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# The Ethnic Dimension of Religious Extremism and Terrorism in Central Asia

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## **Abstract**

This study seeks to demonstrate and explain the variation in the extent of support for radical Islamic groups by ethnic minorities in the Central Asian states. It maintains that two related factors – the greater Islamicization of Uzbeks and Tajiks, and the escalating campaign of religious persecution of the ethnic minorities – have contributed to the greater support for Islamists among Uzbeks and Tajiks than among representatives of other ethnic groups. The research draws on social movement theory to explicate the impact of Islamic identification and religious persecution on the success of recruiting and mobilization efforts by radical Islamic groups.

## **Keywords**

ethnicity, radical Islam, terrorism, Central Asia

The collapse of the Soviet Union unleashed a flood of religious activity in parts of Central Asia. Along with the moderate and traditional forms of the Islamic faith, radical Islam reemerged in the Muslim communities of the Central Asian republics. Although people of all backgrounds have been drawn to radical Islam, Islamists have been less successful in gaining support in the communities of indigenous populations of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan than among the Uzbek and Tajik minorities. What explains variation in the extent of support for radical Islamic groups by ethnic minorities in Central Asia?

Scholars have long been interested in examining the genesis and impact of the Islamic threat on the regional stability and security of the individual Central Asian nations (see, for example, Malashenko and Olcott, 2001; Naumkin, 2005; Rashid, 2002; Sagdeev, 2000). Some have also been concerned that ethnicity might reemerge as a trigger for intra-state conflicts (Ahmedova and Leitich, 2001). Few, however, have attempted to juxtapose ethnicity and Islamic radicalism and systematically examine an ethnic dimension of religious extremism and political violence in Central Asia.<sup>1</sup> In

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this article, I aim to illuminate the differences in the ethnic makeup of members and supporters of radical Islamic groups in the Central Asian states, and suggest explanations for this variation.

I contend that two related factors – the greater Islamicization of Uzbeks and Tajiks, and religious persecution of the ethnic minorities – have contributed to stronger support of Islamists by Uzbeks and Tajiks than by other ethnic groups in Central Asia. For the purpose of this analysis, support for radical Islamic groups is defined broadly. It includes sharing the organizations' goals, which can be as specific as the goal of building the region-wide Islamic caliphate, or as broad as the task of saving all Muslims from suffering inflicted by the infidel rulers. Support for Islamists encompasses participation in various activities of a peaceful and violent nature coordinated by radical Islamic groups. It also denotes instances of identification with and membership in radical religious organizations.

To explicate how Islamic identification promotes support for radical Islamic groups, this research relies on the principles of social movement theory. The latter embraces an array of approaches that look at the structures of political opportunities, resource mobilization, and framing to explain why various forms of mobilization occur. In the context of this study, I treat radical Islamic movements as collective efforts to achieve political objectives outside of the sphere of established public institutions (Giddens, 1997: 51).

Like all world religions, Islam is internally diverse. It manifests itself in a vast collection of experiences, practices, and currents. Muslim societies, groups, and individual believers can hold very different, even conflicting positions within its religious and political framework. The Central Asian authorities, however, adhere to a very simplistic dichotomous understanding of Islam that has outlived the Soviet epoch. In this view, the state-regulated religious establishments are taken as legitimate and official, whereas everything else is deemed extremist and radical. In reality, Islam has many faces in Central Asia, and Islamic groups and movements are similarly diverse. What unites a spectrum of groups that I refer to as radical Islamic movements is the Islamist ideology that calls for a return to earlier models of Islam.<sup>2</sup> The radical Islamic groups, themselves, are far from being uniform. They strive for distinctive visions of Islam and espouse different methods of “struggle in the way of God” (Esposito, 2005: 93). Some groups interpret jihad in a purely military sense and resort to violence the purpose of in order to influence politics in the Muslim nations. Others abstain from coercion in transmitting their message, even if it is a radical one.

I begin by outlining the evidence in support of the ethnic aspect of religious extremism, militancy, and terrorism in Central Asia.<sup>3</sup> The second section presents explanations of observed variations. Next, I demonstrate how increased Islamicization and religious persecution of Uzbeks and Tajiks have contributed to the greater support of radical Islam by these ethnic minorities. An overview of the findings and broader theoretical inferences about the impact of Islamic socialization and framing on the receptiveness of Muslims to radical religious calls concludes the study.

## **Radical Islam in Central Asia: Focus on Ethnicity**

Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, scores of ethnic Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Turkmen, and Kazakhs were separated from their titular nationalities by the tangled borders of the newly independent states (see Table 1). In the past, the high concentration of Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, and Tajiks in the villages bordering the neighboring republics created a context for inter-ethnic clashes in the multi-ethnic communities of the Central Asian republics. Today, however, many political analysts reckon that the extant ethnic cleavages do not constitute a major threat to regional stability. Instead,

**Table 1.** Ethnic Composition of Central Asian States

Country/province	Uzbeks %	Tajiks %	Kyrgyz %	Turkmen %	Kazakhs %	Russians %	Population (millions)
Uzbekistan	75.8	4.8 <sup>a</sup>	0.9	0.6	4.2	6.03	23.0
– Ferghana Valley	84.2	5.0	4.2				6.2
– Andijan						3.9	
– Ferghana	85.0	1.4	4.2			4.9	2.0
– Namangan	83.6	5.5	2.1			1.9	2.4
	84.1	8.8	1.1				1.7
Tajikistan	24.8	68.4	1.3	n/a	0.4	3.2	5.9
– Sugd	31.3	56.9	1.2			6.5	1.8
Kyrgyzstan	14.2	0.8	60.3	n/a	0.9	15.7	4.7
– Ferghana Valley	26.7	1.6	73.5			2.7	2.5
– Osh							
– Jalalabad	28.0	2.1	63.8			2.4	1.5
– Osh City	24.5	0.6	67.3			3.3	0.9
	40.9	0.4	29.1			n/a	0.2
Kazakhstan	3.7	0.2	n/a	n/a	53.4	30.0	8.0
Turkmenistan	9.8	n/a	n/a	78.5	2.1	5.2	3.6

Notes: a. This figure underreports the actual number of ethnic Tajiks in Uzbekistan. In the past, the Soviet censuses identified the residents of Uzbekistan as Uzbeks irrespective of their ethnicity. Today many Tajiks identify themselves as Uzbeks to avoid social discrimination and governmental restrictions on educational and employment opportunities (Hunter, 2002).

Sources: Lubin and Rubin, 1999: 35; Szayna, 2003: 153–7.

the rise of radical Islam has been viewed as the most alarming development in the Central Asian region.

The problem of religious extremism and terrorism in Central Asia has been associated with activities of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Hizb ut-Tahrir, and a number of less well-known radical Islamic movements, such as Akramiya, Hizb an-Nusra, and Tablighi Jamaat among others. The IMU is a terrorist organization made infamous by a series of terrorist attacks and raids in the Central Asian states, and implicated in having ties with the Taliban and al-Qaeda networks. It was established with the aim of toppling President Karimov's secular regime in Uzbekistan, but later expanded its goals in an attempt to create a region-wide Islamic caliphate in Central Asia (Naumkin, 2003). Ideologically speaking, the IMU is a jihadist movement that is not truly Islamist. Its followers have no interest in the transformation of society or converting people to their beliefs. The organization has no political program beyond the conquest of power and the subsequent imposition of their vision of Islam upon people (Khalid, 2007: 16). Another group that has been increasingly active in Central Asia is the Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami (The Party of Islamic Liberation). It pursues the same goals as the IMU but officially eschews violence.

All Central Asian states adopted restrictive religious policies and measures in an attempt to control and manipulate Islam. The bans on unregistered Islamic organizations and persecution of the thousands of Muslims suspected of being in collaboration with Islamists drove radical Islamic groups underground, making their membership numbers and popularity difficult to estimate. The authoritarian nature of Central Asian governments, which often strategically manipulate the discourse on Islamic radicalization, also complicates scholars' efforts at data collection.

Although some studies, news articles, and government reports assert that radical Islam has made a forceful comeback in the last decade in Central Asia, and that its threat to regional security is growing, the reality is more complex. Central Asian states are bastions of moderate and traditional Islam,<sup>4</sup> and the rise of its radical and militant forms has been exaggerated by both the governments and the Islamists. Concerns about the radical Islamic movements persist for a reason, however, as a number of reputable analyses have recorded some growth in the rank-and-file membership of radical Islamic groups – see, for example, reports of the International Crisis Group (ICG), a leading nonpartisan organization with an established presence in Central Asia (ICG, 2003a, 2003b).

The overthrow of the Taliban regime and the destruction of al-Qaeda strongholds in Afghanistan severely weakened the IMU. The remnants of this militant organization created a number of splinter groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Turkistan (the latter term referring to the area encompassing all Central Asian countries) and the Islamic Jihad Union, affiliated to, but not controlled by, the IMU. The former IMU fighters continue to recruit and train volunteers in parts of Central Asia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, but the numbers of militant Islamists are probably much smaller than the figures declared by the governments of Central Asian states. After the last wave of terrorist violence in March 2004 in Uzbekistan, the focus of international attention shifted to nonmilitant Islamic groups, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, whose public support has been spreading rapidly across the region.<sup>5</sup>

The first records of Hizb ut-Tahrir's activities in Uzbekistan appeared in the mid-1990s. By 1999 the movement had attracted between 6,500 and 7,000 followers, and the membership had increased to 15,000 by 2003 according to the estimate of a well-informed Tashkent scholar (ICG, 2003a: 17). In Kyrgyzstan, where the group appeared in 1997, the membership was between 1,000 and 2,000 in the early 2000s, reaching as many as 7,000 to 8,000 members by 2009 (ICG, 2009). In Tajikistan, Hizb ut-Tahrir recruited more than 1,000 members in the early 2000s (ICG, 2003a: 18), and reports of its activities in southern Kazakhstan appeared around this time as well. There, observers estimate the movement's membership to be in the low hundreds. Yet recent reports of the Kazakh security service allege unprecedented growth in the activities of other radical Islamic groups. In 2003, Kazakh police seized over 1,000 leaflets with radical Islamic calls. By 2004, the number of seized pamphlets had increased to 11,000, and a cell of the Jamaat Mujahedin of Central Asia, with alleged ties to al-Qaeda, was dismantled the same year in Kazakhstan (Shpekbaev, 2005).

The Central Asian governments have felt threatened by the growing popularity of radical Islamic groups and the recurrence of raids by Islamic militants, but they have been deliberately inattentive to the ethnic aspect of religious extremism, militancy, and terrorism in their states. Yet, in each of the Central Asian republics, Islamists have been able to gain more support among Uzbeks and Tajiks than among the indigenous Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and Turkmen populations.

After the raids of Islamic militants on Kyrgyzstan in the summer of 1999, the IMU established a social base in the Ferghana valley, a densely populated and ethnically a mainly Uzbek territory divided politically between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The majority of the IMU recruits from the Kyrgyz population have been either Uzbek or Tajik (Amnesty International, 2005; Human Rights Watch, 2002; Kimmage, 2006). Official documents released by the Kyrgyz National Security Service contain references to the Uzbek ethnicity of Islamists.

The membership of nonmilitant Islamic groups operating in Kyrgyzstan has also been overwhelmingly Uzbek (ICG, 2003a; Rotar, 2006). Hizb ut-Tahrir, for example, has been very active in the Ferghana valley as well as in the southern Osh, Batken, and Jalal-Abad provinces of Kyrgyzstan, where the Uzbek minority is concentrated (Botobekov, 2001: 132). Kyrgyz security sources claim

that Uzbeks constitute up to 90 percent of the membership of Hizb ut-Tahrir, while ethnic Kyrgyz make up only 3 to 4 percent (ICG, 2003a: 18). In fact, almost all members of Hizb ut-Tahrir arrested in Kyrgyzstan have been ethnic Uzbeks, and nearly all Islamic clerics implicated in collaborating with banned religious groups have been of Uzbek origin (Karagiannis, 2005: 141).

Since the end of the civil war in 1997 Tajikistan has experienced a surge of militant attacks, most of which have been blamed on the IMU. The Tajik government claims that the IMU operatives are ethnic Uzbeks who crossed into Tajikistan from Uzbekistan fleeing prosecution by the Uzbek government in the aftermath of the 1999 terrorist bombings in Tashkent (Kimmage, 2006; Naumkin, 2005: 166). Hizb ut-Tahrir in Tajikistan is also heavily Uzbek, with the majority of its followers being concentrated in the northern Sugd (former Leninabad) province, where Tajikistan's Uzbek minority is primarily based. Some ethnic Tajiks have also been drawn to the group. However, the movement's core constituency remains predominantly Uzbek (ICG, 2004; Naumkin, 2005: 166).

The growing radicalization of Islam in Kazakhstan has also occurred mostly among ethnic Uzbeks. The radical Hizb ut-Tahrir has been active in the southern Shymkent oblast bordering Uzbekistan. The Kazakh authorities deny the existence of home-grown terrorists and religious extremists, maintaining that Islamists infiltrated Kazakhstan's southern regions from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Russia. Public reports released by the Kazakh security services and court rulings recounted by international human rights groups also refer to the Uzbek fellowship of the radical Islamic groups in Kazakhstan.

In Uzbekistan, as in other Central Asian states, Hizb ut-Tahrir derives its largest following from ethnic Uzbeks. The cities of Namangan, Kasansai, and Andijan, located in the Uzbek part of the Ferghana valley, are considered to be the stronghold of radical Islam in Central Asia. However, radical Islamic groups also enjoy wide support among ethnic Tajiks in Uzbekistan, according to the findings of field researchers and the background information on arrested Hizb ut-Tahrir members (Ahmedova and Leitich, 2001).

Little information about radical Islamic groups in Turkmenistan leaks to the outside world due to the total secrecy of the regime established by late President Niyazov. Some analysts contend that no Islamists could escape the reach of the powerful repressive apparatus of the Turkmen government. Other regional specialists maintain that radical Islamic groups operate underground in Turkmenistan. Hizb ut-Tahrir, for example, has been active in the Turkmen prisons (ICG, 2003a). Some of the moves of late President Niyazov serve as evidence of Turkmenbashi's growing concerns about the rise of radical Islam in the state and fear of the radicalization of Turkmenistan's Uzbek population. In 2003 Niyazov deposed and imprisoned Chief Mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah. Ibadullah is the ethnic Uzbek who had led Turkmenistan's Muslims for more than 10 years (Corley, 2004; Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 2005). Following Ibadullah's ousting, many prominent Muslim Uzbek leaders were arrested and sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment. The authorities unseated ethnic Uzbek imams and replaced them with ethnic Turkmen, even in the areas predominantly populated by the Uzbek minority (Rotar, 2004c). The government reportedly ordered the forced relocation of some Uzbeks living along the common Uzbek-Turkmen border. Turkmen Muslims were banned from receiving religious education in Uzbekistan, and the government shut down Turkmenistan's only university department of Muslim theology.

In the closed political and media environment, there has been no discussion of the motives of the Turkmen government in taking a harder line against ethnic Uzbeks in Turkmenistan. Central Asian analysts speculate that Ashgabat's attack on Uzbeks is an indirect consequence of turbulence in neighboring Uzbekistan and fear of the rise of pro-Islamic sentiments in the communities of Turkmenistan's Uzbek Muslims.

## Rallying for Radical Islam: Theory of Support and Joining

The recent tide of extremist and militant forms of Islam sweeping around the globe has reinvigorated research on radical Islamic groups. The majority of studies have drawn on social movement theories to explain the rise of these groups (Bayat, 2005; Karagiannis, 2005; Meijer, 2005; Wiktorowicz, 2002, 2004b). Some scholars emphasize the primacy of socioeconomic conditions and the psychological roots of Islamic activism. According to this reasoning, various socioeconomic and political pressures breed public discontent, thus precipitating collective action (for a succinct review see Naumkin, 2005: 21–31; Wiktorowicz, 2004a: 3). Other researchers focus on the rational facility of people who weigh up the pros and cons of joining Islamist groups. From this perspective, support for Islamic movements is a rational decision inspired by various selected incentives provided to people by radical Islamic groups (Wiktorowicz, 2004a: 4–5). With the proliferation of interest in the role of ideas, identities, culture, and cognition, some researchers have turned to the analysis of frames that mediate the impact of various background conditions on people's decisions. Frames render specific understanding of solutions to individuals' grievances, and provide the rationale needed to encourage support for radical Islamic groups (Benford and Snow, 2000; Chandler, 2005).

Socioeconomic and political difficulties are ubiquitous across Central Asia (see Table 2). High unemployment rates, poverty, and shrinking welfare, coupled with a lack of opportunities and poor governance, can serve as a breeding ground for radical Islamic movements. Yet socioeconomic and political distress is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for explaining the spread of radical Islam. Radical Islamic groups can emerge under conditions of social dislocation and economic stagnation. Islamists can also appear in societies that are relatively developed socioeconomically (Hafez, 2003; Naumkin, 2005: 22). There has been a lack of evidence that convincingly demonstrates the existence of a relationship between various indicators of levels of development and political deprivation, on the one hand, and the rise of radical Islam and terrorism on the other (see, for example, Hafez, 2003; Krueger and Maleckova, 2003; Piazza, 2006).

The members of Islamist movements in Central Asia have been drawn from the relatively well-off and educated urban populations as well as from the poorer segments of Central Asian societies. Kyrgyzstan's and Turkmenistan's development indicators have been consistently below those of Uzbekistan, but Muslims in these republics have been less prone to religious extremism than Muslims in Uzbekistan. The latter has become a hotbed of radical Islamic movements. However, other Central Asian states, particularly Tajikistan, have seen a steeper decline in living standards. In Kazakhstan, too, the patterns of poverty distribution do not square well with the patterns characterizing the spread of radical Islam, as shown in Table 2 (World Bank, 2004).

There is no hard evidence that the provision of monetary rewards by Islamists is the primary incentive for joining. Even if the recruits do receive payments, it is very unlikely that many would risk their personal security and freedom for small financial benefits (ICG, 2003b). The Uzbek and Tajik minorities hold acute social, political, and economic grievances as a result of persistent discrimination. However, the mere existence of deprivations is not enough to cause them to join the radical Islamic groups.

Why, against a background of progressive impoverishment of the population and the increasingly undemocratic nature of all Central Asian regimes, have more Uzbeks and Tajiks been drawn to radical Islam than representatives of other ethnic groups in the region? It is my contention that, *ceteris paribus*, two related factors – the greater Islamicization of these ethnic groups and their religious persecution – explain minorities' support for the radical Islamic groups. The impact

**Table 2.** Socioeconomic and Political Conditions in Central Asia

	GNI per capita (US \$), 2006	GDP per capita average annual growth rate (%), 1990–2006	Average annual rate of inflation (%), 1990–2006	% of population below US\$1 a day, 1995–2005	Employment to population ratio (%), both sexes (15+ years old), 2006	Total adult literacy rate, 2000–2005	Level of democracy, 2006 (Polity IV score on democracy) <sup>a</sup>
Kazakhstan	3690	2.6	83	<2	64.7	100	0
Kyrgyzstan	490	-0.9	51	<2	58.7	99	3
Tajikistan	390	-3.1	109	7	47.9	100	1
Turkmenistan	1340	-6.8	408	12	59.6	99	0
Uzbekistan	610	0.7	117	<2	57.7	n/a	0

Notes: a. Polity IV democracy index is an eleven-point scale (0–10) measure of institutionalized democracy derived from the scores on the competitiveness of political participation, the openness and competitiveness of executive recruitment, and constraints on the chief executive (Marshall and Jaggers, 2001). In this index, “0” stands for the lowest possible level of democracy.

Sources: UNICEF (2007); United Nations (2007).

of the identified factors can be best understood in the context of social movement theory, which provides a unifying framework of the conditions that are connected to mobilization processes, including structures of political opportunities, resource mobilization, and framing.

To induce participation in the high-risk activities of radical Islamic groups, individuals have to be persuaded that the cause they choose to support is worth the perils and costs of involvement (Wiktorowicz, 2004a: 7). The success of radical Islamic groups in convincing individuals to join depends not only on the structure of political opportunities and resource availability, but also on their ability to frame their appeals in such a way that they resonate with the prospective members (Chandler, 2005).

Poverty, discrimination, and other kinds of distress are important in that they compel people to seek out and embrace alternative views on the nature and causes of their problems. In the absence of other viable means of expressing dissent and effecting change, people can turn to radical Islamic groups that provide easy answers and simple solutions to social and individual concerns. Whether the movement's message will reach the target audience depends on the people's receptiveness to broad religious declarations. Those individuals who have had prior Islamic experiences are typically more receptive to the movement's religious appeals (Wiktorowicz, 2004a).

The more strongly an individual's identity is tied to Islam, the greater the likelihood that he or she will seek further exposure to Islamic teachings and become involved in the discussion and exchange of ideas over religious meanings and alternative ways of viewing the world (Wiktorowicz, 2004a: 8). The ability of an Islamic group to frame this debate in such a way that it resonates with the listeners' experiences of discrimination and deprivation, as well as their Muslim identity, will determine the success of its recruiting efforts. Once the frame alignment is achieved, i.e. individuals accept the group's interpretations and solutions to the pending problems, they become more committed to its cause through participation in a variety of micro- and macro-mobilization activities, which can include study groups, independent readings, one-on-one discussions of Islam, as well various types of nonviolent and violent action.

Repression by the state will affect the structure of the political opportunities available to the Islamist groups. Yet the nature of the relationship between state sanctions and dissent has been one of the most perplexing questions (see, for example, Lichbach, 1987; Moore, 1998). Some analysts claim that repressive measures inhibit mobilization efforts by increasing the costs of participation in various forms of dissent (Muller and Weede, 1990; Snyder and Tilly, 1972). For others, repression simply encourages more violent action (Khawaja, 1993).

Recent studies of Islamist movements support both theories. Preemptive and targeted state repression may reduce political violence and diminish the level of popular support for Islamist groups (Hafez, 2003: 72–6). However, as the level of violence employed by the state escalates to the point where it becomes indiscriminate and reactive, violent dissent by the radical Islamic groups will increase. Blanket repression will serve as a catalyst for increased public support of the Islamist opposition. Hafez (2003: xv), in his comparative studies of Islamic movements in Algeria and Egypt, as well as in Jordan, Pakistan, Tunisia, Kashmir, the southern Philippines, Chechnya, and Tajikistan, found that Muslims in these states turned to violent means in response to the employment of indiscriminate repressive measures by exclusionary governments against their citizens during the period of mass mobilization. State repression triggered “a dynamic of radicalization characterized by exclusive rebel organizations that isolate Islamists from their broader society and foster antisystem ideologies that frame the potentially healthy competition between secularism and Islamism as a moral struggle between faith and impiety” (Hafez, 2003: xv). State violence provides Islamists with an additional avenue for using Islam to legitimate the expression of both secular and religious concerns, and to frame their teachings in such a way that they resonate with individuals' experiences of repression.



The following sections of the article demonstrate how the historical differences in the introduction and practice of Islam in the societies of Central Asia translated into the varied roles of the Islamic faith among Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, and Turkmen. The greater Islamicization of Uzbeks and Tajiks increased the susceptibility of these ethnic groups to Islamists' religious teachings. The stronger religious identification exposed the devout Uzbek and Tajik Muslims to increased state persecution. In the absence of functioning interest-based organizations, or other institutions for channeling the minorities' frustration and dissent, Uzbeks and Tajiks used radical Islamic groups to express their grievances about social and political constraints and religious persecution.

## **Patterns of Islamicization in Central Asia and Its Impact on the Radicalization of Muslim Communities**

The Islamicization of Central Asia began in the second part of the 7th century. It was a protracted and uneven process affected by rich pre-Islamic traditions, sedentary and nomadic cultures, and the geopolitical situation in the region. Different patterns of the dissemination and practice of Islam unfolded in two parts of Central Asia, namely Mawarannahr (also known as Transoxiana), the territory between the Amy Darya and the Syr Darya rivers, and Turkistan, occupying vast lands to the northeast of Mawarannahr. The territory of Mawarannahr was populated by people of Iranian origin and some Turkic tribes. It was into these early settlements of farmers and traders that the Arab armies brought the new religion of Islam in the 7th and 8th centuries. The sedentariness of the ancestors of modern Tajiks and Uzbeks was an important factor in the early adoption of Islam and the close observance of Islamic laws and prohibitions in Transoxiana. Islam is a religion of settled people, since it requires a developed urban infrastructure for institutionalized Muslim practices. The natives of Mawarannahr built mosques and madrasas in their villages. The towns of Bukhara, Samarkand, and Khiva developed into the major cultural and religious centers of the Muslim world.

The wide steppes of Turkistan, populated by itinerant tribes, provided less fertile soil for Islam, and the nomadic culture was more difficult to convert. Although the present-day Turkmen had been in the Islamic orbit since the 10th century, most of the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz were converted to the Sunni branch of Islam by the end of the 19th century (Sagdeev, 2000: 8). In adopting Islam, the nomads adjusted the basic tenets of the new religion to their own "cosmological precepts," sociocultural values, and indigenous worldviews informed by the nomadic and tribal cultures (Allsen, 1997). The Islamic practices of the nomadic societies were intricately entwined with pre-Islamic pagan traditions and *adat*, a common law prevalent in the steppe (Klyashtorny and Sultanov, 1992: 150; Zhusupov, 2001). For that reason, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen were known as nominal Muslims, for they have never observed Islamic prohibitions and laws very closely.

Thus, historically Islam played a more superficial and varied role in the territories of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, formally inhabited by nomads, than in the regions of the sedentary Uzbek and Tajik Muslims. The policies of the tsarist and Soviet Russia strengthened this pattern. During the colonial period the tsarist administration made an important distinction between the nomadic and sedentary populations based on the role of Islam (Khalid, 2007: 33). In the nomadic societies, where Islam was viewed as one small piece in the mosaic of pre-Islamic traditions, the Russian state promoted Russification and supported the rule and practices of the indigenous law, *adat*. The sedentary populations associated with real Islam were to be governed by Shari'a. As a result, many Islamic institutions as well as educational and cultural spheres were left intact in both Turkistan and Transoxiana. In the sedentary regions, local judicial systems based on Islamic law

provided a space for the growing influence of the ulema, the most educated Muslim scholars, and the evolution of Islamic teachings (Khalid, 2007: 38).

The Bolshevik government decimated the main bastions of Islam. The new regime abolished religious educational institutions, banned the Shari'a courts, harassed the Islamic clergy, and closed the mosques (Ro'i, 2000: 714). Although the Soviet assault on the Islamic way of life was ferocious, the destruction of the main features of pre-1917 Islam was not total. The Soviet purges drove Muslim ulema (legal scholars), underground, helping to preserve the pre-Soviet elements of Islam (Sagdeev, 2000: 9). The faith also stayed alive in the people's consciousness and social practices, particularly in the most remote areas of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, where a significant number of mosques survived state repression. Toward the end of the Second World War the Stalin regime softened its stance on religion. In 1943 the government allowed the establishment of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan and permitted religious observance and education without persecution. Those madrasas that had survived began offering theological education to a limited number of students, and some of the Soviet Muslims were allowed to travel abroad (Khalid, 2007: 78).

When the Soviet government loosened its grip on religion, Islam made a vigorous comeback. Yet the Islamic revival in Central Asia was very uneven. The traditional centers of Islamic activity – Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as well as the northern parts of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan inhabited by Uzbeks, Uighurs, and Dungans – became the epicenters of the revived Islamic tradition (see, for example, Ro'i, 2000: 460). In the late 1950s, 202 of 495 functioning mosques in the Soviet Union were in Uzbekistan, 18 in Kazakhstan, and only 4 in Turkmenistan (Ro'i, 2000: 62). The urge to open and register mosques in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan was much less strong than in the historically sedentary areas populated by Uzbeks and Tajiks (Ro'i, 2000: 185). The latter two ethnic groups had a disproportionately high representation among the Islamic clergy.

After the establishment of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, some reformist ulema distanced themselves from the official clergy controlled by the Soviet regime. They took self-consciously conservative positions on issues of Islamic tradition and called for the re-Islamicization of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. During the Brezhnev era, some of these Muslim clerics began teaching selected students in the underground religious circles in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (Khalid, 2007: 114). Later these study groups evolved into politicized groupings of Islamic devotees, some of which identified with Wahhabism (Miloslavski, 2001: 82). The other three “stans” – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan – saw very little of this kind of religious activity (Khalid, 2007: 114).

In addition, after independence, Muslim activists from Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and other Muslim states inundated Central Asia (Rashid, 2001). The Uzbek and Tajik communities attracted the bulk of these Muslim “missionaries” due to the previous contacts of the Uzbek and Tajik ulema with the outside religious world, and the concentration of the Islamic infrastructure in these Central Asian republics. The Uzbek and Tajik communities received a significant inflow of human and financial resources, utilized for the construction of new mosques and madrasas. Some 6,000 mosques were built in Uzbekistan in 1993, compared with 300 in 1989 (Yerekesheva, 2004: 584). In Tajikistan 2,000 new mosques were opened during 1989–91. Kyrgyzstan, on the other hand, had only 1,000 mosques by 1995, with the majority of those mosques located in southern Kyrgyzstan (Karagiannis, 2005: 143; Yerekesheva, 2004: 584). In Kazakhstan there were some 1,402 mosques built in the late 1990s (Yerekesheva, 2004: 585).

Thus, in the communities of the Tajik and Uzbek Muslims, social and political conditions, the presence of influential Islamic clergy, a developed religious infrastructure, and the intellectual environment were ripe for the emergence of radical Islam. The societies of the indigenous Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and Turkmen Muslims lacked these important preconditions. Furthermore, the return

to Islam took a somewhat different form in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the two republics that had been subjected to intense Russification as a consequence of the influx of Russians. There the public authorities and some ordinary people were ready to embrace Islam as part of the greater ethnic idea, and to assert a local identity against the Russians who had long overshadowed the local cultural life (Khalid, 2007: 119).

In a nutshell, the differences in the prior socialization experiences with Islam exposed Uzbek and Tajik Muslims to radical Islamic teachings. The “cognitive opening” prompted by the socio-economic and political crises made them more receptive to radical Islamic calls typically framed so as to resonate with people’s personal and social problems. The extensive social and religious networks and the system of religious institutions also enabled the outreach by Islamists.

Hizb ut-Tahrir in Central Asia has been particularly successful in utilizing its ideology in recruiting and mobilizing efforts. The movement has a long history of legal and underground work, and considerable experience in propagandizing. The movement’s pundits prepared succinct descriptions of the religious, political, and economic foundations of an idealized Muslim state using a selective interpretation of Islamic theology and history. Hizb ut-Tahrir developed theological arguments grounded in passages from the Qur’an to vilify the governing regimes and defend the promulgated religious ideals (Badadzhanov, 2001; Karagiannis, 2005: 144).

The emissaries of Hizb ut-Tahrir have typically used the existing social and religious networks to launch new relationships with the congregation. The mosques and seminaries have also served as a convenient recruitment platform. After listening to the imam’s sermon, Muslims may stay in the mosque to discuss aspects of the religion. Questions about Islam or people’s individual concerns can be raised and discussed in circles of friends or other social groups. It is in these guided conversations, as well as through leaflets and messages on the Internet, that the members of Islamist movements would employ their views on Islam to legitimize listeners’ secular and religious frustrations and questions, and attempt to relate their teachings to people’s experiences and concerns.

The Islamists rarely offer concrete explanations for problems, particularly in the social and economic domains. Instead, they invoke “absolute” values and rely on effective emotional appeals. Pleas for equality and social justice, for example, have traditionally permeated the rhetoric of Islamists. In Central Asia, Hizb ut-Tahrir has attempted to match these appeals to the societies’ unique contexts by introducing elements of a socioeconomic and political program into their doctrine. In Tajikistan, which is still recovering from the civil war carnage, Hizb ut-Tahrir has been stressing nonviolence as a method of struggle for their Islamic ideas (Naumkin, 2005: 161). In the Uzbek communities, Hizb ut-Tahrir has promoted a vision of a borderless and nationless Islamic state. For many Uzbeks who feel dissatisfied with their post-communist status and isolated from their families in Uzbekistan, these views have been very attractive (Karagiannis, 2005: 142).

The simplicity of the Islamists’ teachings makes them very effective. The Islamist groups advocate the reconstruction of an ideal society or an Islamic state, in which socioeconomic problems are nonexistent or can be resolved by implementing the principles of Shari’a law. This religious message appears convincing in a region of growing inequality, rampant corruption, and rigid authoritarianism. In particular those who have been socialized in the Islamic context are more predisposed to embrace and defend these views.

## **Religious Persecution of Ethnic Minorities**

Because of the greater spread of radical Islam in the communities of Uzbek and Tajik Muslims and the tight association of Islamism with these ethnic groups, nearly all the measures aimed at

combating terrorism and religious extremism in Central Asia have impinged on the Uzbeks and Tajiks. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, following the IMU raids in 1999, hundreds of ethnic Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Afghans were rounded up on suspicion of collaboration with the Uzbek and Tajik fighters (Human Rights Watch, 1999). In a series of counterterrorism operations following the incursions, Kyrgyzstan's security forces raided Uzbek communities, and some Uzbek settlers were detained without arrest warrants (Azimov, 2006). In 2006 the Kyrgyz authorities conducted more counterterrorism sweeps, killing some people and arresting dozens of alleged Islamic radicals, mostly ethnic Uzbeks (Firdavsi, 2006).

The Kyrgyz law-enforcement agencies have persecuted several Uzbek imams for their supposed involvement in radical Islamic groups and tolerated occasional abductions of Islamic activists by the Uzbek secret service. In the fall of 2006, following the government's killing of the prominent ethnic Uzbek religious leader Rafiq Qori Kamuluddin, implicated in ties with the IMU, the security services of Kyrgyzstan developed a special plan for strengthening state control of the republic's Islamic clergy. The plan envisages, among other things, extensive monitoring of the Kyrgyz citizens of Uzbek and Uighur origin who have lived in the south of the republic, and those individuals who have arrived from Uzbekistan (Djuraev, 2006).

For a long time, there has been a deep-seated animosity between Tajiks and Uzbeks,<sup>6</sup> which developed into mutual distrust and a tenuous relationship between the Tajik and Uzbek governments (Torbakov, 2001). The civil war in Tajikistan reinvigorated this historical rivalry between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The Tajik government accused its Uzbek counterpart of supporting political unrest and separatist aspirations in Tajikistan's Leninabad oblast (Human Rights Watch, 1998). This most "Uzbekified" part of Tajikistan has traditionally maintained strong political, economic, and cultural ties with Tashkent. Dushanbe authorities also insisted that Mahmud Khudorberdiyev, the rebellious Uzbek colonel, had received some assistance from Uzbekistan (Parker et al., 2000). Following the 1997 uprising led by the renegade colonel, the government of Tajikistan took revenge on the Uzbek population. After the government's detachments drove off the rebel brigade, the troops looted the ethnic Uzbeks' homes to punish them for their alleged support of the commander (Open Society Institute, 1998).

For Dushanbe's authorities, Hizb ut-Tahrir was an "Uzbek movement" (ICG, 2003b). Naturally, most arrests of alleged members of Hizb ut-Tahrir occurred in areas with a high concentration of ethnic Uzbeks (ICG, 2003b). The followers of Hizb ut-Tahrir have endured unfair trials and been abused in detention, and the relatives of the movement's supporters have been harassed by the government of Tajikistan (Abdullaev, 2004).

Uzbekistan's government has traditionally used a decidedly authoritarian approach toward the supporters of Islamist movements. Tashkent's authorities have also become known for their persecution of Muslims of Tajik descent. The latter have been portrayed as the Islamists' sympathizers, and the "terrorist" image has served as a pretext for harassing them (Amirkulov, 2005). In 2000 the Uzbek security services evicted several hundred Tajik families from villages in the southern Sukhandrya region with the alleged purpose of clearing the area of IMU troops. The settlers were transferred to a wilderness in the southern Sherabad district, while the Uzbek air force destroyed their homes. About 70 ethnic Tajiks from Dara-i-Nihon, including 21 teachers, were charged with complicity in terrorism. The defendants confessed to the alleged crimes under duress and were imprisoned for between eight and eighteen years (US Department of State – Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2001).

Regional experts have noted the impact of Tashkent's indiscriminate repression on the radicalization of Muslim believers and the spread of radical Islam in Uzbekistan. For instance, most of the

female suicide bombers who took part in the 1999 explosions in Tashkent were family members of the prosecuted Uzbek Muslims, and their violence was a sign of protest against the harsh policies of the government of Uzbekistan (Naumkin, 2005: 116). The deepening resentment of the Tajik population has also corresponded to the growing influence of Hizb ut-Tahrir. The movement enjoys wide support among Uzbekistan's Tajiks, who have become discontented with the persistent oppression, growing poverty and unemployment, and the heightened border controls with Tajikistan introduced by Uzbekistan.

In Kazakhstan, fewer ethnic Uzbeks have been drawn to Islamist movements than in the neighboring states. This stands in marked contrast to the situation in southern Kyrgyzstan, where virtually all Kyrgyz members of Hizb ut-Tahrir are ethnic Uzbeks. One reason for this discrepancy is Kazakhstan's ethnic composition. There are fewer Uzbeks in Kazakhstan than in Kyrgyzstan (3.7 percent as against 14.2 percent of the total population), and Russians constitute the largest nontitular nationality. Until 2005 the law-enforcement agencies of Kazakhstan had no legal grounds for prosecuting Islamists, and the activities of Hizb ut-Tahrir were not officially banned (ICG, 2003b). Kazakhstan's more liberal religious policy and the smaller number of constraints on the rights of the minority groups have been an important barrier to the mobilization of Uzbek Muslims.

This situation may change, however. In 2004 several ethnic Uzbeks from the Shymkent oblast of Kazakhstan were implicated in a series of Tashkent suicide bombings in Uzbekistan. Following these attacks, Kazakhstan's government intensified measures against radical Islamic groups and tightened the control over religious practices, particularly in the south of the country. Uzbek imams in southern Kazakhstan came under renewed pressure to accept their subordination to the state-backed Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kazakhstan (Ponomarev and Jukeyeva, 2002). Instituted in 1990, the Spiritual Administration initiated the displacement of ethnic Uzbeks from their positions as imams, and today most of the mosques in the south of Kazakhstan are headed by ethnic Kazakhs. This is upsetting local Uzbeks, who choose to commute to Uzbek villages for important prayers because, in their view, Kazakh religious leaders possess less profound theological knowledge than the Uzbek clergy (Rotar, 2004a, 2004b). Since 2004 all imams in the south of Kazakhstan have had to pass a compulsory re-attestation (Rotar, 2005). In a sign of the growing discontent with the religious policies of the Kazakh administration, Muslims of Kazakhstan staged an unauthorized demonstration in Almaty in January 2005. Following this event, the Kazakh security forces carried out a stream of arrests of the supposed members of Hizb ut-Tahrir accused of staging the unauthorized protest. The Kazakh authorities began closely monitoring the Uzbek-populated areas of Kazakhstan. Arrests of members of banned organizations and the seizure of Islamist literature have become more common in the republic's south (Mukhametrakhimova, 2006).

## Conclusion

The goals of this research were to demonstrate the differences in the ethnic makeup of radical Islamic movements in Central Asia, as well as to explain the observed variations in the extent of the support for radical Islamic groups among various ethnic minorities. Although representatives of all ethnic backgrounds have been drawn to radical Islamic groups, Islamists' proselytizing efforts have been particularly effective among ethnic Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, as well as among Uzbeks in Tajikistan and Tajiks in Uzbekistan. The study attributed this success to the greater Islamicization of Uzbeks and Tajiks and to the religious persecution of the ethnic minorities.

The rise of Islam in the communities of Uzbek and Tajik Muslims has demonstrated the importance of Muslim identity, ideology, and framing in garnering their support. The failure of secular democratic resistance in Central Asia is linked to the fact that democracy, as defined in the West, is an alien notion to many Central Asians, who have been less inclined to fight for democratic ideals and ideology imposed from abroad. The Central Asian authorities have employed the rhetoric of democracy to boost their international and domestic image, but have also repeatedly stated that they would promote their own “special” types of democracy informed by the specific circumstances of their countries’ development.

Historical experiences from the Soviet and colonial past have left their mark on the internal developments of the Central Asian republics. The legacy of communist rule has been a big obstacle to establishing democratic rule. The resurgence of Islam, a potent political and cultural force, has stifled other nationalist trends and the establishment of democratic institutions (Hunter, 2001). The Central Asian authorities eagerly embraced Islam, if only in its official permutation, and used the Islamic creed to bolster their legitimacy. The advocacy of democratic ideas and the activities of democratic organizations were severely curtailed in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where democratic movements received more popular support, these movements were much weaker than the movements for civil rights and political freedoms active in Eastern and Central Europe.

This study found that Islamists’ efforts were less successful in the communities of the ethnic Kyrgyz. Part of the reason for this stems from the fact that their Islamic identity is relatively new and not well-defined. The religious beliefs of the Kyrgyz Muslims have always been rather eclectic. Recently, however, some have noted the growing religious self-consciousness and religious seeking among the ethnic Kyrgyz. The soaring grassroots interest in Islam, combined with the worsening economic and political situation in the country, reopened a window of opportunity for radical Islamic groups. Hizb ut-Tahrir, for example, has adjusted its framing and proselytizing tactics there. Traditionally it focused on vilifying the rule of President Karimov in Uzbekistan. Today it calls for the toppling of the Kyrgyz secular government. More of Hizb ut-Tahrir’s literature is published in Kyrgyz, with some leaflets condemning the policies of Kyrgyzstan’s “infidel” and corrupt leaders.

Since the rise of radical Islam is, to a large extent, about religious beliefs and ideas, it should be responded to at this level as well. The state-imposed strictures on media freedom and religious controls are encouraging the turn to Islamism, which continues to fill the informational and ideological vacuum created after the Soviet demise. The new legislative measures adopted by each of the Central Asian states, with the aim of combating terrorism and religious extremism, prevent the local and national media from engaging in any serious discussion or in-depth coverage of religious topics. Instead of stifling religious freedom and limiting discussion of the issues of faith, the Central Asian governments need to promote religious and spiritual education, to encourage dialogue within Islam, and to support the expansion of critical coverage of religious issues by broadcasting organizations. One of the most effective strategies for coping with the growth of radical Islamic movements and the politicization of Islam is through enlisting the assistance of competent theologians at the local and national levels. For this to happen, the official Islamic clergy should expand its educational, ideological, and informational work with the population to improve its reputation and the perception of religious knowledge, and increase trust.

The stronger Islamic identification of Uzbeks and Tajiks not only facilitated their mobilization by radical Islamic movements, but also exacerbated ethnic and religious tensions in the ethnically mixed communities of the Central Asian states. There has long been a latent rivalry among the

Central Asian ethnos regarding their “Muslimness” (Lubin and Rubin, 1999). The settled Uzbeks believe that they are better Muslims than the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs, whereas Tajiks contend that they are the “real Muslims” of Central Asia, as opposed to the peoples of Turkic origin (Ahmedova and Leitich, 2001). This competition around the degree of religiosity of different ethnic groups gave rise to a widespread practice of constructing ethnically separate mosques and religious schools for Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, and other Muslims. The governments’ clampdown on the Uzbek and Tajik believers has further complicated relations between ethnic minorities and the authorities of the Central Asian states, reinforcing the dividing lines between titular nationalities and other ethnicities. The correspondence of the growing inter-ethnic tensions with the activities of Islamists has been a deeply troubling development, particularly in Kyrgyzstan. The south of the Kyrgyz republic has seen an alarming number of small-scale clashes between the indigenous population and the Uzbeks and Tajiks (Khamidov, 2002). The local authorities have recorded a number of violent confrontations with the representatives of other confessions (Rotar, 2006). Some public officials have expressed concerns that in future Islamists will attempt to foment an inter-ethnic conflict in the Ferghana valley in order to destabilize the situation in the region and weaken the governing regimes.

The evidence examined in this study suggests that the strategy of governmental reprisals has been ineffective in eliminating or reducing the spread of radical Islam. The governments’ repression served merely as a temporary deterrent that drove some Islamists underground. Yet a vigorous region-wide crackdown on radical Islam has resulted over time in more militancy and an increase in the number of religious zealots. Repressive policies toward Muslims practicing their faith outside of religious confines established by the Central Asian states has become another in the series of grievances that has radicalized moderate believers and generated widespread sympathy for the oppressed in the broader population.

To neutralize the threat of radical Islam, the Central Asian governments need to explore alternative paths. Socioeconomic and political reforms that will improve people’s lives regardless of their ethnic background are necessary conditions for the achievement of social harmony in the Central Asian republics. The governments of the Central Asian states should develop and enact measures that will assist the ruling elites in gaining the support of moderate Islamic groups and those Islamists who are open to dialogue with state officials. To thwart radical groups’ attempts at gaining large-scale support among Uzbeks and Tajiks, the governments have to foster initiatives designed to accommodate the interests of these ethnic groups, and to integrate the ethnic minorities into the Central Asian states and societies. Repressive tactics against minority groups are counterproductive and should be avoided at all costs. The use of counterterrorist and counterextremist operations as a pretext for suppressing minorities’ campaigns against various forms of ethnic discrimination is an unacceptable move that will stir up hostility toward the governing regimes rather than lay the foundations for stability in the region.

## Notes

1. Notable exceptions are Oliver Roy (2000) and Dr Emmanuel Karagiannis. The latter claims that Hizb ut-Tahrir is essentially an Uzbek phenomenon, particularly in southern Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.
2. There are many conceptual disagreements over the best terminology and precise meaning of different strands and manifestations of Islam. For discussion of some basic concepts and terms in Islam, including but not limited to “Islamic fundamentalism,” “Salafism,” “Islamism,” “jihadism,” and others, see Khalid (2007) and Naumkin (2005), for example.

3. Data on detentions, arrests, trials, and thwarted terrorist attempts in the republics of Central Asia were retrieved from a larger dataset on states' responses to terrorism that the author created using event data collection techniques. The primary source of information for coding events on various dimensions of states' responses to terrorism comprised the wire reports downloaded using the LexisNexis® academic newswire service. To triangulate the conclusions from the event data analysis, I conducted a series of unstructured interviews with political analysts, representatives of human rights groups, and ordinary practitioners of Islam in Kyrgyzstan. I also systematically examined reports (in English and Russian) published by the reputable analytical sources that monitor political and security trends in Central Asia, along with evidence from ethnographic and field studies of radical Islamic groups.
4. The majority of Central Asians belong to Hanafi Sunnism, the most tolerant and liberal school of thought of Sunni Islam. According to the *CIS World Fact Book* (2008), in Kyrgyzstan 75 percent of the population professes Islam; in Kazakhstan 45 percent; in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan 85 and 88 percent, respectively; and in Uzbekistan 89 percent.
5. The situation may change. In the wake of the shootouts between the police and armed Islamists in the Uzbek capital in the summer of 2009, the Central Asian authorities have been alarmed by the resurgence of activities by IMU militants.
6. One of the long-standing sources of conflict in Uzbek/Tajik relations is the divergent interpretation of national historiographies and competing claims to Bukhara and Samarkand. During the era of national delimitation, the Soviet government transferred these two important centers of Tajik urban culture to Uzbekistan. Modern Tajikistan continues to trace its cultural-historical background to the Samanid empire, which extended beyond the boundaries of present-day Tajikistan. Uzbekistan, on the other hand, maintains a competing historical narrative, through which it lays claims to all the historic names, persons, and written and architectural artifacts located on its modern territory, including Samarkand and Bukhara. For further discussion, see Torbakov (2001).

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