are still required to pray for him.²⁸ The government provides "recommendations" for sermon content, as well—sermons are expected to convey a state message. This, apparently, has riled some Turkmenistani Muslims, who resent government intrusion into their religious lives.²⁹

It is difficult to speculate about the effects of government policy on the religious beliefs of Muslims in Turkmenistan, although much empirical research shows that repression of religious groups generally leads to increased radicalism.³⁰ Therefore, one would expect to see some mobilization of a religious opposition, and indeed, there is some anecdotal evidence of this. Some unconfirmed reports from Turkmenistani refugees have claimed that there are underground mosques that preach anti-government sermons.³¹ In addition, approximately 360 Turkmen Islamists have turned up in Syria, where they have been fighting the Assad government.³² A former security

official from Turkmenistan blames this development on the harsh repression of Turkmenistan's religious groups and the ineptitude of the secret police.³³ Turkmenistan could also prove vulnerable to radical religious teaching due to theological ignorance among its citizens and clergy, ignorance which could facilitate the spread of extremist doctrines. The government has increasingly installed *imams* lacking in religious education; in fact, many viewed Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah as the last official with a proper religious education. Average citizens are rarely exposed to Islamic teaching, and while most households have a copy of the Koran, it is usually in Arabic, which few Turkmen citizens read. Turkmen-language Korans are rare.³⁴

As the United States and its allies continue to draw down their forces in Afghanistan, concerns remain that instability from Afghanistan could spread to Central Asia—concerns which are now compounded by the nearly 400 Turkmen fighting in Syria. About a quarter million Turkmen live across the border in Afghanistan, providing a potential pool of recruits for extremist groups. In 2014, reports surfaced that Turkmen border guards had been killed in skirmishes with Taliban fighters.³⁵ However, there is as yet little evidence that the conflicts in Afghanistan and Syria threaten stability in Turkmenistan.

ENDNOTES

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[3] *Cracks in the Marble: Turkmenistan's Failing Dictatorship*, International Crisis Group, January 2003, 25, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/asia/central-asia/turkmenistan/044%20Cracks%20in%20the%20Marble%20Turkmenistan%20Failing%20Dictatorship.ashx>.

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- [11] Alexander Verkhovsky, ed., *Islam i politicheskaya bor’ba v stranakh SNG [Islam and political struggle in the IS (ommonwealth of Independent States)]* (Moscow: Panorama, 1992), 27.
- [12] BTI, *Turkmenistan Country Report 2016*, 7, https://www.bti-project.org/fileadmin/files/BTI/Downloads/Reports/2016/pdf/BTI_2016_Turkmenistan.pdf.
- [13] Sally Cummings, *Oil, Transition, and Security in Central Asia*, Routledge, 2010, pg 14-15.
- [14] U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report 2013* (Washington. DC: USCIRF, April 2013), 176, <http://www.uscirf.gov/images/2013%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report%20%282%29.pdf>.
- [15] Cummings, *Oil, Transition, and Security* pg 14-15.
- [16] S. Demidov, “Religioznie protsessy v postsovetском Turkmenistane,” [Religious protests in post-Soviet Turkmenistan,” *Tsentral’naia Aziia i Kavkaz* no. 5 (2001).
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- [18] Felix Corley, “Turkmenistan: Government Changes Islamic Leadership Again,” *Forum 18 News Service*, February 25, 2013, http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1805.
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- [21] See Maria Elisabeth Louw, *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (London: Routledge, 2007), 50.
- [22] However, as some have noted, the relationship between folk Islam, orthodox Islam and Sufism is complex. While some folk customs might contradict the precepts of sharia, Sufi brotherhoods often successfully used the murid organization to spread orthodox Islam. Geiss, *Pre-Tsarist and Tsarist Central Asia*, 94n3.
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- [35] "Three Turkmen Border Guards Killed on Northern Afghan Border," RFE/RL, May 27, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/a/three-turkmen-border-guards-killed-on-northern-afghan-border/25400305.html>