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## The Relationship between Religious and National Elements in the Social Consciousness of Tajiks

Historically, Islam has meant more to Tajiks than to the other peoples of Central Asia. In other words, Islam has played a greater role in the culture and way of life of the Tajik people (a key role, one could say) than in the cases of neighbouring nomadic peoples. This is precisely one of the reasons why Islam has undergone a revival in the period since independence. At present, 98 per cent of Tajikistan's population practise Islam, or at least consider themselves Muslims. The vast majority of believers belong to the Hanafi school of the Sunni branch of Islam, which became the official religion in the region during the time of the Samanids in the 9th and 10th centuries. The Hanafi school is distinguished from the other Sunni legal schools by its greater rationality and flexibility, which opens up a broad range of opportunities for the development of national elements within Islamic culture. In addition, Ismailism, a branch of Shia Islam, is practised by many residents of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAR). The local version of Ismailism is rather eclectic and flexible, with many peculiarities compared to other Ismaili communities. It gives priority to the spiritual perfection of the individual over theology and formal rituals and is known for its tolerance. In addition, in several villages in the Darvoz District of the GBAR, there are small communities of Imamites (also known as Twelvers), adherents of the most widespread form of Shia Islam in the Muslim world. Historically, an atmosphere of mutual understanding and tolerance in religious life in Tajik society has prevailed between these two main religious currents, the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, on the one hand, and the Ismaili version of Shia Islam, on the other. In our opinion – and this has been supported by other scholars – this is because the main disagreements and conflicts between these two schools were resolved earlier thanks to serious efforts undertaken by authoritative representatives of both sides at public meetings known as *Dar-ut takrib*. This speaks to the usefulness of dialogue and constructive debate between representatives of different religious currents on doctrinal matters and is why there have been no conflicts or major friction between Sunnis and Ismaili Shiites over matters of religion. Friendly relations between the country's political leadership and the leader of the Ismaili world, Aga Khan IV; the country-wide celebration of the 1,000th anniversary of the birth of Nasir Khusraw, an Ismaili scholar; and the construction of a cultural centre in the capital for Ismailis are just some of the evidence of the atmosphere of peace and tolerance that exists between these two currents. By contrast, representatives of the recently emerged Salafi movement exhibit a negative attitude to-

wards both traditional Islam and Ismailism. Both spiritual leaders and intellectuals have spoken out against Salafism in the Tajik media.

It is precisely the relationship between the religious and national elements in the consciousness of the population of Tajikistan that these discussions characteristically focus on and which is also their starting point. In this respect, determining the place of religion in the context of the national culture of these peoples, as well as in the formation of their national identity, is thus significant today both in theory and in practice. And this was also of great importance in the revival of national culture during the course of the creation of nation-states. And it was precisely the question of religious consciousness and its place in national culture, as well as in the formation and development of national identity, that was neglected in the fields of religious and cultural studies in Tajikistan during the Soviet period. As a result, this question is currently becoming the subject of intense debate and controversy in certain groups within society today.

When it comes to the relationship between the religious and national elements in public consciousness, determining Islam's relationship to the concept of the nation takes on particular importance. In Islam, there is the concept of the *umma*, or the *umma al-Islamiyah*: the community of all Muslims. The Islamic conception of a community of people is of a community of faith and belief. In Islam, the dominant principle is that of Muslim brotherhood, while there is no such concept as "nation". In Islamic doctrine, the word *millat* (nation) means direction, path, current, and religion. Islam is respectful and tolerant of the existence of communities of human beings in the form of tribes, peoples, races, nations, etc. It considers ethnic differences to be divine will and does not have a preference for one group over any other. Ethnicity, national identity, skin colour, and other characteristics have no particular importance for Islam, though they are recognized. Preference is given to people only in terms of the degree of their piety and faith; as far as national identity and ethnic origin are concerned, all people are equal before God.

The Quran says: "O mankind, We have created you male and female, and appointed you races and tribes, that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most godfearing of you. God is All-knowing, All-aware."<sup>1</sup>

In the area of interethnic relations as well, Islamic doctrine is based on the principles of humanism and justice. In the religion's primary sources, the Quran and the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, believers are encouraged to be fair and just in their relations with representatives of other faiths and religions. When necessary, they should help and support one another. An exception is made only in respect of those who are at war – on religious grounds or seeking conquest – with the Muslims:

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1 *The Quran*, 49:13, The Dwellings, Arberry version.

“God forbids you not, as regards those who have not fought you in religion’s cause, nor expelled you from your habitations, that you should be kindly to them, and act justly towards them; surely God loves the just.”<sup>2</sup>

The history of Islam is full of examples of Muslims living together in peace and harmony with representatives of other faiths and various peoples. At the same time, there have been many episodes where Islam has been a factor in ethnic and religious strife. However, proper analysis of these situations makes clear that, in the majority of cases, the religious element was not the cause of the strife, but rather a pretext for it. The inherent features of religion imply that it can easily be used by certain groups, especially radicals, for their own purposes. This mainly happens when members of a faith community, including Muslims, have a low level of religious education and when their religious awareness is intertwined with superstition. Another reason for this is that the tendency towards ambivalence inherent to all world religions is particularly marked in Islam. In Islam this takes the form of an ability to justify something while, at another time and in another place, justifying its polar opposite. However, this does not mean that Islam applies double standards, but rather the opposite, that the solutions it offers take into account socio-historical circumstances. Consequently, there is a field of Islamic scholarship called *tanzil* (the study of the revelation of the Quran’s verses), which bases its interpretation on the specific circumstances of the revelation of the verses of the Quran. In their ignorance, however, ordinary believers and some spiritual interpreters can fail to take this into account and are thus manipulated by radicals. This is especially prevalent in light of the communication technologies available in the age of globalization. All of this shows the multifaceted nature of Islamic doctrine, but to use these interpretations faithfully, one has to proceed from specific historical situations in the development of society.

Although the national community is not particularly important in Islam, it has indirectly played a major role in the formation of the religion. One of the characteristic features of world religions is polymorphism, and this can be seen very clearly in Islam. Polymorphism allows the various cultural and ethnic values of different peoples and ethnic groups to appear within one and the same religious system. It was precisely this feature that allowed the world’s religions to expand beyond individual tribes and states and spread among various peoples and nations. In this way, national traditions and customs mix with religious beliefs and are expressed in the context of national culture.

It was this universalism that allowed Islam to absorb local traditions, where they do not fundamentally contradict the basic canons of the religion and where they comply with the requirements of the time. Although the mixing of the national cultures of Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Azeris, Tatars, and many others with Islamic values was a complex and ambiguous process,

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2 *The Quran*, 60:8, The Women to Be Examined, Arberry version.

these cultures advanced to a higher stage of development as a result. Moreover, not only did these cultures not lose their identity, but they were also given a new impetus for further development and improvement. They enriched Islam, and they received a great deal from Islam in return. This is why Islamic religious elements often appear alongside national elements.

As we have already noted, one of the factors that led to a revival of religion in Tajikistan during the period of independence and the creation of a democratic society was its role in the formation of national consciousness, especially among young people. Although this issue has been given little attention in Tajik scholarship, the role of religion in the formation of national consciousness was evident in Tajik society from the first days of independence. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union and of the unified international community known as the Soviet people, the national consciousness of the citizens of the newly formed states was raised to a new level, and interest grew in national roots and traditions. Against this background, it was entirely logical and understandable that there would be a surge of people, especially from the younger generation, turning to traditional religion, which experienced a revival, and thus played a greater role in the formation of national consciousness.

In addition, threats stemming from globalization processes, which have a strongly Christian and particularly American orientation, are also having an impact on the convergence of Muslims' national and religious consciousness. The same can be said about labour migration, which has become an everyday part of life for the people of Central Asia. By performing its compensatory, regulatory, and other inherent social functions, religion can alleviate problems and help Muslim labour migrants adapt to new conditions in life. It may even sometimes act as a means of preserving their identity. These factors promote the growth of religiosity among migrants.

It is against this background that it is important to determine the relationship between religious and national elements in Tajik culture. Doing so would make it possible to develop effective methods for the active inclusion of the population in the process of creating a democratic and fully-fledged civil society based on the rule of law. At the same time, one must also consider that in most of the Central Asian countries – and in Tajikistan in particular – religious consciousness remains the dominant and most popular form of consciousness among the indigenous population, whose principles of morality, law, family life, aesthetics, and more are derived from their religion. Islamic principles are embedded in customs and traditions and have an impact on the behaviour of family and community members, as well as on the types of relationships that exist between them. In Tajik families and their daily life, we can see modern legal rules being synthesized with Islamic ethics and law. Even the Family Code of the Republic of Tajikistan covers not only modern legal regulations, but also takes into account the mindset and religious traditions of the Tajik people. However, the main problem in

Tajikistan and other Central Asian states remains the question of whether they will be able to keep this religious factor under control and use it constructively. That is to say, is it possible to avert aggressive religious radicalism and prevent various groups and movements within the country and abroad from using religion for their own selfish and arrogant goals? The practice of recent decades in these republics and the experience of several developed Muslim countries such as Turkey, Malaysia, and Indonesia show that using the positive potential of Islam in a modern democratic society based on the rule of law is a realistic possibility. To do this, it is first necessary to examine and correctly identify the causes of the current Islamic revival, to determine the place and role of religion in the national culture of the peoples being studied, and to identify points of compatibility between Islamic principles and tenets and the democratic norms of modern society. In this way, it is possible to determine the nature of the transformation of religious consciousness and its specific features in the period of social transition these countries are in.

Thus, the post-Soviet period of development of the independent states of Central Asia has been characterized by the revival of Islam and by a significant increase in the influence of religion on almost all spheres of public life. Islam, which was virtually driven underground in the Soviet era, has, in a relatively short time, become a serious force, including in the field of politics. Although nearly all of these republics are, in constitutional terms, secular states, the authorities, without exception, have to deal with the revival of Islam – whether they want to or not. A particularly acute problem for these republics is the issue of the relationship between religious and national consciousness, as democratic processes and the establishment of genuine national sovereignty depend, to a large extent, on resolving this issue.

In analysing the relationship between religious and national identity, we have to define the outline and the features of the concept of national consciousness. The term “national consciousness” has only recently begun to be used in academic circles. Although some scholars identify it as a specific form of consciousness, we believe that it is most likely a set of theoretical and everyday views concerning the nature of nationality and of the nation-forming processes taking place in society. If we were to take this as a whole, it would cover the social, political, moral, aesthetic, religious, and other views that characterize the content and features of the spiritual development of a particular national or ethnic group.

National consciousness is primarily formed on the basis of national values, with national identity at its core. A nation’s self-consciousness is the intra-group identification of the members of that cultural collective, who recognise their own identity and particular shared features. The main elements of a national or ethnic identity are awareness of a common history, culture, and psychology. Thus, in analysing the relationship between national and religious elements in the formation of the spiritual life of a society, it can be

concluded that the common opinion in Tajik academic circles that religion, and especially world religions, cannot play a positive role in the formation of national identity is not quite right. This is a point of view that gained momentum at a time when, for purposes of atheistic propaganda, religion was seen as being in opposition to all that was considered national. Although Islam is a world religion for which national and ethnic features are of little importance, it has played a particular role, as we have already noted, in the formation of national culture in various ways. The influence of Islam has been particularly strong at the level of the everyday consciousness and psychology of its adherents. For a Tajik, for example, the concepts of “being a human being” and “being a Muslim” are practically identical. This is because, for Tajiks, Islam is not just a religion but rather a way of life.

Thus, in analysing the specific features of Islamic doctrine in respect of national consciousness and national entities, we believe that the religious consciousness of Muslims plays a specific role in the formation of the national values and national culture of its adherents.

The identities of national and religious communities of Muslims in Central Asia are also being examined and taken into consideration in neighbouring countries. For example, in studying the place and role of Islam in contemporary Kazakh society, Alma Sultangalieva, a scholar of Islam from that country, concludes that, although the influence of Islam on the life of Kazakhstan’s nomadic population is much weaker than on neighbouring peoples – Tajiks and Uzbeks – Islam is nonetheless one of the elements in their ethnic identity. Here is what she had to say on the issue: “Historically, Islam was not a form of social organization for Kazakhs, but it has been one of the elements of ethnic (ancestral, tribal) affiliation. In this respect, it would hardly be correct to speak of the existence in the past of a traditional Islamic system of politico-legal and socio-cultural norms that regulated social and political life.”<sup>3</sup> In her opinion, and in the opinion of numerous other scholars, Islam played a positive role in the consolidation of the Kazakh nation in recent history. It was instrumental in the formation of Kazakh ethnic identity, and it can play a positive role in contemporary processes related to the development of the nation.

Thus, for many of the peoples of Central Asia, Islam provides the ideological basis for all kinds of customs and traditions. Many popular and national customs and traditions have Islamic elements, while Islamic customs and traditions have also taken on a popular or national character.

As the key cultural element regulating the existence and development of other cultural components, Islam is of great importance in the life of the countries in the region and regulates many types of social relations. Alongside state institutions and secular laws, Islam determines both the behaviour

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3 Alma Sultangalieva, *Tsentrlnaya Aziya i islamskii mir* [Central Asia and the Muslim World], in: *Kazakhstan i mirovoe soobshchestvo* [Kazakhstan and the World Community] 3/1995, pp. 50-57, here: p. 51 (author’s translation).

and attitudes of people and also which faith-based organizations are involved in public life. Tajikistan is the only Central Asian republic where a religious political party has been officially registered and had a representative in the country's parliament. Religious associations not only perform their direct functions, such as religious rituals, but also take part in all kinds of cultural and spiritual activities, and sit on the Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of National Customs and Traditions. The very same pattern of relations between religious and national culture can be seen in the neighbouring republics of Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. It is therefore essential to take this into account when making decisions regarding socio-economic problems.