

«Although the definitions of “traditional” and “tolerant” do not quite correctly apply to religion and its various movements, for the past two decades, they have often appeared in official political rhetoric and informational space», notes an expert on religion, Rustam Azizi in his original article for the analytical platform CABAR.asia.

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### Article Summary:

- With the acquisition of independence, the problems related to religion actualized in the former Soviet republics;
- The Hanafi madhhab affirmation in the history of Central Asia is associated with the Samanid dynasty, under whose rule the madhhab acquired official status;
- The revival of the Hanafi madhhab reformation and modernization began in the 1970s, that is, during the heyday of the USSR and its atheistic ideology;
- The end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s showed the unpreparedness of local religious leaders and institutions to compete with the new wave and respond to new challenges;
- The state intervened in the opposition of the “old” to a “new” wave, and it made a choice in favor of traditions. The Hanafi madhhab is almost declared the official religious movement of Tajikistan;
- The neighboring countries notice and explore Tajikistan’s experience in this area.

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The topic of the relationship of “traditional” or “local” Islam with modernized or radical fundamentalist trends has attracted greater public attention in recent years. At the same time, often not quite correct evaluations and conclusions are made in discussions of this issue.

What is “traditional” or “local” Islam? Is the use of these definitions appropriate and correct? Where is that red line that separates “traditional” Islam from “non-traditional”, “local” Islam from “alien trends”? What of this is true and what is fiction?

### **The Formation of Issue in the Context of Geopolitical and Globalization Processes**

Globalization processes, along with indisputable achievements and advantages, bring as well a number of challenges and threats to traditional societies and nation states. These challenges are particularly sensitive for young states that are on the initial stage of forming an independence and building national identity. Religion, Islam in particular, has become a

part of general globalization processes with all the ensuing consequences. The religious factor began to play an important role in the late 1980s. This is tied with the weakening of the Soviet state’s control over religion and the strengthening of centrifugal and nationalist tendencies in the national republics. In these countries, an interest to such elements of identity as language and religion has increased, which played to a certain extent important role in the first inter-ethnic and inter-religious clashes and conflicts.



*In the 1990s, a new wave of clergy from young people educated abroad appeared. Photo: ozodi.org*

With independence acquisition, the problems related to religion actualized in the former USSR republics. In the young states, a question of finding a new optimal model of the relationship between the state and religion arose. In the Muslim republics of Central Asia, the situation developed in different scenarios. For the Turkic-speaking Muslim republics of Central Asia, the role model to some extent was the Turkish model with its at that time strong emphasis on secularism, building a national state and the integration of Turkic-speaking nations. However, Iran and Afghanistan were close to Tajiks by language and cultural-historical heritage. The official titles of Iran and Afghanistan included the term “Islamic Republic”. The influence of these factors can be illustrated by the Tajik Islamists’ slogans, that copied the rhetoric of the Islamic revolution in Iran, sometimes even out of the local context.

For example, on the cities’ squares, one could hear the following slogans: “Istiqlol, ozodi, jumhuri Islomi!” (Independence, freedom, Islamic republic!), “Amrico, Amrico, marg ba nayrangii tu! Huni shahidoni mo, mechakad az jangi tu” (America, America, death to your

intrigues! The blood of our martyrs flows from your hands!), “Rohi mo - rohi Alist, gumu gur shav communist!” (Our path is Ali’s path, wind up dead in the grave, communist!), etc.

### **An Attempt to Determine the Place of Religion in the Socio-Political Processes**

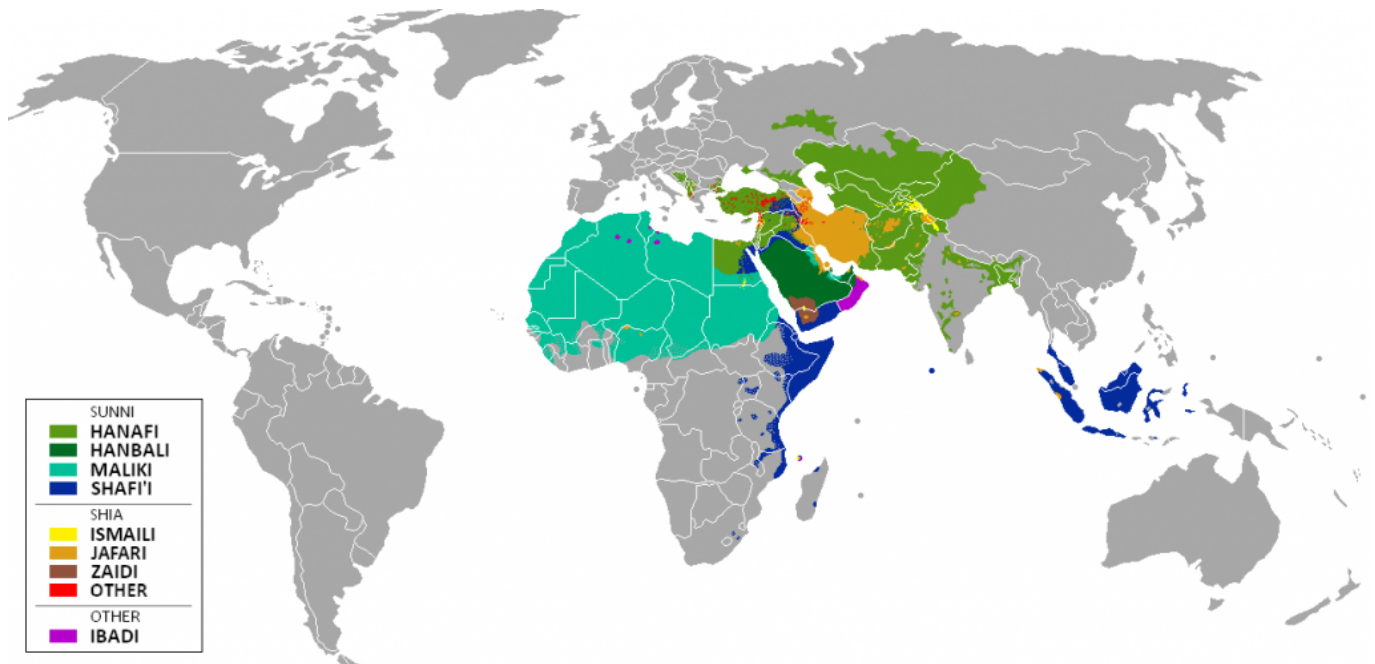
After the inter-Tajik reconciliation agreement was signed, the Islamists were included in governance as a political actor, and the revival of religious life began in the republic that had just returned to peace. By this time, the first students who received religious education abroad began to arrive in the country, and foreign emissaries and preachers of various religious movements appeared. The end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s showed the unpreparedness of local religious leaders and institutions to compete with the new wave and respond to new challenges. The authorities’ neutrality in this matter led to the local authoritative religious figures being pushed out to the outer circles.

**The calls to support the “local”,  
“traditional”, “tolerant” Islam began to  
appear in political rhetoric only since the  
beginning of the 2000s.**

Although the definitions of “traditional” and “tolerant” do not quite correctly apply to religion and its various movements, for the past two decades, they have often appeared in official political rhetoric and informational space. Noting the ambiguousness of the definition of “traditional” and “non-traditional” in a Muslim context, since Islam does not have an official church institution that would give a legitimate definition of “right” and “wrong”, we emphasize that further, with certain reservations, under “traditional” we mean the “historically established form of religious practice in a particular territory”.

### **What Does “Traditional” and “Local” Mean for Tajikistan?**

In a context of Tajikistan, Hanafi and Ismaili movements of Islam are traditionally influential. The latter, despite the currently small number of adherents, has historically had a significant influence on the formation of the Tajik cultural and religious life and scientific and literary heritage. We cannot agree with some authors’ claims of the “traditionalism” of Sufism, since Sufi tariqas (*fraternities - ed.*) have always been half-closed communities that claimed some kind of elitism and choseness, which does not allow us to talk about popularity and common character of Sufi tradition. However, the indisputable influence of Sufi teachings’ elements on literature and folk traditions should also be taken into account. As it is known, the Hanafi doctrine is a traditional madhhab (*Shari’a law school in Islam - ed.*) for most Muslims in Tajikistan, as well as, indeed, in the CIS countries. The name of Imam Abu Hanifa is known to Muslims, followers of various madhhabs, as well as to those who study Islam professionally, or at least have an interest in it. This is not surprising: adherents of the Hanafi school are the absolute majority in the world among other religious and legal interpretations of Islam.



The approximate geography of Muslim madhhabs distribution. Photo: geocurrents.info

Such strong positions of the Hanafi madhhab can be explained by several reasons. Historically, most of Imam Abu Hanifa’s students were from Central Asia. However, this does not mean that Hanafi madhhab or the so-called madhhab “*Ahl ar-Ra’y*” (*supporters of common sense or rationalists*) was immediately established across the region. Up to the end of the XI century, the positions of the “*Ahl al-Hadith*” school (*supporters of traditions or traditionalists*) were very strong in Mawarannahr and Khurasan. Such great personalities in the Islamic world like Imam al-Bukhari, Imam al-Tirmidhi, Darimi as-Samarqandi, Darulkutni as-Samarqandi and others are connected with “*Ahl al-Hadith*” school. In addition, in Mawarannahr there were followers of Shafiites (*one of the legal schools in Sunni Islam - ed.*), Shiite Twelvers (*the prevailing school within Shiite Islam - ed.*), Ismailis (*a complex of religious movements in the Shiite branch of Islam - ed.*) and the Qarmatians (*radical movement in Shiite Islam, which focuses on violent methods of promoting ideology - ed.*).

The Hanafi madhhab affirmation is associated with the Samanid dynasty, under whose rule the madhhab acquired official status and all Qadis (*Shari’a judge — ed.*) were appointed from among the adherents of this madhhab. Russian expert on Islamic studies Prozorov is right in his assertion that there are no exact criteria for defining the “orthodox” or “heretical” in Islam, and the orthodox movements were often defined by the rulers<sup>[1]</sup>. Nevertheless, by the X century, the Hanafi madhhab became the dominant and a kind of “official” madhhab in the region. Central Asian scholars became the leaders and “trendsetters” in the madhhab. This situation remained unchanged until the middle of the XIII century. All this time, the Hanafi madhhab kept up with the times - a huge legal, socio-



political and cultural heritage has been created in accordance with the requirements of that era. Hanafi preachers spread Islam among the Turkic nomads, and contributed to the Islamization of the Volga region and Siberia<sup>[2]</sup>. [2] During this period, the madhhab got so firmly rooted in the life and traditions of the inhabitants of the region that, according to medieval historians and geographers, mainly Hanafi inhabited it. After the Mongol invasion, most prominent scientists moved to India and Asia Minor, and Mawarannahr lost intellectual leadership in the madhhab. The Hanafi madhhab in the region has already ceased to be a factor of modernization, and was aimed more at preserving traditions.

### **Attempts of Modernization Within the Hanafi School**

Nevertheless, at all times, certain individuals have attempted to reform and modernize the madhhab; these attempts can be divided into two groups:

- 1) First group tried to bring together the madhhab with the other Sunni madhhabs, relying on the Quran and the Sunnah (*the sacred Muslim tales about the life of the Prophet Muhammad supplementing the Quran - ed.*), and resolve some controversies of the madhhab's founders with these primary sources.
- 2) The second group focused on a rational tradition and tried to modernize the madhhab in accordance with the real needs of the era.

Attempts to reform and modernize the madhhab in the region resumed at the end of the XIX century and were connected with Jadidism (*the sociopolitical and intellectual movement among the Muslim (mainly Turkic) peoples in the Russian Empire at the end of the XIX - early XX century - ed.*), which was followed by a galaxy of eminent scientists and writers. They tried to reform the educational system, the legal and political systems of the country, but met fierce resistance from both the traditional clergy and official authorities. After the Soviet power establishment, they disappeared from view, and the situation in the madhhab returned to medieval traditions.

As surprisingly as it sounds, the revival of madhhab reformation and modernization began in the 1970s, that is, during the heyday of the USSR and its atheistic ideology. There were two waves of the reformation and the revival of Islam, and, accordingly, the Hanafi madhhab in Soviet Tajikistan:

**The first wave falls on the 1970s** and is associated with the name of Mavlavi Hindustani. During this period, he taught some representatives of the clergy authoritative today, such as Domullo Hikmatullohi Tojikobodi, Mahsumi Saidrahmon, Asomuddin and others. Hindustani, educated in Indian madrasas, brought relatively new teaching methods and study guides from there. In addition, he was from Kokand and some local customs and traditions were alien to him, so he was critical of them. The other influential representative of the clergy of that period is Eshoni Turajon. Their activities were aimed at censuring some “superstitions” and “innovations” in folk rituals and traditions, increasing religious education and culture of at least a certain number of people. The clergy formed the first political views then [3]. Although, at that time some attempts were made to modernize the madhhab in accordance with the era requirements, most of the clergy still held traditional views or chose a policy of non-intervention.



Mavlavi Hindustani. Photo: wikipedia.org

**The second wave in the 1980s** embraced the wider circles of society, and the range of issues discussed expanded:

**Modernization and reformation of the educational process.** Said Abdullo Nuri and Muhammadsharif Khimmatzoda indoctrinated their students with the works of Islamist thinkers and reformers Sayyid Qutb and his brother Muhammad Qutb, Mohammed al-Ghazali of Egypt, Mawdudi and others. They translated the popular at that time books “Inventions around Islam” and “A dispute with the atheist.” These books, due to their limited capacity, were reproduced in photocopies. Attention was paid to the study of Tafsirs (*Quran interpretations - ed.*) and Hadiths (*legends about the words and actions of the Prophet Muhammad - ed.*) which were forgotten in Bukhara madrasas’ program.

### **Reformation of Views on Religious Rites and Traditions**

Here, certain circles of clergy paid attention to the mismatch between the religious rites and traditions on one hand and Islam on another; a certain campaign on eradication of the “superstitions” and “novations” (bid’ah) began. Over seventy years long period of the Soviet rule, with its ideology of “militant”, and later “scientific” atheism, led to the separation of religious life and practices from the realities of society. The content of the main issues and problems discussed during that period, despite its simplicity, reflects the realities of that period: Is visiting Mazars (*grave of a Muslim “saint” - ed.*) allowed? Is it allowed to say Fatiha (*the first sura of the Quran - ed.*) in prayer for deceased? Is it allowed to charge for reading the Quran? Is there any use to the deceased from reading the Quran? Is there any use in reading the Quran for ill person if he does not understand it? Is it possible to rely on the mediation of the prophets and the departed saints in the prayers? Is it allowed to stand

up and put the hands on chest as a sign of respect for spiritual persons? etc[4].

**These seemingly naive questions quite vividly characterize the struggle between modernization and traditions in the religious life of that era.**

At that time, the modernization of the views on the socio-political role of religion could be observed, the core of such modernization was the idea of possibility of an Islamic party creation and the participation of clergy in the social, political and cultural life of a secular state.

### **New Round of Confrontation, State Involvement**

In the 1990s, during the civil war in Tajikistan, while the representatives of the first two waves fought for influence or determined their attitude towards the opposing sides, a new wave of clergy from young people educated abroad appeared. Besides studying Islamic sciences, young people fell under the influence of foreign traditions, modernist or radical movements. The range of such movements starts from pro-Western modernists, traditional Hanafis and ends with ultra-traditional Salafis, calling for a return to the golden age of “pure Islam”, and radical currents with political demands such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, Bay’at, and Takfir va al-Hidzhra (the latter are also often considered “Salafis”). Everyone began to fight for the audience and divide the influence spheres.

Former modernists and reformers of the first two waves have already “settled down” and entered into a confrontation with a new wave. Obviously, the chances of the first groups were not too great, since they were inferior to the “youth”, both intellectually and financially. However, the state intervened into such an opposition, and it made a choice in favor of traditions. The Head of Tajikistan in his speeches emphasizes the role and place of the Hanafi madhhab in society. He makes presentations, writes articles and books about Imam Abu Hanifa and the Hanafi madhhab. 2009 was declared as the “Year of Imam Abu Hanifa”; the international symposium “Legacy of Abu Hanifa and his role in the dialogue among civilizations” has being held with much fanfare. Various movements are officially banned. The new version of the Law of the Republic of Tajikistan “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations” includes a clause on “recognizing the special role of the Hanafi movement of the Islamic religion in the development of the national culture and spiritual life of the people of Tajikistan”[5]. That means that the Hanafi madhhab was almost declared as official religion of the state. Everything happened according to the classical scenario: “belonging to one or another madhhab in certain conditions directly meant supporting corresponding government, since various Muslim governments played a big role in madhhabs’ changing”[6].



*Support of “traditional” Islam opens up the possibilities to use it as a link in the construction and strengthening of national identity. Monument to Ismail Somoni in Dushanbe. Photo: restbee.ru*

Actions taken by the government have had positive results. The number of preachers of “non-traditional” for the region movements and groups, who not only spread radical ideas, but also destabilized religious life, criticizing established religious practice, has noticeably reduced. In this sphere, Tajikistan has outrun its neighbors in taking appropriate regulatory and prohibitive measures at the legislative level and in its politics. The Law of the Republic of Tajikistan “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations” emphasizes the role of the local traditions. “National Strategy on Countering Extremism and Terrorism of the Republic of Tajikistan for 2016-2020” and an Action Plan for its implementation have been developed and approved[7]. “The Concept of the State Policy in the Sphere of Religion of the Republic of Tajikistan” was developed and approved[8], as well as many other regulatory acts that are implemented and improved in accordance with identified needs and deficiencies. Tajikistan’s experience in this area is being noticed and explored by



neighboring countries.

The strengths of “traditional” Islam support include the fact that it is associated with the spiritual heritage of the ancestors, which makes it possible to use it as a link in the construction and strengthening of national identity.

At the same time, however, it should be considered that over the almost century-long Soviet period, when religions were pushed out to the periphery of public life, traditional religious institutions were poorly integrated into the structure of society, which can explain the problems with their organic return to the socio-cultural environment. That is, traditional religious institutions found themselves in the role of a “catch-up runner” who must quickly close the gap. During the Soviet period, the clergy distanced themselves from authorities and the state and the mechanisms of effective interaction were lost.

### **Achievements, Failures and Challenges in the Implementation of the Patronage Policy of “Traditional” Islam**

Along with the positive aspects, the implementation of these actions has revealed some “pitfalls” that may cause new threats and challenges.

The analysis of the practice and implementation showed that the “official traditional Hanafi clergy” enticed by authorities’ support could not always successfully develop and modernize in accordance with the demands of the times and protect themselves from external and internal threats. Often, their whole argument in polemics and struggle with other movements and organizations boils down to a single thesis: “We are officially recognized and empowered by the state”, which leads to a decrease in their influence level and authority among potential audiences. Public opinion polls have shown a catastrophically low trust level for Imams in mosques, and filling of this niche by the so-called “Internet Imams”. The pronounced “statehood” of religious leaders pushes away from their preaching and activities an audience with protest potential.

The blurriness and vagueness of the term “traditional Islam” made this concept an object of speculation in political rhetoric and social relations. The accusation of “non-traditional” becomes an instrument for the suppression of competitors and a narrative for oppressing and discriminating against “non-traditional”. This practice makes “traditional Islam” unattractive to a neutral audience, which increases the risk of its radicalization.

Another challenge to the policy of protectionism of “traditional Islam” is the observance of the constitutional principle of “secularity” and “manifestation of respect and tolerance towards all religions and religious movements”, which are also mentioned in the preamble to the Law of the Republic of Tajikistan “On freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations”. This problem often sounds in international organizations’ criticism of the official policy of the Republic of Tajikistan. The question of how consistent is the “official madhhab” with the status of a secular state, remains timely and important.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

When implementing a protectionist policy towards “traditional” Islam, it should be taken into account that it can play both a positive and a negative role in sociocultural processes. First, this is due to the fact that everything traditional is essentially conservative, based on some fundamental basis and can act as an obstacle to reform and modernization.

Secondly, there is a real threat of usage the slogans of protecting “traditional” Islam as a tool in the fight against competitors and as the rationale for a “witch hunt”.

Thirdly, an ill-considered, strong propaganda coverage of “traditional Islam” support can provoke a negative reaction from the audience with protest potential and push them towards radicalization.

Based on these risks, we see it relevant to draw the attention of various actors to the following recommendations:

- Clearly recognize the vagueness and diversity of the concept of “traditional” Islam;
- Critically evaluate and take into account the destructive elements contained in the ideas and practices of “traditional” Islam, without idealizing or romanticizing it, attributing to it those qualities and potential that it does not really have;
- When implementing state policy in the sphere of religion, more attention should be paid to strengthening and realizing secular potential and neutral attitude to religious issues, avoiding two extremes: belligerent and aggressive anti-religious attitudes, whose origins go back to the policy of the Soviet period, and excessive protectionism to the vague and diverse term “traditional” Islam;
- Muslim religious leaders should pay more attention to strengthening the positive potential of traditional religious practices and culture, gently promoting humanistic ideas and values, rather than defying their official nature, reinforcing negative attitudes towards themselves and official state institutions;
- The scientific and creative intelligentsia should rethink its attitude to the Muslim element in traditional culture, creatively using it in practical and pragmatic products and constructs;
- In educational products, the teachings and ideas of “traditional” Islam should be presented in the informative and educational discourse, and not as obligatory theological catechism, as we can see today.

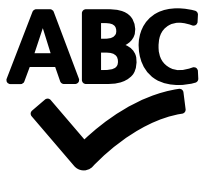
Today, Tajikistan has a rich and positive experience in supporting “traditional” Islam and integrating its positive potential into the life of society. A critical analysis of the implementation of religion policy will make it possible to adjust the strategy for the future and may be of interest to other countries, particularly in the Central Asian region.

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- [7] Approved by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan No. 776 dated November 12, 2016.
- [8] Approved by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan No. 1042 dated April 4, 2018.

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