Negotiating Islam in emerging public spheres in contemporary Tajikistan

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Objekttyp: **Article**

NEGOTIATING ISLAM IN EMERGING PUBLIC SPHERES IN CONTEMPORARY TAJIKISTAN

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Abstract [1]

Over the past decade, the Internet has emerged as a new public sphere in the Central Asian republic of Tajikistan in particular for negotiating 'Islam' – religious belief, practice and morality. Whilst the authoritarian regime severely restricts the 'traditional' public spheres, the Internet has proven to be more resilient and elusive to government control. Blocked web pages move to other domains, and, in particular, labour migration has 'denationalized' public spheres. Additionally, the Internet has altered the form and content of how Islam is communicated due to the anonymity of the internet and its less formal customs of communication. After discussing some general theoretical and methodological implications, we chart how one of Tajikistan's most prominent families within the religious elite – the three Turaǧon-brothers – negotiates landscapes of Islamic belief and practice within the context of the country's political economy. Particularly, we present how the Turaǧon-brothers deal with religious, moral, and ethical queries addressed to them by Muslim women, and how they formulate alternative discourses about the role of women in society and religion contradicting the government's conceptions.

1. Negotiating Islam in post-Civil War Tajikistan: authenticity, morality and social order

Post-independence and post-Civil War (1992–1997) Tajikistan has witnessed a number of contradictory narratives with regard to the role and importance of Islam in the society. For a decade after the general peace accord of 1997, Islam was largely excluded from the nation building project of the authoritarian government of Emomalī Rahmon. The government and parts of the urban civil society considered public observance of Islamic religious practice (prayer, mosque attendance, Islamic *rites de passage* and so forth) and the articulation of Islamic concepts of a social and political order as diametrically opposed to the

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post-conflict political economy and 'peace' in Tajikistan.[2] In particular, in the light of the global war on terror the Tajik government is instantly classifying political and social opposition as manifestations of 'Islamic radicalism', regardless of the particular context of conflict and grievance in the Tajik society.[3]

Discursively, the government refers to race (*nažod*), language, and a carefully filtered historical legacy as the core identity markers for Tajiks.[4] However, government symbolic projections of a glorious past, present and future bear little to no tangible repercussions for large parts of the population – except for an architectural remake of Dushanbe reflecting an imagination of an alleged historically authentic Tajik panache. Instead, the population is exposed to economic and social exclusion, corruption and nepotism among the dominating elite, the complete absence of the rule of law and continuous centre-periphery tensions, which have turned sporadically violent.

Despite hostile religious policies, public observation of Islamic religious practices as well as an Islamic habitus has significantly increased among parts of the population over the past decade. Although surveys in Tajikistan often suffer from methodological inconsistencies, the available data and research supports this impression. For an increasing percentage of Tajikistan's population – in particular, its younger generation – Islam signifies an important element of an 'authentic' Tajik identity and a moral as well as spiritual guidance in the complex post-Soviet and post-conflict transformation.[5] Additionally, the younger generation of Tajiks considers the Civil War as distant history and does not necessarily follow government interpretations of the origins of the Civil War.[6] The widening gap between official representations and the actual cleavages and grievances within the society might have contributed to a cynical renunciation of the official orchestration of "virtual politics"[7] by the Tajik government.

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2   HEATHERSHAW , 2009; EPKENHANS, 2011.

3   Cf. HEATHERSHAW / MEGORAN, 2011.

4   For instance, in 2006 the government celebrated the year of Aryan civilization. Cf. BLAK-
     KISRUD / NOZIMOVA, 2010; EPKENHANS, 2012; LARUELLE, 2007.

5   IFES, 2010. Cf. also: EPKENHANS, 2011; STEPHAN, 2010. For similar developments in
     Central Asia/Uzbekistan: LOUW, 2007 and RASANAYAGAM, 2010. As Adeeb Khalid points
     out, ethnicity, the idea of tradition, and religion increasingly became intertwined already in
     the late Soviet Union, KHALID, 2007: 84–115.

6   This observation is based on a review of Tajikistan's press and conversations with Tajik
     students in the past years.

7   Cf. WILSON, 2005.

Yet, the post-Soviet renaissance of Islam is not the only noticeable social process happening in Tajik society. Arguably, the most important one is that increasing numbers of Tajik citizens are leaving the country (seasonally and long-term) mainly for Russia and Kazakhstan in search of employment. The most recent data from the Migration and Remittances Unit of the World Bank suggests that about 800,000 (11.2% of the total population, predominately younger men) have emigrated from Tajikistan and their remittances generate approx. 47% of the country's GDP (the highest share worldwide).[8] Considering these significant numbers, it is reasonable to assume that labour migration has remarkable implications for the overall society in Tajikistan, including its diverse and contested religious field.[9]

The increasing public observation of Islamic practices is also related to the politics of Tajikistan's religious specialists, the *ulamo*, who address immediate grievances and social issues in the Tajik society in their sermons and in their religious advice (*pand* or *nasihat*). Usually, the religious advice is considered part of the larger idea of 'Commanding Right' (Tajik: *amr ba ma'ruf* or *amri ma'ruf*) and the struggle for general public welfare (*maslahat*) in a Muslim society.[10] In recent years, in the Tajik social context the term has become a synonym for advice given by religious specialists. Most of the advice is related to questions about religious practice, for instance the ritual prayer (*namoz*), the ablution (*ġosl, vuzu', tayammom*), the fasting (*ruza*) during Ramadan, and so forth. However, a significant part of the advice, as we show in this paper, is related to more general social or personal affairs reflecting the changing social landscapes of post-Civil War Tajikistan.[11] Whilst religious advice was usually given either before or after the Friday prayer personally by an *imom-xatib* (or *sar-xatib*, the leader of the Friday prayer), the internet has changed the patterns of giving advice radically.

This paper to some extent explores uncharted waters by providing insights into new forms of negotiating Islam in Tajikistan, namely the popular 'Islamic' websites of the Turaġon-family. We are aware that we are only discussing a very limited section and moment of the complex religious life-worlds in contemporary Tajikistan and that the 'Islamic' internet is changing and transforming rapidly.

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8   WORLD BANK, 2013.
9   Cf. BENNETT / CLIFFORD / FALKINGHAM, 2013; HEGLAND, 2010.
10 COOK, 2000.
11 Cf. HALLAQ, 2011: 144.

2. Theoretical and methodological considerations

Since the late 1990s, scholars have been exploring the intriguing intersection of Islam and the new forms of media and communication. In conceptual terms, Jürgen Habermas' theory of public sphere and Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" have been identified as central methodological frames in the analysis of the producers and consumers of the Islamic normativity.[12] Notably, the related negotiations are increasingly taking place in a transnational environment enabled by recent technological advances.[13] Commenting on the recent developments in Muslim societies, Eickelman and Anderson note that a "new sense of public is emerging throughout Muslim-majority states and Muslim communities elsewhere". The distinctive aspect of this new "Muslim public sphere" is in the fact that it is "[s]ituated outside formal state control" and that it "exists at the intersections of religious, political, and social life". The Muslim public sphere, as the authors propose, has the potential of challenging and limiting the traditional forms of authority – in the state, as well as, in the domain of religion. The new forms of media and communication play a central role in the Muslim public sphere:

> [T]his combination of new media and new contributors to religious and political debates fosters an awareness on the part of all actors of the diverse ways in which Islam and Islamic values can be created and feeds into new senses of a public space that is discursive, performative, and participative, and not confined to formal institutions recognized by state authorities.[14]

This emphasis on the new, technologically advanced media and communication deserves further elaboration. Building on Benedict Anderson's conception of speech communities, scholars have suggested that the new acts and technological experiences enabled by the new forms of communication (e.g. "downloading together" as similar to "reading together") foster a sense of community and shared consciousness.[15] This phenomenon is most vividly observed when analysing the notable level of mobilization among the followers of the Turaǧon-brothers in Russia.

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12   ANDERSON, 2003: 892–893; HABERMAS, 1981. In the context of this paper, normativity is understood as a discursively constructed concept.
13   SISLER, 2009: 52; MANDAVILLE, 2001: 166.
14   EICKELMAN / ANDERSON, 2003: 1–2.
15   MANDAVILLE, 2011: 15.

Asef Bayat calls this phenomenon "imagined solidarity" – "which is forged spontaneously among different actors who come to a consensus by imagining, subjectively constructing, common interests and shared values between themselves". For Bayat imagined solidarity is a product of authoritarian societies "where the effective exchange of ideas and communicative action in the public sphere are lacking".[16] And although Bayat does not specifically point out to the role of the new media and communication technologies, one could argue that these mediums are the most important channels in facilitating the process of such "imagining" as these technologies are notorious for being less susceptible to government regulation and control. The ubiquitous usage of mirror/proxy services to bypass state censorship and gain access to restricted Internet content in most authoritarian polities, including Tajikistan, is just one example of the affordability that the new technology provide in the process of fostering a new public sphere with a distinct sense of consciousness/solidarity.[17]

In the context of the present case study these conceptual frames have clear implications. The repetitive blocking of access to the Turaǧon website in Tajikistan with directives coming from the state communications agency indicates that it is part of the greater attempt by the Tajik regime to encroach upon not only the more "traditional" public sphere but also the newly burgeoning one.[18] Some state officials naively believe that by censoring the national Internet providers they can confine the new public sphere that is emerging in the digitally facilitated frontiers. The government's efforts seem especially desperate when labour migration is taken into account. Indeed, it is difficult to comprehend how state officials plan to restrict development of this new public sphere in the context of transnational labour movement. Whilst the Tajik government's censorship capacity is limited to its borders (at best), close to a million Tajik labourers enjoy greater freedoms (if not in civic then, certainly, in religious terms) as a consequence of their living and working in Russia.[19] The presentation of the emerging public sphere and the process of imagining new solidarities in the

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16   BAYAT, 2005: 904.

17   Cf. in general to BRADBURY, 2011; for Iran: GOLKAR, 2011; SHIRAZI, 2012; for Tunisia: WAGNER, 2012.

18   DAVLAT, 2011. The Turaǧon website is not the only website that is, rather regularly, subjected to blockage under the pretenses of 'technical / prophylactic' works. Social media outlets like Facebook and Odnoklassniki, as well as news media sites or the homepage of the Islamic Revival Party (<www.nahzat.org>) on more than one occasion have been blocked as a result of such 'technical / prophylactic' works.

19   Cf. HEATHERSHAW, 2011; STAROSTIN, 2012.

context of Tajikistan and Tajik labour migrants should include an important caveat that these are, certainly, projects in the making.

Similarly, landscapes of 'female Islam' should be understood in this context: Public religious life-worlds manifest a strong gender separation and there is in our observation no interaction between female religious specialists (usually called *bibī-xalifa, bibī-otun, bibī-mullo*) and their male colleagues. [20] Since women are banned from regular mosque services since 2004, they could not address religious issues in public. However, the transformation of public spheres due to the increasing online presence by (male) religious authorities in Tajikistan has changed these paradigms, and since a few years women can address in a public but anonymous forum religious issues to male religious authorities.[21] As we show in this paper, male religious specialists approach gender issues and the particular situation of women in contemporary Tajik society as part of the larger social and political contexts of labour migration and the increasing deterioration of traditional family structures.

The presentation of *amri maʿruf* and religious advice or (as the Turağon-brothers themselves call them) *fatvo* (plural: *fatovo*) on a webpage has further methodological implications that we need to address briefly. First, websites, blogs, and other online platforms in Tajikistan have changed frequently in recent years – this is also the case with the Turağon website we are discussing in this paper. Since 2009, we have collected around 1,200 *fatovo* from the *suolu ğavob* (question and answer section) from their webpage. However, in September 2012, the design of the website (see below) changed and some *fatovo* were deleted, as the setup of the *fatovo* was restructured and professionalized. Second, the online communication is less formal than is usually observed between religious authorities and their followers. The language is often colloquial with little attention to correct orthography (partly even written in Latin and not in the modified Cyrillic Tajik). The answers by the three brothers are likewise less formal and different from their print publications regarding the use of religious sources.[22] Perhaps,

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20   Research on 'female Islam' in Tajikistan is more fragmentary than consistent, cf. for instance STEPHAN, 2010. For Uzbekistan cf. FATHI, 1997; KLEINMICHEL, 2002; KRÄMER, 2002.

21   For the Turağon brothers <http://turajon.org/faq/cat.php?cat_id=7>; the IRPT offers a similar service <http://www.nahzat.org/nahzat/suol>; cf. also <http://wasatiyat.tj/> and the Iranian site <http://www.taqrib.info/tajik/>.

22   For instance, the publications of Hoğī Akbar Turağonzoda are based on a wide range of religious texts which he meticulously quotes including bibliographical references, cf. TURA-ĞONZODA, 2006/2007/2011. In the online *fatovo*, there are a few references to the Koran but not to any other sources (such as *hadith*).

the less formal setting attracts a younger generation of Tajik Muslims who are experienced users of social media outlets but would hesitate to address a religious specialist personally.[23] However, there is insufficient data on the lay Muslim who submit their questions to the Turaǧon-brothers to support this hypothesis, and we are keenly aware of this deficit in our research.

3. The Turaǧon-brothers and their religious enterprise

The website <www.turajon.org> is operated by *ešoni* Nuriddinǧon Qahorov/ Turaǧon[24], Hoǧī Akbar Turaǧonzoda and *ešoni* Mahmudǧon Qahorov/Turaǧon, three sons of the late *ešoni* Muhammadrafiʿ, better known as *ešoni* Turaǧon (1934–2005), a highly venerated Qaderiyya sheikh in the Qarotegin and Hisor Valleys of central Tajikistan. The three brothers follow a division of labour covering various aspects of Islamic practice and teaching in contemporary Tajikistan: As the oldest brother, *ešoni* Nuriddinǧon (b. 1953) is the spiritual heir to the sanctity (*karomat*) of his father in the local genealogy of the Qaderiyya, Nuriddinǧon studied in informal religious circles (*huǧra*) with non-registered religious specialists, in particular *domullo* Muhammadǧon Hindustānī, one of the central figures of Islamic revival in post-Stalinist Central Asia.[25] As the former *imom-xatib* of the Xalifa Abdulkarim Friday mosque in Vahdat (until 2003 Kofarnihon, 25 km east of Dushanbe) he organized the weekly Friday prayer (*xutba*) and performs religious ceremonies for his followers. During religious ceremonies at the Xalifa Abdulkarim mosque (with an attendance of perhaps 10.000 people), students or followers (*murids*) of Nuriddinǧon record the events on audio and video tapes which are distributed throughout Tajikistan and usually sold reasonably priced in local bazars or in front of mosques. The same recordings can be found as downloadable files on the web platform. *Ešoni* Nuriddinǧon is the central religious authority in the family and avoids political statements.

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23 In general, public interaction in the Tajik society is relatively strictly formalized in generational and gender hierarchies.

24 Qah[h]orov was the family name of the Turaǧon (also: Tūraǧon) family during Soviet times. Literature from the 1990s sometimes refers to Hoǧī Akbar Turaǧonzoda as Akbar Qah[h]orov. In the late 1980s, many Tajiks changed their 'Soviet' family names to more 'authentic' ones. *ešon* is a honorific title (and grammatically a personal pronoun for the third-person plural) for important representatives of Sufism in parts of Central Asia.

25 DUDOIGNON, 2011.

During the Civil War in Tajikistan, he accompanied his father to exile in Kazakhstan (returning in 1998). The youngest of the three brothers, *ešoni* Mahmudǧon (b. 1960), appears – compared to his two older brothers – less in public and has been devoted to scholarly work. Similar to his brother *ešoni* Nuriddinǧon, Mahmudǧon was trained in Islamic sciences by non-registered religious specialists.

Arguably, the most prominent representative of the Turaǧon family is Hoǧī Akbar Turaǧonzoda (b. 1954), who occupies a leading role in Tajikistan's politics since the late 1980s. As an independent, self-confident, and popular *qozikalon*[26], he challenged the political nomenclature of the late Soviet Union and eventually supported the heterogeneous democratic and Islamist opposition in the tumultuous years between 1991 and 1992. During the Civil War, Hoǧī Akbar was appointed deputy chairman of the IRPT, but left the party after the general peace accord 1997 due to disagreements with the undisputed post-Civil War chairman of the IRPT, Abdullo Nurī. He eventually served as Vice Prime Minister (1999–2005) and Senator of Tajikistan's Upper House (2005–2010).[27] Hoǧī Akbar is a polarizing figure in contemporary Tajikistan: Whilst some hold him responsible for the outbreak of the Civil War, others consider him as a distinguished politician and singular religious authority. Although Hoǧī Akbar has not occupied any official position since 2010 and has repeatedly insinuated that his political ambitions are muted, he is highly visible in Tajikistan's media as a popular commentator on political affairs, a potential candidate for various political offices or a disputatious religious specialist. Importantly, he is one of the few religious specialists who frequently publish on religious affairs, such as the role of women in a Muslim society, the challenge of radical Islamic groups or the social-economic dimensions of Islamic charity. [28] Furthermore, Hoǧī Akbar is also a businessman, owning the cotton-processing plant *Paxta* in Vahdat and agricultural areas under cotton cultivation, thus highlighting his vested economic interests. Perhaps due to his popularity and elusiveness, Hoǧī Akbar has been vilified by representatives of Tajikistan's government and government loyal media since 2010. The conflict escalated in late 2011 when the chairman of the quasi-government *High Council of ulamo of Tajikistan*,[29] Said Mukarram

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26   The office of the *qozikalon* ('supreme judge') was, between 1988 and 1996, the highest office in the quasi-state administration of Islamic affairs (*qoziyot*).

27   EPKENHANS, 2011: 85–86.

28   TURAǦONZODA, 2006 / 2007 / 2011.

29   The *High Council of ulamo* (*Šuroi olii ulamoi Toǧikiston*) is since 1996 next to the Department for Religious Affairs the central government body for administering registered Islamic

Abdulqodirzoda, accused *ešoni* Nuriddinğon and Hoğī Akbar of instigating religious hatred by performing the Shia ceremony of *ʿašūra* commemorating the martyrdom of al-Husayn at Kerbala 680 CE in a majority Sunni Muslim society.[30] Eventually, the High Council of *ulamo* demoted the Xalifa Abdulkarim Friday mosque to a regular five-times-prayer mosque (*masğidi panğ vaqta*), thus depriving *ešoni* Nuriddinğon of the opportunity to conduct the important congregational Friday prayer.

4. Virtual Islam?

The website of the Turağon-brothers was established in the mid-2000s under the domain <www.turajon.org>. The website was relatively stable until September 2012, when the layout was substantially changed to a more professional design. Simultaneously, the three brothers with <www.facebook.com/turajon> and <http://www.youtube.com/turajoncom> opened their own pages on Facebook and Youtube Channel. In early March 2013, the website was offline for a few days sparking rumours in the Tajik media about a government crackdown or an attack by hackers on the website.[31] However, the rumours were not substantiated, and the website continued to operate as before.

The current website of the Turağon-brothers was originally created under the domain name turajon with a '.com' extension, and in mid-September of 2012, a new website was launched with the same domain name but with an '.org' extension. The new website provides improved functionality and a better aesthetic value, however the content is rather limited in comparison to the information that was available at the old website (some sections, such as *Taʿlimi Islom* being completely empty). Since the mid-2000s, websites by religious specialists such as the Turağon-brothers or Hoğī Mirzo (another highly popular younger *imom-xatib* in Kūlob who is affiliated with *ešoni* Nuriddinğon), or lay religious bloggers have rapidly developed and indicate an important shift to

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institutions and their personnel. In recent years, the *High Council*, in co-ordination with the Department for Religious Affairs, has emerged as a more interventionist institution trying to establish a tighter control over the religious field in Tajikistan (EPKENHANS, 2011: 81–82).

30 ISLAMNEWS.TJ, 2011.
31 OZODAGON, 2013.

virtuality in the negotiation of religion in Tajikistan. As it is stated in the *Tamos* (contact) page, the goal is to connect followers of the Turaǧon brothers:

> We are very happy to successfully use modern technology and establish a bridge of communication between you and the greatest men of this nation, brave and devoted Muslims. As you all know, communicating with the noble men of Islam became difficult in our present day society, especially for the one million Muslim brothers that are abroad, working in harsh conditions to fulfil the needs of their families. When they encounter problems in their everyday lives and want to find an Islamic solution from an advisor, whose faith and unwavering opinion they trust, but do not have access to … for that reason it is very appropriate to implement this initiative. Let this website be a way for you to connect with the community of knowledge and wisdom of our land!

Importantly, the necessity of the Turaǧon webpage is further justified by the emphasised limitations of the traditional public sphere:

> Unfortunately, mass media (TV, radio and print press) have taken away [the] right [to communicate with religious authorities] from the Muslims of our country. Therefore, to the best of our capacity we have tried to create an Internet site exclusively dedicated to this great family, the family of *Hazrati ešoni* Turaǧon (*rahimahullah*). So that we can introduce you to these outstanding men, their writings and teachings.

Additionally, one could see the website as being an initiative coming from the younger followers of the Turaǧon-brothers, who notice the general trend among the foreign religious authorities which already have an established online presence. For example, there are many websites of Iranian origin, which specifically target Tajik audience.[32]

The website, predominantly consists of internal links with the only external link being to <www.quranflash.com>. It is rather user-friendly and not overloaded with information or images. Interestingly, the previous webpage (pre-2012) contained more introductory resources on Islamic belief and practice (including conversion) as well as links to Islamic institutions and organizations, whilst the *suolu ǧavob* section was not particularly prominently placed. The current website, however, is centred on this section, and there is – except for the Turaǧon-brothers' own treatises – no additional material available. Additionally, the production of *fatovo* has significantly increased over the past years perhaps

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32   Cf. for an overview on the Sunni internet in Iran DUDOIGNON, 2009.

due to high demand by lay Muslim Tajiks.[33] We assume that the website was tailored to the particular needs of their audience. However, the site does have pages dedicated to biographies of each of the brothers and their revered father. Also, Hoǧī Akbar Turaǧonzoda's books in electronic format, as well as some of his treatise and articles and essays of Mahmudǧon are published on the website. The multimedia section of the website contains video recordings (embedded YouTube links) of the *xutba*s and talks delivered by Nuriddinǧon and Mahmudǧon. Interestingly, most of the audio and video files can be downloaded in compressed cell-phone readable file formats (as .mp3 format for audio and .mp4 for video content).

One of the features of the new website is the introduction of some degree of interactivity, where the visitors can 'evaluate' the video, audio, and textual content using thumbs up ('Like') and thumbs down ('Dislike') buttons as in other popular social media. The new website also tries to accommodate some of the contemporary 'Web 2.0' experience by introducing the "Inform your friends" option, which allows sharing of the link to the specific content (audio, video, text) using most prominent social media tools (not only Facebook, Google+, and Twitter, but also – taking into account the audience of the site – Moy Mir, Odnoklassniki, and VKontakte, which are very popular in a Russian speaking context).

The 'Question and Answer' (*Suolu ǧavob*) section of the website we discuss in this paper is divided into nine sub-sections: *aqida* (belief, dogmatic theology), *tahorat* (ablution), *namoz* (prayer), *zakot* (alms), *ruza* (fasting during Ramadan), *haǧ* (pilgrimage), *xossi zanho* (special section for women), *muomaloti molī* (financial affairs), and *masoili gunogun* (miscellaneous). As the overview indicates, some 2/3 of the questions submitted deal with ritual practice while 1/3 are related to ethical and societal issues.

Each of the sub-sections is then composed of a list of hyperlinked titles that provide a general idea about the specific *fatvo* (legal opinion). Clicking on the title makes the text of the question appear, followed by the answer and information on the petitioner (voluntarily provided name or alias), identifying which of the brothers issued the answer, the date when the question was posted, and also a counter of how many people viewed that particular *fatvo*.

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33   Compared to previous years (2008–2011), the number of published *fatovo* has significantly increased since 2012. However, there is no data on the actual number of questions addressed to the Turaǧon family per month.

The question petition form allows the visitor to specify which of the brothers they wish to address. A new addition to the petition form page was the recent introduction of the *fatvo* search tab, where an entered keyword produces a drop-down list of possible titles of *fatovo* where the entered word or phrase is present. The visitors are urged to use the *fatovo* search options before they post a question, since it is claimed that most of the questions are repeated. Interestingly, a cell-phone number is provided as an alternative channel of communication "in case of difficulties".

5. Female societal dimensions
in the online advice of the Turaǧon-brothers

After women were banned by the quasi-governmental *High Council of Tajikistan's ulamo* in 2004, the Turaǧon-brothers have repeatedly and provocatively addressed the question of the role of women in a Muslim society and challenged the government's policy. Nuriddinǧon, as the *imom-xatib* of the Xalifa Abdukarim Friday mosque, has publicly ignored the ban and admitted women to the prayer. Hoǧī Akbar published an extensive study on the place of women in Islam refuting the judgement of the *High Council of Tajikistan's ulamo*.[34]

In their public statements the Turaǧon-brothers must perform a balancing act satisfying the expectations of their conservative male audience as well as their female followers. Importantly, this is taking place in the dramatically changing social contexts in which the Soviet claim of gender equality is increasingly yielding to the dominance of patriarchal structures and imaginations of an allegedly authentic Tajik tradition of gender and generational hierarchies. However, labour migration has, at the same time, deeply eroded the social fabrics in Tajikistan's society with women forced to act formally or informally as heads of households. Thus, gendered role models, concepts of male / female honour as well as gender and generational hierarchies are simultaneously undermined by the social realities.[35] On the one hand, the Turaǧon-brothers must acknowledge that female headed households are increasingly important in the societal context of Tajikistan (and therefore have to address female Muslims directly and fulfil specific female expectations). On the other hand, they need to

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34   TURAǦONZODA, 2011.
35   Cf. FALKINGHAM / BASCHIERI, 2009; HARRIS, 2004.

represent in the specific post-Soviet context of negotiating Islam in Central Asia and Tajikistan, a rather normative position which confirms the central scriptural concepts of Islamic gender relations. A more reformist or 'innovative' interpretation would, in our opinion, not be understood by the majority of lay Muslims in this specific context. Therefore, the Turaǧon-brothers repeatedly feel obliged to confirm that the central Islamic sources – Koran and *hadith* – attribute the same dignity to men and women, but burden men and women with different religious obligations.[36] The related discussion of male / female dignity, the *hijab* issue as well as the practice of polygyny, illustrates their balancing act. For instance, Nuriddinǧon responds to a question by "Kudratullo" (13 January 2013)[37] whether women are less intelligent (*kam aql*) than men with a lengthy and well-articulated answer. The response indicates the importance of this question for the Turaǧon-brothers, as evidenced by the number of times this particular question was raised. Nuriddinǧon clearly rejects the idea that women are intellectually imperfect (*noqisulaqle*) and explains that Islam was revealed to both sexes. And that men and women are equally responsible for their deeds in front of God. He also ascertains (based on a *hadith*) that men and women possess similar intelligence. Additionally, he concedes that women usually show more empathy and sympathy (*otifa*) than men and provides the example of ʿĀʾiša bint Abī Bakr (Muḥammad's third wife), who is considered by the Islamic tradition as a scholar in her own right. Importantly, the discussion of the role of women in Islam (and in the larger society) is utilized by the Turaǧon-brothers – and in particular by Hoǧī Akbar – in their dispute with Tajikistan's government and the quasi-state *High Council of Tajikistan's ulamo*.

6. Polygyny and *hijab*

Tajikistan's civil code explicitly stipulates a state sanctioned monogamy, which means that only marriages registered with the ZAGS registry office (*Otdel zapisey aktov grazhdanskogo sostoyaniya*) can have legal consequences; the religious *nikoh* is viewed as only a ceremonial affair, from a legal perspective.

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36   This is elaborated in detail by TURAǦONZODA, 2011: 16–27.

37   The *suolu ǧavob* and *fatovo* are cited with the name / alias of the questioner and the date the question was submitted. Due to the changes of the website, not all *fatovo* quoted in this paper are still online. Readers interested in the original *fatovo* may address the corresponding author for further details (s. note 1).

However, in recent years, registrations of marriages with ZAGS have been de-clining. In particular, in rural Tajikistan only the religious ceremony is con-ducted with far reaching consequences for women, since the enforcement of a religious marriage contract (in case of divorce or inheritance) cannot be submitted to a civil court.[38] Additionally, polygyny – often contracted in front of a local *mullo* – has become a wide spread phenomenon in Tajikistan.[39] In the *suolu ğavob* section of <www.turajon.org>, the issue of polygyny is frequently addressed by women, thus indicating the importance of the matter.[40] Despite the official ban on polygyny, the Turağon-brothers discuss polygyny as a 'normal' social practice in a Muslim society, which is only corrupted when ignorant *ulamo* do not apply the Islamic legal provisions correctly. When the polygamous *nikoh* is properly implemented, the woman should be emotionally and materially satisfied (*rozigī*). Hoğī Akbar explicates (to "Fotima" on 8 February 2011) the Islamic provisions regarding *nafaqa* (support by a husband for his wife), i.e. that the husband is responsible for providing all vital necessities: Housing, clothing and food. Should he not be able to provide this, a woman can appeal for divorce with a *mufti*. Hoğī Akbar's suggestion to appeal to the *muftiyot* (i.e. the *High Council of ulamo*) should again be understood as a further affront against the official institutions since they would *de jure* reject any judgment on a poly-gamous marriage and relegate the issue to a civil court (which would likely consider the case an offense against Tajikistan's civil code).

Nuriddinğon concedes to a "Muslim woman" (1 December 2012), who had confided in him her deep despair about her husband's intention to marry a second wife, that he understands her concerns and agrees that polygyny is difficult (*dušvor*) for a woman to accept. However, he concludes, that every woman who endures the jealousy (*rašk*) in a polygamous marriage will receive a martyr's reward (*ağri šahid*) in reference to Surah *az-Zumar* (39:10). And Mah-mudğon, in an answer to "Raxmatulloh" (4 May 2010), states that the "rights of men regarding their wives are indeed extensive and that a wife who could not satisfy her husband leaves this world with a grave sin (*gunohi buzurg*)". Hoğī Akbar, however, considers also the particular rights of women in a polygamous marriage. For instance, "Fotima" (8 February 2011) reports that she is the se-cond wife of her husband and that neither she nor her husband's first wife had

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38   Cf. ROCHE / HOHMANN, 2011.

39   There is no reliable data on polygyny in Tajikistan, cf. QODIR, 2011.

40   In the sample of *fatovo* from 2009 to 2011, about one third of all questions addressed by women to the three brothers were related to the issue of polygyny.

conceived a child to date. Hence, her husband announced that he would marry another woman in the event she did not get pregnant. Hoğī Akbar rejects the man's intention and urges "Fotima" to convince her husband to do a medical check to determine whether he might be infertile (*aqim*). Hoğī Akbar and his brothers discuss polygamous marriages as common practice in the Tajik society and do not explicitly refer to the judicial implications.[41] Instead, they provide tangible advice which publicly acknowledges the particular burden on women and admonishes men to comply with the liabilities stipulated in the Islamic law. Importantly, this discussion takes place within a new public sphere in which female Muslims can address anonymously male *ulamo* in an environment where the government is not able to monopolize or manipulate the discussion.[42]

A likewise contentious issue in contemporary Tajikistan is the *hijab*. Tajikistan's government has imposed a dress code in government institutions, including hospitals, schools and universities, banning the *hijab* and suggestive dress. A number of the Turağon-brothers' *fatovo* come in direct contradiction to the state legislation since they maintain that women should be wearing *hijab* under all non-*mahram* conditions (i.e. in presence of males who are not members of the family).[43]

For example, "Sherzod" (5 January 2011) presents the following circumstance: his mother is a doctor, his father lost his job and is currently unemployed, and he also has a serious health condition. Sherzod goes on telling that his mother performs her prayers (*namoz*), but her supervisor does not allow her to wear her headscarf at work, so he asks for advice on behalf of his mother. In a lengthy answer with references to the Koran, Mahmudğon says that under no circumstances should this woman take off her headscarf, since it is a religious duty (*farz*), and not wearing it is a great sin (*gunohi buzurg*). Mahmudğon, instead, suggests looking for a job in another medical facility, which, perhaps, will be more lenient toward *hijab*. In similar advice to "Bibioiša" (7 April 2011), Hoğī Akbar explains that the Islamic *šari'a* does not oppose women working, however the general conditions should allow a woman to wear the *hijab* and fulfil the daily prayers and not be exposed to irreligious deeds. However, Hoğī Akbar concedes that, in particular in the case of single mothers, women cannot simply

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41   According to Article 170 of Tajikistan's penal code, polygamy is considered to be a criminal offense. Tajikistan's Office of Public Persecution has repeatedly opened investigations against oppositional politicians on charges of polygamy, recently in the case of the former Ministry of Industry, Zayd Zaidov.

42   Cf. the observations in EICKELMAN / ANDERSON, 2003.

43   SARKOROVA, 2005.

quit work. In these cases, they should try to wear the *hijab* (which is forbidden in government institutions including universities), avoid being alone with men, and preserve the "etiquette and dignity" (*odobu viqor*) of a Muslim woman".

A related question from "Zuhro" (25 September 2010) states that young women are not allowed to wear headscarves (*satr*) in universities and hospitals (where she is interning). She tries to cover her hair and neck and asks if she is still liable to a sin. In his answer Nuriddingon, echoes his younger brother's verdict stating that *hijab* is a duty (*farz*) for all Muslim women and only non-believers (*beimon*) can ignore that duty. However, there is an important distinction between the two *fatovo*: While Mahmudgon suggests change of employment, Nuriddingon takes a more affirmative position and advises the young woman to demand her rights and not to allow her *hijab* to be taken from her. Nuriddingon says that no law in Tajikistan stipulates a ban on *hijab*. On the contrary it is a policy of a group of people who do not fear God (*xudonotars*).

Nuriddingon discusses the *hijab* issue in a wider context of male / female relations as well as alleged mentalities or 'nature'. On the question posted by "Dilovar" (8 May 2011) concerning why women must wear the *hijab* and not men, Nuriddingon declares the "women's body arouses lust (*barangezandai šahvat*)". God has created the "nature of men (*tabiyati mard*)" in a way that they easily get aroused by female bodies. Women, on the other hand, do not get excited by uncovered male faces. As in other *fatovo*, Nuriddingon employs reference to the Koran, but he also quotes a French newspaper to support his arguments. According to Nuriddingon, the newspaper reported more than 4.412 sexual assaults against women in France for the year 2010. The article also pointed out that the actual number is considered to be much higher since most women did not report to the police out of shame (*šarm*). Nuriddingon explicates that "all these incidents of sexual assaults against the honour (*nomus*) were committed by men (*az tarafi mard surat megirad*)". He continues, that US statistics indicate that 31% of women in the USA were exposed to sexual assaults (*ǧinoyati taǧovuz ba nomus*), and that an important NGO reported that every two-and-half-minute a woman becomes a victim of a sexual assault: "This happens in a country where the *hijab* is considered as oppression". Thus, Nuriddingon demonstrates with his use of sources and his argumentation, that he belongs to the 'modern (*muasir*) *ulamo*' who consider the various life spheres and who uncover the arrogance of 'Western' perceptions of Islam. However, he simultaneously distracts with this statement from his implicit legitimization of male violence against women by referring to the alleged 'nature' of men.

Interestingly, Hoǧī Akbar in a different question concerning mosque attendance of women ("Iftixor" on 8 February 2011), ridicules the statement of an *imom-xatib* who had defended the ban on women to participate at Friday prayers with the argument that women's "figure (*qadu qomat*)" detracts the male congregation. Hoǧī Akbar (implicitly contradicting his brother's statement) rejects this idea and concludes that an *imom-xatib* has to follow the directives of the *High Council of ulamo* even if they are inconsistent with the religious principles. Eventually, he gives the discussion a twist by addressing conflicts within the religious authorities in Tajikistan and fiercely criticizes the government:

> It is a pity that we Muslims need to follow the imposed concepts of others. The enemies of religion know that a woman is a mother, and a mother is the fundamental tutor / instructor of the children. If a mother is a believer and god-fearing (*xudotars*), and if she visits the mosque and is informed about the Koran and the *Sunna*, it is self-evident that she will bring up her children in this way. Therefore this plan (*naqša*) [by the government] is designed to distance [women and mothers from religion] in order to keep women away from listening to *amri maʿruf* and the religious foundations. It is their intention that the future generation (*naslhoi oyanda*) does not know about Islam and [grows up] ignorant (*ǧohil*), and that pure Islam is eradicated (*Islomi nob*) in the society.

Hoǧī Akbar complains that public space for negotiating Islam for women is restricted, and the *ulamo* are not even allowed to address this issue on television or in the radio. "Then, how should a woman as a member of a Muslim society know about the principles of religion?"

The state's overreach into the religious field is a central issue in the brothers' alternative discourse. Hoǧī Akbar adamantly criticized the Tajik President Rahmon for signing the law on parental responsibility, which bans youths under 18 years old from attending Friday prayers in the mosques. In the *fatvo* section of the website, Hoǧī Akbar maintains that it is a Muslim's duty (*farz*) to attend Friday prayer congregations once he / she reaches the age of puberty (*baloǧat*). What is notable, however, is that Turaǧonzoda tries to maintain a fragile balance in order not to sound too oppositional. For example, "Khurshedi gharib" addresses Hoǧī Akbar (16 August 2011):

> [Y]ou are the hero of the Muslim nation, I count on God and then on you, please, do something (*iloǧe kuned*) to change the law [on the parental responsibility] so that it does not turn [our] Muslim nation into infidels.

Hoǧī Akbar responds in the following manner:

> Muslim brother, adopting or changing of this law is not in our hands, this is a state matter. We did the best we could do on our part. We have voiced our criticism of this law via mass media. Now all is left to us is to pray so that God grants conscience (*insof*) to the statesmen, so that they withdraw from this anti-God law and make it void.

On a related matter, "Abubakr" says (23 July 2011) that people in Tajikistan face challenges from the government in performing their religious duties. He says that "we" knowingly remain silent, and asks if God will hold "us" accountable for it. Also, he asks whether following government-created laws will free them of the sin associated with the (state-)required behaviour. Hoğī Akbar says that Muslims should not follow the laws that go against the practice of religion (*ibodat*) and God's universal laws. He continues by saying that if the law is against the requirements of God, Muslims should not abide by them, irrespective of whether the law comes from the Shah or the President. Turağonzoda maintains,

> when a human says not to pray and God demands to pray, we should consider God's orders above all the orders of the beings. The performance of God's laws depends on dignity / honour (*nomus*) and faith (*imondorī*) of each individual, however.

7. Societal and political implications

To counter the prominence of the Turağon-brothers, in both physical and virtual realms, the Tajik government agencies and officials have adopted a number of constraining actions. Nuriddinğon, for example, has faced pressures from the National Security Committee by being subjected to numerous interrogations under the charges of undermining the secular state and political order.[44] Access to the <www.turajon.org> site was blocked repeatedly by the directives coming from the State Communications Services. According to Hoğī Akbar, 2011 was the year of the family's humiliation by the state. He cited the arson at their family business facility (the cotton-processing plant *Paxta*), obstruction of their business (farmers not being allowed to deliver raw cotton to Turağonzoda's factory), refusal to publish Hoğī Akbar's book on the place of women in Islam, and, finally, the dramatic dispute with the chairman of *High Council of ulamo* – Saidmukarram Abdulqodirov, all being a part of the state's concerted effort to

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44   MILOD, 2008.

undermine the family's influence in Tajik society.[45] Persecutions continued in 2012, as well. Nuriddinǧon was initially forced to step down from *imom-xatib* positions in their mosque, and later the mosque was downgraded from being a Friday-mosque (licensed to conduct Friday congregational prayers) to only a five-times-prayer mosque (*masǧidi panǧvaqta*), thus depriving the Turaǧon family from their Friday *xutba* pulpit.

Importantly, it should be noted that the challenges to the Turaǧon-brothers emanate not only from the state. Indeed, the very nature of the new public sphere is conducive to a greater degree of contestation. A crucial aspect of the new public sphere, as seen by Eickelman and Anderson, includes the fact that the new technologies significantly change common perception of the public and private domains, often blurring the boundaries between the two.[46] As a consequence, the new communication technologies also have transformational potential in that they can change public discourse and narratives. The recent publication on Sufi brotherhoods and practices in Tajikistan, followed by another article presenting the video of a Qaderiyya *zikr* (remembrance of God) produced a very heated debate in the cyber community over the compatibility of such practices and experiences within the framework of a normative Hanafi Sunni Islam. Hoǧī Akbar Turaǧonzoda vociferously defended *ešoni* Xalilǧon (the Qaderiyya sheikh whose *zikr* circle was recorded) and argued that such practice "bears no contradiction to Islam or Islamic *fiqh*". Moreover, he went on to call those who did raise question on the normativity of Sufi practices in Tajikistan adherents of atheism and Salafism.[47] This incident vividly illuminates that when experiences that were meant to be exclusive and private (such as a *zikr* with a particular sheikh) become public via the new forms of broadcast, they produce new avenues in the existing discourse, especially with regards to the role of religion and religious leaders in society.[48] The incident also vividly demonstrates that this newly emerging public sphere is in fact a highly contested one. Turaǧonzoda's presentation of his opponents as atheists and Salafis, both of which he views as alien and illegitimate, is telling of the degree of the contention that takes place. Such vibrancy is to be expected, however, as Peter Mandaville

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45   TURSUNZODA, 2012.

46   EICKELMAN / ANDERSON, 2003: 14–15.

47   RADIO OZODĪ, 2013a.

48   See the recent scandal about an alleged private sex video of a Tajik *imom-xatib* (RADIO OZODĪ, 2013b).

notes, new technologies "allow greater numbers of people to take Islam into their own hands, opening new spaces for debate and critical dialogue".[49]

The analysis of the Turaǧon-brothers and the virtual public sphere they actively aspire to establish can be greatly aided by the insights offered in Manuel Castells model of power and counterpower. In this framework, the means of coercion and / or construction of meaning form the underlying dynamics that produce disciplinary discourses within a society. Castells posits that challenging status quo power relationships involves (re)production of *alternative discourses* "that have the potential to overwhelm the disciplinary discursive capacity of the state"[50] – a necessary condition to neutralize its coercive capacity. Thus, Castells' model would suggest that the alternative normative discourse (re)constructed by the brothers stands as a challenge and attempt to take over the official disciplinary discourse.

In the case of the Turaǧon-brothers, we can contend that they are (re)producing this alternative disciplinary discourse, introducing new normative codes, and therefore challenging the legal institutions of the state by calling to follow the *šarīʿa*. In particular, their advice on the role of women in a Muslim society frequently contradicts Tajikistan's secular law and government's imagination. Indeed, control over the female body has preoccupied center stage in both dominant official and challenging religious discourse, perhaps in a mutual (but unexpressed) understanding, that whoever controls the women's body (sexuality, dress code, female public sphere) has an edge in the discursive contestation taking place in the post-Soviet and (perhaps in the meantime more importantly) post-Civil War Tajik society.

8. Concluding remarks

It is our contention that the Turaǧon-brothers create alternative disciplinary discourse to counter state's power discourse by introducing new codes of religious normativity, in particular regarding the role of women in society. Furthermore, by challenging the official power discourse, the brothers are attempting to introduce a new hegemony of knowledge where their interpretation of social and Islamic normativity precedes (in importance) the disciplinary discourse (re)pro-

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49   MANDAVILLE, 2002: 88.
50   CASTELLS, 2009: 16.

duced by the state, as well as, contesting normative discourses originating from competing religious and non-religious authorities.

These contestations and negotiations over the social and, more importantly, Islamic normativity are taking place in a new public sphere. Since technological advancements engender this new public sphere, the figures capable of introducing their form of knowledge and 'normativity' using the new means of communications can significantly transform the discursive space. This paper indicates that the case of the Turaġon-brothers is illustrative of such developments. Indeed, it was demonstrated that the Turaġon family successfully employs the new platform to engage in the topics of 'normativity' and hegemony of knowledge, relevant not only to an individual's personal Islamic experience and practice but also to his / her stance as a member of society and a citizen.

Current social and political commentary on Tajikistan, one way or the other, touches upon the issue of migration. Indeed, with a significant number of the population working abroad and sending remittances home that maintain the country's relative economic stability, ignoring this factor would produce a deficient analysis. We posit that the diaspora of labour migrants scattered (all over the world but predominantly) across Russia is one of the most important aspects of the newly emerging public sphere. And although the term of diaspora in a political sense might not be very relevant to this segment of the population as they have not yet taken conscious steps to influence the political developments back home, the new public sphere and the usage of new communication technologies has created meaningful acts that foster a sense of imagined solidarities transcending the national boundaries of Tajikistan.

The observations made in this paper present sufficient grounds to argue that future contestations over the normativity, Islamic and otherwise, are most likely to take place in the discursive realm of the new public sphere. Moreover, the new public sphere, by blurring the lines between the private and the public, makes such challenges not only possible but also visible. Regardless of who will have more prominence and authority in the new public sphere, one thing is for certain – the state will have less and less success in curbing the religious specialists and their alternative discourse, ultimately leading to major reconfiguration and rethinking of the role and importance of Islam not only in private but also in public / social realms.

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