

## A Story on Religious Identity and Islamic Trends in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan

Before arriving in Kyrgyzstan as a Peace Corps Volunteer in March 2015, I knew very little of its history, culture, language, and of its complex relationship with Islam. The morning after I arrived, I remember looking out over the hotel balcony and seeing dawn's rays of light illuminate my first glimpse of Kyrgyzstan: a skyline of grey Soviet-era buildings, broken up by the silhouettes of newly-built mosques, their domed roofs and minarets standing proudly amidst architecture from an era in Kyrgyz history when state-mandated secularism forced Islam to the sideline of Kyrgyz society.

To me, this skyline represented a story and one that answers questions about how Kyrgyzstan's geography and history have shaped the people's religious identity and how they have come to perceive the role of Islam and Islamic values in Kyrgyz culture. This is the story I will explore for the next 9 months through the Fulbright-National Geographic Digital Storytelling Fellowship and through CASI.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, more than 2,000 mosques have been built around Kyrgyzstan<sup>1</sup> as many Kyrgyzstanis move to revitalize Islam after almost 55 years of state-mandated atheism under Soviet rule. Through this movement, Islam and Islamic values have returned to the forefront of Kyrgyz society with approximately 86 percent of Kyrgyzstan's population identifying as Muslim.<sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Eurasia Review. "Kyrgyzstan Experiencing Mosque Building Boom." *Eurasia Review*. N.p., 12 Mar. 2016. Web. 20 July 2016. <<http://www.eurasiareview.com/12032016-kyrgyzstan-experiencing-mosque-building-boom/>>

<sup>2</sup> Cooperman, Alan, Brian Grim J., Mehtab Karim S., Sahar Chaudhry, Becky Hsu, Jacqueline Wenger E., Kimberly McKnight, Megan Pavlischek, and Hilary Ramp. *MAPPING THE GLOBAL MUSLIM POPULATION*. Rep. Ed. Sandra Stencel, Andrea Useem, Tracy Miller, and Sara Tisdale. The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, Oct. 2009. Web. 20 July 2016. <<http://www.pewforum.org/files/2009/10/Muslimpopulation.pdf>>

In the summer of 2016, the above billboards were displayed throughout Kyrgyzstan as part of a government-supported campaign designed to contribute to this dialogue surrounding Islam and where it belongs in relation to the Kyrgyz cultural identity.

The first photograph is of Kyrgyz women wearing traditional dress and the adjacent photographs depict women, fully covered, wearing niqabs and burqas. Underneath, in Kyrgyz, it reads “Poor people, where are we heading?!” This billboard serves as evidence of the ongoing debate about the role Islam should play in Kyrgyz society.

The main focus of this project will be to collect stories about the experiences of individuals throughout the country. From the interviews, I hope to learn about a range of religious experiences with religion under Soviet rule, how those experiences changed in an independent Kyrgyzstan, what Islam means to people on a personal level, and how they balance their Kyrgyz and Muslim identities. I also hope to gain understanding of how Kyrgyzstan’s history – its roots in Tengrism, its history with Islam, and its history as a post-Soviet country – has impacted the religious identity of individuals and the multidimensional Kyrgyz identity.

I will be posting stories I collect on the National Geographic *Voices* blog, using writing, photography, videos, and maps to offer insight into the religious landscape of Kyrgyzstan, simultaneously shedding light onto the diversity of Muslim identity.