

Islam and Danger: A Reconsideration of the Link between Religiosity, Radicalism and Rebellion in Central Asia

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Paper abstract submitted to the first annual international conference *“Twenty Years of Central Asian Independence: Shared Past, Separate Paths?”* at the AUCA, Bishkek, 14-16 October 2011.

In equating “radical Islam” with danger and a rebellion against the state, a number of assumptions are made about the appropriate form of politics and the social space to which religion should be contained. Within the Central Asian context, the discursive fusing of radicalism and Islam has utility as a boogeyman to which political regimes and the international community can react in common. The conflation of terms, however, misleads us in our attempts to understand both counter-hegemonic movements—whose approach is seldom “radical” in form—and Muslims—who are generally more concerned with making meaningful lives than revolution. Exploring seven claims made across both Western and regional elite discourses with respect to Islam in the region, we suggest that rather than being an objective contextualization of the struggles populations face in Central Asia, these propositions which together claim a causal link between religiosity, radicalism and rebellion are inaccurate. Our interpretation of popular discourse and practice – based on extensive survey data and ethnographic research in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan from 2004 to 2010 – suggests that such a causal relationship does not exist. Moreover, the association of Islam with radicalism and rebellion is not essentially the utilization of religious tradition in antagonistic relation to authority but rather a moral and political framing distant from the discourse common in political and policy analyses of the groups in question. However, whilst the claim can be refuted it should not be dismissed from our analysis. As a particular reading of state, society and religion it informs national and international policies towards civil society and political development in general, and religious freedom and Islamic movements in particular.