

## Why Uzbekistan's New President Needs to Expand Access to Islamic Education

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 534  
July 2018

Sebastien Peyrouse<sup>1</sup>  
*The George Washington University*

Uzbekistan remains one of the Muslim states in the former Soviet space most averse to the development of Islamic education. For over twenty years, in the name of separation of religion and state, and in an effort to prevent so-called threats from foreign Islamist elements, late President Islam Karimov limited the teaching of Islam to a few madrasas and higher Islamic institutions attended by a small number of cautiously selected students. Outside of these institutions, any theological teaching of Islam was banned and regularly, severely repressed.

Karimov's policies only managed to stifle the fundamental issues that religious education raises for the development and social stability of any society. I argue that it is now urgent for the new Mirziyoyev administration to revise this policy: first, by significantly increasing and easing access to Islamic education to respond to a demand that, if unsatisfied, could contribute to resentment among believers and to clandestine and possibly extremist drifts; and second, by substantially revising the almost exclusively security-oriented and repressive approach allowing for more open reflection and debate concerning the fundamental questions and risks that teaching religion raises in any society, as well as the potential or existing role of Islam in public education. None of these questions have blueprint answers. However, the government will have to address them in the very near future if it wants to avoid the potential development of extremism which it wants to prevent.

### **Three Negative Impacts of the Old Policy**

After more than seventy years of Soviet official atheism, Karimov ignored the desire of part of the population to seek religious knowledge in a country that is more than 90 percent Muslim. This approach has had at least three negative impacts. First, beyond the

---

<sup>1</sup> [Sebastien Peyrouse](#) is Research Professor at the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies (IERES) at The George Washington University.

five pillars of Islam, religious study is considered a duty and a [mode of worship](#). Second, Karimov refused to address, other than by political repression, the potential conflict between secularized education and traditional-style Islam and thinking, which has burgeoned over the last twenty-five years. According to a World Values Survey, more than half of the Uzbek population ([54 percent](#)) wants Islam to be taught in public schools. Third, Karimov's security-oriented approach to the issue led to quasi-taboo debates outside the strict lines drawn by the authorities about the teaching of Islam, both within the government and among academics, think tanks, and private circles.

### **Heavy Historical Legacy: an Approach Based Essentially on Security**

Following the fall of the Soviet Union, Karimov adopted a policy to modernize the country based on the principle of secular education; he was extremely cautious toward Islam and the teaching of it. According to Uzbek authorities, supervising religious education should counter what neighbors such as Pakistan or Afghanistan have encountered, namely fundamentalist groups taking advantage of the [moral and political vacuum](#) to impose their ideology.

The government therefore maintained a limited network of secondary-level religious schools (madrasas) and higher education institutes, which it deemed sufficient to cover the country's needs. These institutions were set up as sites for knowledge canonization and the re-centering of religious authority under the control of political power. Beyond these networks, Islamic theology was strictly prohibited. In public schools, the topic of Islam was basically confined to local and historical dimensions. Secondary-level students focused on the biographies of local theologians and thinkers who were [born on Uzbek territory](#), such as imam al-Bukhari. Verses of the Koran and hadiths have been integrated less in relation to their religious dimension than from a secular perspective that [promotes](#) familial and social respect. Moreover, the government has minimized Islamic study by integrating it within a general course on religious studies as such (*dinshunoslik*) in which all the religions present on Uzbek territory are taught (Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, etc.). Finally, religious teaching in private and family circles has been made illegal. Many Muslims have been [arrested and imprisoned](#) for having organized instruction and discussion sessions on the Koran in their homes.

The security approach to the teaching of Islam is not specific to Uzbekistan and has been fed by a global narrative. However, Uzbekistan's policy on Islamic teaching has distinguished itself from many other states in the world. It is distinct from post-Soviet states, in which secular schools, [such as those in Russia](#), have gradually introduced religious education. It is also distinct from Muslim states like Libya under Muammar Gaddafi, in which schools based on Western models integrated an Islamic component into the curriculum, or like Pakistan, where the growth of private schools that provide Islamic instruction lessened the appeal of religious schools.

The Uzbek approach has had important consequences. It has dashed the expectations of the part of the population that was in search of religious knowledge and has prevented independent research on this question. Data have been collected by local groups, experts, and academics, most of whom are vassals of the political authorities, as well as by the security services and police. These datasets are often corrupted by the impact of the general climate of authoritarianism, which has led interviewees to censor themselves and/or led those in charge of the studies to adapt their findings to the government's expectations.

In so doing, Uzbek power has considerably reduced its own ability to prevent the violence against that it wants to avert. Many Muslim states, despite their authoritarianism, use opinion polls and surveys in developing their policies. There is manifestly no single clear pattern among Muslim states, but authoritarianism combined with the absence of data in Uzbekistan has thrown a dark veil over knowledge of the expectations, hopes, and frustrations of believers, and has thereby reduced the information required for developing a policy on religious education, and for understanding the potential societal issues related to it.

The question is all the more complex that globalization has added to the difficulty of managing the teaching of religion, which is undergoing a phenomenon that [juxtaposes](#) global, standardized, cultural aspects and local cultural aspects. In Uzbekistan as elsewhere, to speak of a society with a single culture, one confined to a delimited territorial space, is meaningless. Population flows across borders have fragmented the authorities, upset social hierarchies, and profoundly challenged geographic [traditions of knowledge and faith](#), as well as their teaching.

### **What Must Be Done?**

It is up to the new government of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to revise the existing security-oriented, repressive policy. This means understanding the expectations of believers. In Uzbekistan as anywhere else, aspirations to acquire knowledge of Islam are extremely diverse. They reflect identity questions, local morals and, in the Uzbek case, the many political, economic, and social issues occasioned by the fall of the Soviet regime. However, in the post-Soviet context, Islamic education often is less about memorizing theological doctrine than about inculcation of social and familial values that the so-called vacuum resulting from the collapse of the communist bloc is seen to have threatened. Learning the Koran can also be a key part of socialization. For many young believers, acquiring and exhibiting one's religious knowledge is about showing respect for one's family circle – the child, and, later, the adolescent, imitates his or her parents by praying and reciting the Koran.

The government has several options if it wishes to address the demand, such as: increasing the number of madrasas; including religious education in public or private

schools; or allowing the teaching of Islam in mosques. This list is not exhaustive, and each of the options mentioned is not exclusive to the other. Mirziyoyev has already taken several measures. In June 2017, the government designated the Mir-i Arab Madrassa in Bukhara a university rather than a secondary school, thereby raising the number of Islamic universities in the country to three. In 2018, he announced the opening of an Islamic studies academy. These positive signs herald a significant revision of his predecessor's policies. However, Mirziyoyev and his government likely will also have to contend with issues that many other states, Muslim or not, have faced, such as the status accorded to religious schools in Uzbek society, as well as some clerics and believers' potential attempts to challenge the secular education.

### **Addressing the Risks**

In many Muslim countries, Islamic schools enjoy notable popularity; in some countries of Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, they have been able to rival secular schools. However, such schools have sometimes proven difficult to control. They use oral traditions, often have no entry conditions, and are usually not established as formal institutions in that they do not answer to the state or a specific administration but are [organized](#) by teachers, the local community, or members of the local *ulema*. They are unstable, and may expire along with the master-teacher who heads them, but at the same time they can be flexible enough to re-establish their duties anew elsewhere. This potential nomadism of religious teaching has the capacity to escape the legal framework defined by the state. Moreover, in contrast with secular education establishments, Islamic schools enjoy an inherent legitimacy owing to their religious foundations. Consequently, they have the ability [to resist](#) the official ideology of the political authorities, undermine the legitimacy of the government by showing its inability to develop the secular education system, and establish Islamic teaching as an alternative model.

The context in Uzbekistan remains different. First, the government maintained tight control on the religion sphere. Second, the atheist policy of the Soviet regime, followed by the authoritarian secularism of the Karimov regime, marginalized religious schools in the minds of the population. Contrary to other Muslim states, religious schools in Uzbekistan [are not seen](#) as real alternatives; rather, a majority of the population considers them to be inadequate for receiving an education that leads to a good job. However, in a context of growing religiosity, and of serious difficulties in the Uzbek public educational system, a significant growth in the number of Islamic schools could make them much more popular.

The Mirziyoyev government will need to define a legislative and policy framework that addresses the questions and risks emanating from private Islamic schools. Yet, however legitimate it is for the government to regulate the teaching of Islam, developing new structures for this purpose should avoid Karimov's regressive tendencies. State-run madrasas and Islamic institutions were perceived by Uzbekistan's believers less as

centers for learning about Islam than as power structures for elites subservient to higher authorities. Tashkent is therefore faced with two questions. How can it form a teaching body and supervise its training? Simultaneously, how can it ensure adherence to the legal framework and prevent teachings that challenge secularism?

### **The Inevitable Interference of Islam in Public Schools**

A second essential mistake of Karimov's management of religion and Islamic education was to completely separate religious schools in which Islam is taught from secular institutions in which religious education is prohibited. This type of dividing line is porous. Secular institutions are attended by segments of believers who bring with them cultural, familial, and religious values. For sections of the Muslim population, the absence of religion, or the lack of the religious elements in the curricula of public schools, gainsays other official discourses, which claim that Islam is one of the country's historical and cultural bases.

Moreover, Islamic education raises questions about the very identity of the educational system. In many Muslim countries, education is seen as too Westernized and as having no basis in a national religious ethos. It is said to produce individuals who are [unaware](#) of their own traditions and historical and cultural heritage, and thus are unable to meet the moral challenges with which they may be faced. In Egypt, a majority of the student population [considers](#) that an education further grounded in Islamic principles would [improve](#) the quality of education and provide them with better prospects for the future. Uzbekistan has the opportunity to introduce teachings about Islam in public schools, which could satisfy much of the population, but the delicate challenge is to do so without changing the secular nature of the public education system.

### **Conclusion**

In Uzbekistan, as in most states, debates about religious education policies are complex and there few ready-made solutions. It seems inevitable that there will be development of religious education in Uzbekistan in the post-Karimov era.

As the current Turkish experience shows, a repressive type of policy yields the high risk of pushing less moderate Islamic strains to join clandestine networks that fall out of the authorities' surveillance networks. Turkey's former President Mustafa Kemal Ataturk undertook one of the most radical programs of secularization in the Muslim world. But the Turkish authorities a quarter of a century later observed that those reforms contributed to developing an underground education system. In Uzbekistan, the government's intention was to have religious education enter the public space from out of Soviet-era family confines. However, by restricting Islamic education, and despite the continuance of some government-controlled madrasas and religious education

institutions, the teaching of Islam remains part of the private or familial clandestine sector that is outside the control of the political authorities.

Contrary to the expectations of theoreticians of education, the growth of secular education in many Muslim states has actually encouraged an attachment to Islam more than it has [discouraged](#) it. The reduction, and even the exclusion of religion from education, gets interpreted by the population as an offensive against local culture and values; such values justify, for some believers, a traditional religious education, and might fuel protests by students who demand a type of Islam that is more in line with their expectations.

Finally, Islamic education is not a static phenomenon rooted in atemporal “traditional values.” Rather, it evolves under the influence of transformative forces, including religious reforms, nationalism, domestic policies, and public education. The re-centering of Islam in modern times has benefitted from new forms of governance, electronic media, and universal education, all of which have enabled the political authorities to go beyond the ranks of the *ulema* and to directly reach ordinary Muslims. However, all these efforts at re-centering have been outflanked by a new pluralization of knowledge and authority, which has given rise to new approaches to what it means to be a Muslim, further undermining any governmental ambitions of systematic control.

Mirziyoyev’s assumption of power in September 2016 reopened the debate on the direction of Uzbekistan’s political regime and its approach to managing religious education. However, Uzbekistan’s second president must continue to stand out from the policies of his predecessor by engaging in more and deeper reforms in the realm of religious education in order to keep believers from going underground and to prevent discourses leading to radical movements involving the sentiment that Uzbek believers are victims of an authoritarian and anti-Muslim political regime.