

“WE PRAY FOR OUR PRESIDENT”: SAUDI-INSPIRED LOYALIST SALAFISM AND THE BUSINESS SECTOR IN KAZAKHSTAN

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Contents

Introduction	2
Halal Business: A Vehicle for Dawah Salafiyya	3
<i>Madkhali Salafism: Ilyas' Loyalty to the Rule Becomes a Religious Duty</i>	
<i>A Discreet Salafi Dawah: "To Be a Crafty Fox"</i>	
<i>Tawhid: The Very Foundation of Business</i>	
<i>A Business Blessed with Baraka</i>	
Quietist Salafi Dawah: Political Loyalty and Social Purification	5
<i>Political Opposition—and thus Jihadism—is Khariji</i>	
<i>Societal Reform: Fighting Against Shirk and Bid'a</i>	
Conclusion	7
Notes	8
About the Author.	9

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This working paper examines the dissemination strategies of the transnational Salafi movement in post-Soviet Kazakhstan through the study of its connections with the local business sector. This case study seeks to provide a snapshot of the specific—and significant—ways in which economic entrepreneurs are becoming local drivers of the dissemination of Saudi-based loyalist Islam.

INTRODUCTION

In post-Soviet Central Eurasia, the Islam of the “disinherited”—a trend visible among those dispossessed by privatization, shock therapy, and confiscation of wealth by oligarchs during the 1990s—has today morphed into something approaching a prosperity theology. In other words, Islam has conformed—or adapted—to the rules of a globalized market and capitalist economy. After nearly three decades of deep economic transformations in Central Eurasia, we are now witnessing the rise to power of a transnational Islam adapted to the rationale of the market economy. With globalization, Islam has embraced key themes of the world market and become a vehicle for individual autonomy. My goal in this paper is to examine the dissemination strategies of the transnational Salafi movement in post-Soviet Kazakhstan through the study of its connections with the local business sector.

Kazakhstan, a rentier economy, relies heavily on oil, which accounts for 60 percent of its exports and more than 40 percent of state budget revenues. The country has been economically strengthened by two decades of “shock therapy” and massive foreign investment in hydrocarbons. Throughout the Central Asian region, the growth of the 2000s can be explained by a rise in consumption and by the boom in the construction and financial sectors—but not by the creation of new industrial wealth or know-how. Although Kazakhstan is far wealthier than its Central Asian neighbors (despite the economic crisis that forced Kazakhstan to devalue its currency, the *tenge*, in August 2015), stark economic inequality is increasingly apparent: The market economy has widened the gap between rich and poor and created new social structures that divide the winners of the country’s transformation from the losers. This has not, however, prevented the appearance of a new if fragile urban middle class.

In Kazakhstan, as in the rest of Central Asia, the government, media, public, and experts alike portray Salafism as an agent of Saudi Arabian influence. Yet there is an open question as to whether Salafism—and specifically the Salafi business sector—represents some form of Saudi religious soft power in Kazakhstan.¹

Any answer to this question must begin by stressing the limitations placed on Saudi religious soft power in Kazakhstan. Despite maintaining a variety of connections with Saudi Arabia, mostly via business networks,² Kazakh Salafi networks receive little if any direct financial support from Saudi Arabia. Indeed, any attempt by the latter to finance local actors is regarded with a great deal of suspicion: The Kazakh government fears both political interference by Islamic states and the spread of banned forms of Islam, including Saudi Wahhabism and Salafism. The state’s instrumentalization of Islam has led to the promotion of state-advocated “good” Islam (Hanafism)—considered a “traditional” faith adapted to the history of the Kazakh nation, and therefore supposedly moderate³—and the corresponding disqualification of “bad” Islam such as Salafism,⁴ which, like other “non-traditional” faiths, is represented as a foreign export alien to Kazakh traditions.

As this binary division might suggest, official and public discourses make no distinction between the trends within global Salafism. Local Kazakh Salafis are variously depicted by government and state-controlled media as “Wahhabis,” “terrorists,” and “fundamentalists” striving to establish an Islamist theocracy in secular Kazakhstan. The Kazakh government’s efforts to counter “extremism” have led to significant securitization within the country: Since 2014, over 325 citizens have been accused of “inciting national, racial, religious, and social hatred,” receiving prison sentences of between two and seven years. Local and global jihadist and terrorist events—such as the series of terrorist attacks in Atyrau (2011), Aktobe (2012), and Almaty (2016)—have contributed to amplifying criticism of Salafism.

In this context, Kazakh Salafis are framed as transnational religious actors—as vectors of transmission of Saudi Salafism. Yet there is also local adaptation of Salafism to the social and political conditions of Kazakhstan.⁵ One of the main features of this localized Salafism, at least among the new urban middle classes, is its quietist political stance; far from positioning themselves as a political opposition upholding “original” Islam against an “impious” regime, this quietist Salafism views the secular Kazakh regime as legitimate. The majority of Salafis in Kazakhstan embody this Sunni quietism, which maintains that rulers must be obeyed, however irreligious they may be. Kazakh Salafis loudly proclaim their loyalty to the ruler, Nursultan Nazarbayev, the country’s authoritarian ruler since it gained independence in 1991 with the fall of the Soviet Union. Two prominent examples are Daryn Mubarov (who is currently being prosecuted despite arguing that “you should not protest the government because that leads to chaos”) and Rinat Abu Muhammad, who emphasizes that “you must obey N. Nazarbayev” (his website salaf.kz has been shut down).⁶ As the unforgiving response from the government demonstrates, even Salafism as quietist as this arouses mistrust among Kazakh political elites, who continue to worry that it might become politicized in a way that could undermine state structures.

HALAL BUSINESS: A VEHICLE FOR DAWAH SALAFIYYA

Reflecting the regime’s concerns about religious mobilization, the Administrative Code of Kazakhstan prohibits the “unregistered spreading of the creed of religious groups.” This means that any religious discussions that take place outside a registered religious building, including invitations to religious services and discussions—especially those of “non-traditional” religious groups—are considered “illegal missionary activity” and are punishable as “incitement of religious discord.”

In this context, halal business—that is, business done in a halal way (no payment of bribes, refusal of *riba* [interest], no collaboration with banks, etc.)—has become a vehicle for a group of economic-*cum*-religious entrepreneurs to engage in Salafi preaching in Kazakhstan without running afoul of legal restrictions. These quietist Salafis are part of an emerging urban middle class; they are not poor nor do they hail from underprivileged groups. They are integrated into society, but due to their religiosity in the public sphere—both external signs such as sporting long beards and ritual practices such as the five daily prayers—they can only work in the private sector. Some of them prosper as businessmen, so long as their business is not being threatened by the security services, the Kazakh National Security Committee, which sometimes seizes business assets under the guise of countering “religious extremism.” They promote a form of Islamic prosperity gospel: For these new Islamic entrepreneurs, economic success is indeed a divine dividend, transforming this quietist Salafism into the “Muslim version of a successful Protestant capitalism” (Stephan-Emmrich 2018).⁷ Islam is used as a resource to legitimize the global market economy: These new entrepreneurs from Kazakhstan’s urban middle classes give capitalism a religious gloss.

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The case study presented here draws on research conducted among the young urban middle classes in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, in 2017. It tells the story of Ilyas,⁸ a quietist Salafi businessman. A former oil engineer, Ilyas is now the manager of three Astana-based companies: an innovation fund, a drilling company, and an ecological water treatment plant. The aim of this case study is not to represent the quietist Salafi community as a generalized whole, whether in Astana or in Kazakhstan more broadly. Instead, it seeks to provide a snapshot of the specific—and significant—ways in which economic entrepreneurs like Ilyas are

becoming local drivers of the dissemination of Saudi-based loyalist Islam. In using their strategic position and influence to share their understanding of Islam with their local communities, these actors are reshaping the religious landscape and forms of communal identity in a Kazakh society that is increasingly contending with politicized religious divisions and competing visions of religious authority.

Madkhali Salafism: Ilyas' Loyalty to the Ruler Becomes a Religious Duty

Ilyas is a globalized entrepreneur. He studied in the United States as an undergraduate student. Today he is connected to non-Western resources, namely Saudi private business networks. The latter are sources of potential commercial financing for Ilyas—he hopes in particular to obtain Saudi financing for a project connected to his innovation fund—but also in the field of charities. Indeed, in 2011, Ilyas captured a Saudi tender/contract—“there has been no bribe, I won it honestly,” as Ilyas points out—for building a hospital specialized in the treatment of children with tuberculosis (almost \$7 million in funding). Ilyas embodies an urban Salafism: his *darwah* (“invitation” or “call” to Islam) targets the urban middle classes, not the losers

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Ilyas' main inspiration and discursive reference is Madkhali Salafism, named after the Saudi Sheikh Rabi' al-Madkhali. The latter, though not at the core of the Saudi state's religious apparatus, is affiliated with the Islamic University of Medina. Various online portals have played a prominent role in broadcasting Madkhali's religious doctrine beyond the borders of Saudi Arabia. The major characteristics of this trend in modern Salafism are its strict focus on preaching and the struggle against religious “innovations”; its refutation

of political participation; its fierce criticism of jihadism and political Islam; and its loyalty to the Saudi royal family and all-out support for Saudi Arabia's official religious institutions, among them the Council of Senior Ulama and Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and the Issuing of Fatwas. According to Stéphane Lacroix,⁹ this loyalist Salafism goes one step further than quietist Salafism, making loyalty to the ruler not merely a principle but a religious duty.

A Discreet Salafi Darwah: “To Be a Crafty Fox”

There is, according to Ilyas, an obligation to engage in *darwah* in Kazakhstan: “We, Salafis, want to do *darwah* for Kazakhs in order to save them. It is dangerous now, it is forbidden by the law, but we do it anyway. As an entrepreneur, I want to lead by example, that of a rightly guided Muslim and show Islam as a way of life. I have the intention (*niyya*) of working for Allah through my business. It is a question of honor for me; it is a kind of *darwah*.” Ilyas emphasizes the discreet nature of his *darwah* activities among his commercial partners.

Today, Ilyas tries to keep a low profile. He has shortened his beard and adopted the less conspicuous Hanafi way of praying. He highlights the flexibility and rationalism associated with this practice of Islam: Since the emphasis is on *aqeeda* (creed), that is, the Salafi “*aqeeda* of the heart,” which is hidden (“nobody can get into your heart, nobody can know which *aqeeda* you have”), rituals linked to Salafi orthopraxy can be adapted to context. For Ilyas, since Abu Hanifa, the founder of Hanafi legal school, was himself a *Salaf* (one of Islam's early “pious ancestors”), praying according to the Hanafi jurisprudence is permissible in order to be protected from repression. From this standpoint, as Ilyas puts it, “if you have the right *aqeeda* (that is, the Salafi *aqeeda*) in your heart, you can do any *fiqh* (jurisprudence).” For Ilyas, it is necessary to

“be a crafty fox,” to be a hidden Salafi, since this *modus vivendi* with the regime allows him to spread the Salafi path—but only discreetly.

Tawhid: The Very Foundation of Business

According to Ilyas, it is through halal business practices that the preaching of *tawhid* (divine oneness), especially the *Tawhid Ar-Rububiyyah* (divine oneness in lordship), is made possible. To Ilyas, respecting and applying *Tawhid Ar-Rububiyyah* is one of the conditions for business success, especially for those who, like him, are not part of the clientelist economic and political networks linked to the state oligarchy.

What does the practice of *tawhid* in business look like? For Ilyas, it is about setting goals, getting things done (*amal*), and not expecting favor from people with high-ranking positions but only from God: “The more obedient you are, the more you will obtain rewards from Allah in business. In business, do not tie yourself to ‘creatures’ or expect things from them—it is a small *shirk* (polytheism) and the divine punishment will be immediate.” As Ilyas describes it, the practice of *tawhid* corresponds to “business coaching” as promoted, for example, by Donald Trump when he was a “successful” businessman¹⁰: “Do not show you are dependent, otherwise you will be humiliated. As Donald Trump says, ‘When a commercial offer is made to you, show that you are ignoring it.’ You must expect results only from Allah.”

A Business Blessed with Baraka

Ilyas proclaims that any businessman can benefit from *baraka* (divine grace) by respecting sharia, or Islamic law. If setbacks in business occur, this divine reprimand must be treated as a test: “Why? What sins have I committed? I deserve my punishment; I must find a solution by becoming a better Muslim.” Once blessed by *baraka* in business, a “good” Salafi must consider wealth as a test as well: “The Saudi ulama say, ‘When we meet a Muslim brother who is poor, we say: Be patient, it is a test. Later, when this brother has been granted *baraka*, a job or has become rich, it is also a test. You must not forget sharia.’”

Becoming successful and prosperous is a goal in itself. Indeed, it is considered a divine reward for the orthodox practice of Islam. The attractiveness of this idea—especially to young entrepreneurs looking for personal enrichment and social capital—serves the cause of Salafism itself and helps it to spread. As Ilyas points out, “When you are rich, you are more listened to. I have experienced that. I was poor.”

QUIETIST SALAFI DAWAH: POLITICAL LOYALTY AND SOCIAL PURIFICATION

Ilyas represents a trend of Salafism that is both obedient and loyal to the political regime and compatible with the nation-state. “According to the Sunnah [the normative custom of the Prophet Muhammad],” he says, loyalist Salafis like himself “cannot criticize our president (even in our kitchen). According to a hadith, each people deserves its governors. In a verse in the Qur’an, Allah says, ‘I shall punish you for your sins with unfair rulers.’” From this standpoint, to be in the political opposition “only serves to hurt you and your family. We must be loyal to our president. We must pray for our president. In Saudi Arabia, they kiss the hand of their prince.”

A loyalist Salafi like Ilyas is by no means a dissenting actor in post-Soviet Kazakhstan—but, he adds, “we are not blind.” By this, he refers above all to the law banning schoolgirls from wearing the hijab in schools (based on the French model) as well as broader perceptions, encouraged by the state, that Salafism

is a dangerous form of Islam. In the face of these difficulties, Ilyas is pushing for integration into Kazakh society in order “to change the current ideology for the benefit of the true Sunnah.” His priority is “to do *darwah* in order to save your family, friends, neighbors, business partners from hellfire,” which requires a person-by-person re-Islamization from below, as espoused by the Salafi interpretation of Islam’s tenets.

Ilyas is not yet advocating for *hijra* (emigration) to Saudi Arabia, which Kazakh Salafis see as one of the “purest Islamic territories.” Even the appointment of Mohammad bin Salman as Saudi Arabia’s crown prince in June 2017 does not seem to alter this perception of Saudi Arabia that Ilyas sums up by saying, “Saudi Arabia is the homeland of Islam, it is a desert land but they received a bonus from Allah—oil—to help them spread the true religion. Saudi Arabia is not pure sharia, but is the closest to it.” Neither is he advocating departure for Turkey (not yet, at least), where many Kazakh Salafis are already settling or willing to settle in the near future in order to protect their businesses from state intervention at home. As he explains, “We accept the ruler unless he makes me worship things other than God. I obey what does not contradict sharia. If our president made us worship someone else, get loans from the bank, commit major sins, I would leave the country. I would do *hijra*. You do not make a revolution, you do not go underground like partisans, you simply leave.”

Political Opposition—and thus Jihadism—is Khariji

Any political opposition to the ruler is described as being “*Khariji*,” a reference to the earliest Islamic sect and the most controversial dissenting faction in early Islam.¹¹ Today’s *Kharijis* (a term typically used to describe ISIS members) are not to be confused with Salafis, according to Ilyas: “They dress like us, look like us, but they stand in political opposition, unlike us.” They also practice *takfir* (excommunication)—that is, declaring a self-described Muslim to be a non-Muslim.

In Ilyas’ view, the temptation to become a *Khariji* is great. Young people in particular, he says, turn to Islam looking for meaning in a context where the Kazakh state appears, to the local population, rife with corruption and cronyism, discrediting the state as the provider of public goods:

When Allah opens someone’s heart, usually this person becomes *Khariji*. It means rising against the ruler, criticizing power. This is the *Khariji aqeeda*. People are not aware of the truth. The main reason is the following: It is like tuberculosis: Every human has it, the virus is asleep, it wakes up when you have a low immunity, it is in everyone. The main reason is in the very nature of a person: You are looking for justice. If people are sick with tuberculosis because of waste, of dirtiness, they start killing doctors, blaming the doctors for tuberculosis. We, Salafis, admit that there is a lot of injustice. We need to cleanse the streets of illness, but not of the doctors or rulers themselves. The *Kharijis* want to find justice, but they offer the wrong cure.... As a Salafi, I am against any protest. The ulama say: you have to bridle your emotion. You have to keep your emotion under the bridle of knowledge (*ilm*). Revolutionary war or protest is premature.

Ilyas adds, “As a Salafi, you can be a partisan inside, it is hidden. You can get as close as possible to your enemies and still be a Salafi. You can work in the White House, in the Kremlin. This is the power of *aqeeda*: You can even be close to Putin and still you are a *Salaf*.” According to Ilyas, “Muslims who are in political opposition are suffering a lot and are not getting any results. If you are not in opposition, as a Salafi, you can survive in any society, especially in a democratic system: Democracy is an instrument to better do *darwah*; it is easier to do so since the system is freer.”

Societal Reform: Fighting Against Shirk and Bid’a

The aim of loyalist Salafi entrepreneurs like Ilyas is to reform the mores of their Kazakh co-religionists, whose faith has “deviated” from that of the “pious predecessors,” by purifying social values. This loyalist Salafism—discreetly implemented at the local level through business activities in order to avoid

repression—is presented as suitable for urban modern life and even as a means for the modernization of individuals and societies.

For Salafis, the only strategy is the “return to Islam” of every Muslim, more precisely to “Sunni authenticity,” that is, devoid of *shirk* (polytheism) and *bid’a* (innovation): Salafis want to make the Prophet’s tradition, the Sunnah, the norm for individual behavior. For Salafis, every Muslim has to imitate the “pious predecessors,” understood as the companions of Muhammad (the *sahaba*) during the idealized period of Medina’s first community (622–661 CE). For Ilyas, specifically, it is only by respecting Salafi orthodoxy that economic development and success, for the individual at the micro level and society at the mezzo level, can be achieved. For Ilyas, it is above all the local population’s “ignorance” regarding Islam and the Salafi interpretation of its tenets that is holding back Kazakhstan’s development: “The *Jabiliyya* (age of ignorance) is the source of all our problems. I love my country; I am a patriot but not in the secular sense of the term. I am not tied to Kazakhstan, but to the Sunnah.... If Muslims have miserable and poor lives, it is because they are committing a lot of sins. Christians and the others are already punished by *kufir* (disbelief); God does not even notice their sins.” Statements such as these, which emphasize individual responsibility, effectively serve as a justification for the growing inequality at the heart of Kazakh society. For loyalist Salafis, social policy is external to Islam; there is no activist “Islamic social justice” that seeks to replace the state’s clientelist distribution of wealth. What is at stake here is identity reconstruction, not social contestation.

For Ilyas, the future is in the hands of those Kazakh youth who are becoming pious. “We need them to do jihad in education, sciences, in business, in personal development,” he says. These devout young people are not wasting their energy “in drinking and nightclubs.” Theirs is a strong faith (*iman*) and enthusiasm that, Ilyas believes, hold considerable promise for the future of Kazakhstan.

CONCLUSION

Despite the restrictions imposed by the Kazakh state, a Saudi-inspired quietist (or, more accurately, loyalist) Salafi *darwah* continues to diffuse steadily throughout Kazakhstan via halal business.

These loyalist Salafis are not Saudi exports per se—they do not have strong connections with Saudi state religious institutions nor do they enjoy funding from Saudi clerics’ patronage networks; they are local agents seeking societal reform and the construction of new societal identities. This project of Salafi societal reform echoes the “transformative power of ‘anti-political’ Salafism,” as analysed by Kamal Gasimov in the case of Azerbaijan.¹² Despite a strong quietism, successful Kazakh Salafi entrepreneurs are ambitious in their own way. They are trying for transformative societal impact and are forging a new, distinctive vision, that of a pious Muslim society and state. From this perspective, they are driving the diffusion of an alternative social model in Kazakhstan aimed at middle-class youth who are turning to Islam.

If halal business is an illustration of Saudi “soft power,” it is nevertheless indirect and mediated. In Kazakhstan, its main proponents are individuals with their own agency and agendas, working at the local level to (re)create Muslim identities and forge a society based on a Saudi model that they themselves find inspiring—rather than a model that is being pushed or imposed on them.

Endnotes

- 1 There are at least two forms of what might be considered direct religious soft power in Kazakhstan. The first is the Gulen/*bizmet* movement, which, in Kazakhstan as in the rest of the region, was long an instrument of Turkish influence. The Gulen network exists in various sectors, especially education, where it has developed schools and higher education centers operated by expatriate Anatolian Turks. The alliance between Gulen and Erdogan imploded around 2013, and since then Gulen schools, although still active in Kazakhstan, have ceased to act as a soft power tool serving the interests of the Turkish government. The second form of religious soft power is what Manja Stephan-Emmrich, looking at the case of Tajikistan, has called the “Dubai model”: the religious reform projects of Central Asian students, tourists, migrants, etc., that produce an “Arabization” or, more precisely, a “Dubaization” of Islam, mainly through Islamic fashion and sharia-compliant tourism. See Bayram Balci, “Fethullah Gülen’s Missionary Schools in Central Asia and their Role in the Spreading of Turkism and Islam,” *Religion, State & Society* 31, no. 2 (2003): 151-177 and Manja Stephan-Emmrich, “Playing cosmopolitan: Muslim self-fashioning, migration, and (be-)longing in the Tajik Dubai business,” *Central Asian Affairs*, (2017): 270-291.
- 2 Saudi Arabia uses the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) as a vector of soft power over the Muslim world. The situation is rather different in Kazakhstan than in the rest of the Muslim world: The Kazakh government has refused most investments of a religious character and ratified only those focused on infrastructure or agriculture. Yet Kazakhstan has a number of sharia-friendly organizations working in the country: Fattah Finance (one of the first companies to provide financial services compliant with Islamic standards), Istisna’a Corporation (one of the leading Islamic financial consultancies), and Halal Mutual Insurance Takaful. According to the partnership program for 2012 to 2014, the IDB invested \$1.2 billion into Kazakhstan’s economy in that period. The influence of private banks and investment funds from the Gulf is probably less controllable in Kazakhstan than elsewhere. The Gulf countries often link their investments with cultural engagement (opening up cultural centers or financing mosques, madrasas, or charity associations). As for private banks, they focus on providing services to individuals or businesses. See Sébastien Peyrouse, “Islamic Finance in Central Asia: A Religious or Political Influence?,” *CERIA Brief, Central Asia Program*, no. 16, March (2016): 1-7.
- 3 The government continues to recognize as legitimate and legal only those mosques registered with the SAMK, the government-affiliated Sunni Hanafi organization led by the grand mufti, with offices in Almaty and Astana. The SAMK controls the activities of all 2,529 formally registered Muslim groups affiliated with the Sunni Hanafi school and has authority over the construction of new mosques, the appointment of imams, and the administration of examinations and background checks for aspiring imams.
- 4 In September 2016, the Kazakh government created a new Ministry of Religious and Civil Society Affairs (MRCSA), taking responsibility for religious issues and the Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) away from the Ministry of Culture and Sport.
- 5 “To be successful it appears necessary for transnational religious actors to be successful in maintaining and disseminating their global message while adapting to the local.” Jeffrey Haynes, *Causes and Consequences of Transnational Religious Soft Power*.
- 6 I owe this information to the scholar Wendell Schwab, whom I greatly thank.
- 7 Manja Stephan-Emmrich, “Bourgeois Islam, Gulf migration, and post-national sentiments,” presentation at George Washington University’s Central Asia Program workshop, “Bourgeois Islam, Prosperity Theology and Ethics in Muslim Eurasia,” in the framework of the CERIA (Central Eurasia-Religion in International Affairs) Initiative, generously funded by the Henry Luce Foundation, January 29, 2018.
- 8 The name of this quietist Salafi entrepreneur has been changed.
- 9 Stéphane Lacroix, “Unpacking ‘Saudi religious proselytism’: methodological and empirical remarks,” *The Middle East and the Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power*, Schar School of Policy and Government, George Mason University and the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, The Brookings Institution, April 18, 2018.
- 10 More generally, Ilyas holds in certain esteem “strong” figures such as Donald Trump or Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Even President Trump’s ban on Muslim countries is well perceived. Indeed, for Ilyas, “I support Trump in this. Muslims are to blame for all their problems. They need to get knowledge, to practice more and stop *shirk*. The ulama say that Salafis are allowed to go to the United States only for three reasons: for medical treatment, to do *darwah*, or for business. It is forbidden to go to the U.S. for tourism, this is *kufir*. This is forbidden also to go there as an immigrant. Only those who have a strong knowledge can go there in order to do *darwah*.”
- 11 The *Kharijis* revolted against Caliph Ali after he agreed to arbitration with his rival, Muawiyah I, to decide the caliphate’s succession following the Battle of Siffin (657 CE). A *Khariji* later assassinated Ali, and for hundreds of years thereafter the *Kharijis* were a source of insurrection against the caliphate.
- 12 See Kamal Gasimov, “Multimodal Salafi Engagement with Digital Media in Azerbaijan,” *CAP Papers, Central Asia Program*, no. 195, August (2017): 1-23.

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

This working paper is a product of the Berkley Center/Brookings Institution collaboration on the geopolitics of religious soft power. The project will explore the global impact of transnational religious propagation activities sponsored by several countries in the Middle East—including Saudi Arabia, other Gulf Cooperation Council countries, Iran, and Turkey—which for decades have deployed religion as a form of soft power in pursuit of their evolving foreign policy and other objectives. With the generous support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, project research will explore the motivations, modalities, and mechanisms surrounding state sponsorship of religious soft power.

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