

American Foreign Policy Council

TURKMENISTAN

QUICK FACTS

Population: 4,940,916

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: Defines itself
as a secular democracy and
presidential republic; in actuality
displays authoritarian presidential
rule, with power concentrated
within the executive branch

GDP (official exchange rate): \$16.24 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated June 2010)



Over a period of centuries, Islam in Turkmenistan has become an unusual blend of Sufi mysticism, orthodox (Sunni) Islam, and shamanistic and Zoroastrian practices. The cult of ancestors is still observed, and reverence for members of the four holy tribes (the owlat) 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 religion to conform to local popular practices as well as to combat 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. Turkmenis 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 pointed 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 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 instigated by Islamist extremists.² Similarly, despite reports that the Islamist group Hizbut-Tahrir has won converts in Turkmenistan's labor camps and prisons, a significance presence in the country has yet to be established.³

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

In addition to the popular nature of Islam, the durable changes to religious practice experienced by the population during the Soviet period provides a second explanation for the limited appeal of Islamist groups in Turkmenistan. Some analysts have argued that the Soviet legacy is the key factor hindering the present-day development of 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.⁴ 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 cleri-

cal 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 or Africa, Islamic doctrine had never taken as firm 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.⁵ 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 noted, any man who could read and recite prayers was given the title of *mullah*, or cleric.⁶ 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.⁷

In the twenty-first century, Turkmenis 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 Turkmenis do not practice their religion in a formal or institutional way, mosques remain conspicuously empty, including Central Asia’s largest and grandest mosque, the Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque in former President Niyazov’s hometown of Gypjak, which is only visited by a significant number of male worshippers on Fridays.

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 fol-

lowing 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 activity.

In order to prevent the emergence of Islam as a locus of oppositional activity, the Turkmenistani leadership has acted to thoroughly co-opt the official religious establishment. Beginning in the late 1980s, Turkmenistan's iron-fisted ruler, Saparmurat Niyazov, who was first secretary of the Communist Party of the Turkmen SSR from 1985-1991 and the country'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.⁸ 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, thereby adding the title of *hajji* to their already long lists of distinctions.

Yet, even while taking limited measures to promote Islam, the Turkmenistani leadership required all religious communities to obtain legal registration and banned all religious parties. In April 1994, Niyazov set up a Council for Religious Affairs, the *Gengesh*, within the presidential apparatus "to ensure the observance of the law." In July 2000, a long-serving official in the *Gengesh* acknowledged that his organization controls the selection, promotion and dismissal of all clergy in Turkmenistan, thereby allowing the state to exert control on religious matters right down to the village level.⁹

In 1997, the leadership initiated a crackdown on Islamic activ-

ity by closing many of the mosques that had been opened just a few years earlier (mostly in Mary Oblast), shutting down virtually all institutions of Islamic learning, halting the importation of foreign religious literature, and tightening restrictions on the legal registration of religious communities. These restrictions endure to this day. Congregations that are not registered with the Ministry of Fairness (formerly the Ministry of Justice) are prohibited from gathering publicly and disseminating religious materials, with violators subject to penalties under the country's administrative code. The Dashowuz *madrassah* 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.

To an even greater degree than other Central Asian Muslims, Turkmenis 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 188 pilgrims, which represents less than five percent of the quota allocated by the Saudi authorities.¹⁰

As in other Central Asian states, Turkmenistani 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 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. In so far as orthodox Islamic doctrine rejects and condemns as idolatrous some Sufist practices, such as the veneration of local saints and local shrine pilgrimages,¹¹ it is held that the promotion of Sufism will serve to dampen any inclination among Turkmeni believers to support the more purist—and potentially Islamist—forms of ideology.¹²

Consequently, the Turkmenistani leadership 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 Region, 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 Berdimuhamedov governments have encouraged it, even providing free accommodation for pilgrims in some instances.¹³ In 2009, citing fears concerning the spread of swine flu, Turkmenistani 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.¹⁴

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 *Ruhnama* (Book of the Soul). Niyazov regularly urged his country's citizens to study and memorize passages from it, and knowledge of the *Ruhnama* was made a requirement for university entrance and for work in the public sector, which remained the main source of employment. Imams were obliged to display the *Ruhnama* 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 *Ruhnama* be inscribed alongside passages from the Koran on the walls of the cathedral mosque in Gypjak; an inscription above the main arch reads: "*Ruhnama* 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 *Ruhnama* 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 amnestied in August 2007. 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 Berdimuhamedov has gradually phased out the cult of Niyazov's quasi-spiritual guidebook for the nation, although its study remains part of the education curriculum.¹⁵

ENDNOTES

- [1] Ahmed Rashid, *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism?* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 246-247.
- [2] Annette Bohr, "Turkmenistan," in *Nations in Transit. Democratization from Central Europe to Eurasia 2009* (New York: Freedom House, 2009), 522, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/nit/2009/Turkmenistan-final.pdf>. For an excellent, detailed analysis of both the international and domestic media reports on the September clashes, see Vitaliy Ponomarev, *Sobytiia v Ashkhabade 10–13 Sentiabria 2000g* [Events in Ashkhabad September 10–13, 2008] (Moscow: Memorial Human Rights Center, November 5, 2008).
- [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/Cracks%20in%20the%20Marble%20Turkmenistan%20Failing%20Dictatorship.ashx>.
- [4] Krzysztof Strachota and Maciej Falkowski, *Jihad vs. The Great New Game: Paradoxes Of Militant Islamic threats In Central Asia* (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, January 2010), 48-49.
- [5] Carole Blackwell, *Tradition and Society in Turkmenistan: Gender, Oral Culture and Song* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2001), 35.
- [6] Adrienne Lynn Edgar, *Tribal Nation. The Making Of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 26.
- [7] W. König, *Die Achal-Teke. Zur Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft einer Turkmenen-Gruppe im XIX Jahrhundert*, 74, as cited in Paul Georg Geiss, *Pre-Tsarist and Tsarist Central Asia: Communal Commitment And Political Order In Change* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 38.
- [8] Alexander Verkhovsky, ed., *Islam i politicheskaya bor'ba v stranakh SNG* [Islam and political struggle in the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States)] (Moscow: Panorama, 1992), 27.
- [9] S. Demidov, "Religioznie protsessy v postsovetskom Turkmenistane," [Religious protests in post-Soviet Turkmenistan," *Tsentral'naia Aziia i Kavkaz* no. 5 (2001).
- [10] Felix Corley, "Turkmenistan Religious Freedom Survey, August 2008," Forum 18 News Service, August 5, 2008, http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1167.
- [11] See Maria Elisabeth Louw, *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (London: Routledge, 2007), 50.
- [12] 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.
- [13] *Cracks in the Marble*, 25.
- [14] Felix Corley, "Turkmenistan: Exit Bans, Haj Ban, Visa Denials Part

Of State Religious Isolation Policy,” Forum 18 News Service, February 2010, http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1403; Bruce Pannier, “Turkmen Pilgrims Make A Homegrown Hajj,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 25, 2009, http://www.rferl.org/content/Turkmen_Pilgrims_Make_A-Homegrown_Hajj/1887880.html.
[15] Bohr, “Turkmenistan,” in *Nations in Transit. Democratization from Central Europe to Eurasia 2010* (New York: Freedom House, 2010), 544, <http://www.freedomhouse.hu/images/nit2010/NIT-2010-Turkmenistan-final.pdf>.