Chapter Eight

Exclusivist Identities in Central Asia

Implications for Regional Stability and Cooperation

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On June 10, 2010, a violent crisis broke out in the Fergana valley, southern Kyrgyzstan, resulting in massive property destruction, a death toll ranging from three hundred to over six hundred, and a stampede of displaced persons. The ethnic clashes involved two communities—Kyrgyz and Uzbek—practicing the same religion, speaking similar languages, and sharing cultural and historical experiences. In the neighboring Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, Uzbeks and Tajiks, who have lived for centuries in the intermingled communities, began showing signs of alienation toward each other. Outside their homeland, the Central Asian migrant workers and students have staged occasional fights with representatives of other Central Asian ethnicities. These inter-ethnic tensions inside and outside Central Asia have been compounded by the emergence of religious fundamentalists and radical secularists across the region that added new cleavages and points of disagreement across and within Central Asian ethnic communities.

This chapter focuses on ideological sources of inter-ethnic frictions in Central Asia and examines their impact on regional cooperation and stability. First, it shows how the Central Asian political and intellectual elites have adopted exclusivist discourses of national identity premised on primordial understanding of nation and ethnicity. These exclusivist identities have been constructed in reaction and even opposition to the identities of neighboring others. As a result conflicts have emerged over the legitimacy of narratives and myths that make up the national identities of states in Central Asia. Second, the Central Asian version of orientalism has become the ideational force for exclusivist identities. The Central Asian orientalism is defined by the claims to autochthony, that is, supposedly pre-historical roots of the
modern populations and their connection to the “homeland,” and appeals to cultural superiority of one ethnic group and the nation that this group epitomizes over the neighboring Central Asian nations. These claims are reproduced by a number of (pseudo-) academic publications and textbooks, and furthered in political agendas of incumbent regimes. In the most extreme cases, these intensive orientalist discourses dehumanize the others, thus contributing to incidents of inter-communal violence.

Third, the Central Asian orientalism is a product of Soviet social engineering and combative atheism. Together with rigid planning, collectivization, and centralized regulation, these policies led to a considerable erosion of classic sedentary and nomadic Central Asian society, which kept Central Asians united within shared communities. At the same time, a common geographical and political space secured their cultural and linguistic differences and offered immunity against serious inter-communal tensions. Ultimately, the establishment of exclusivist identities and subsequent difficulties with fostering civic nationalism empowered by passive secularism has become a root source of inter-ethnic and inter-state problems. These same exclusivist national identities continue positing a formidable challenge to regional integration and security in Central Asia.

I begin this chapter by discussing the exclusivist identities in Central Asia and analyzing their roots in the phenomenon of Central Asian orientalism. Next, the chapter illuminates the mechanisms and driving forces for building exclusivist identities in the region. It also touches on the role of instrumentalization of Islam in generating exclusivist identities. Finally, the chapter explores the impact of exclusivist identities on cooperation and security in the region.

This study is an example of experiential research, a new research paradigm that breaks down the traditional distinction between the role of the researcher and the role of the subject of investigation. “In the new paradigm, this separation of roles is dissolved. Those involved in the research are co-researchers and co-subjects. They devise, manage, and draw conclusions from the research; and they also undergo the experiences and perform the actions that are being researched.” In line with this new paradigm, I researched the complexity of processes taking place in Central Asia not as an external observer, but as a person “experiencing them.” The conclusions of this chapter are derived from personal communications with the Central Asian people of different ethnic and social backgrounds (including students, ordinary people, scholars, and immigrants living outside the region) supplemented with interviews of experts on Central Asian politics and societies. I also carried out content analysis of the textbooks and academic and pseudo-academic publications published in Central Asia with the goal of shaping people’s perceptions of their national histories.
To simplify their perception of complex phenomena, people resort to categorization. Individuals, groups, objects, and processes get ascribed to preformed categories that guide individuals’ judgments and help them make sense of the world. In the context of post-Soviet Central Asia, ethnicity and language have become the primary categorization criteria for people. A hangover of the Soviet time, the primordialist approach to nation and ethnicity that treats them as objective entities with inherent features such as territory, language, and religion continues weighing heavily on nation building processes in the Central Asian region. For instance, the following categorization (identification) patterns became part of life in Central Asia: Russian-speaking vs. native language-speaking, (prosperous) Kazakhs vs. (losers) others; “shala-Kazakh” (who don’t know the language or many of the Kazakh traditions) vs. “nagyz Kazakh” (who speaks the language fluently and is considered to be “authentic” Kazakh); (descendants of Amir Timur) Uzbeks vs. others; (descendants of Manas) Kyrgyz vs. others; (of Aryan origin) Tajiks vs. others (Turkic nomads); (descendants of Ogyz Khan, 5,000-year-old nation) Turkmens vs. others; and Kyrgyz vs. Uzbek.

The main problem with these kinds of categorizations is that they serve more than a “sense-making” purpose. Rather, a particular category representing the other is ethnically determined and homogenized. It is also presented as a comprehensive category, which becomes essentialized through discourse and concomitant practice. The systematic and deliberate process of “othering” of those who are not part of “in-group” or “we-group” is known as orientalism. In its original meaning, the term was used by Edward Said and post-colonial scholars—Anouar Abdel Malek and Ziauddin Sardar, among others—to critique Western science and its patronizing and negative, if fictionalized, perception of the outside world, especially the so-called oriental (eastern) societies. Recently, a number of scholars began using this concept in relation to the “oriental” (non-Western) societies themselves, and their perceptions of others and their own selves. This diffusion of orientalistic thinking became a by-product of modernization and westernization of non-Western societies, which embraced some of the orientalistic patterns. In Central Asia, the modernization of traditional societies with the concomitant destruction of the classic sedentary and nomadic lifestyles occurred under the Soviet regime. The Central Asian orientalism, which is an ideational force for building exclusivist identities, is, therefore, a direct result of Soviet policies and powerful evidence of the considerable erosion of the Central Asian traditional civilization.

The discursive construction of negative and homogenous identities of others can be witnessed across Central Asia. This process, which builds upon
the described patterns of categorization (identification), is consistent with the classical definition of *orientalism*. For instance, more affluent Kazakhs, especially those who have made their fortunes in state and private business, orientalize other Central Asians who endure economic hardships and perform unqualified work as “inferior, unskilled, and non-progressive.” Uzbeks orientalize Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, who are perceived as both more Russified and more nomadic, as “inferior, carefree, and lazy.” Russians and other Russian-speaking groups tend to orientalize other Central Asians as “inferior, archaic, backward and undeveloped.” Some Uzbeks orientalize other Turkic ethnicities by claiming their central place in Turkic history. These claims are grounded in the historical interpretations presenting Uzbeks as “aristocrats of all Turkic nations.” On the other hand, some Tajiks appropriated the role of “providing civilization and sciences to the Turkic-speaking nomadic tribes” for themselves and began orientalizing other Central Asians of Turkic origin. Still, many Kyrgyz and Tajiks believe in the uniqueness and antiquity of their culture and language and claim that their nations are among the most ancient in the world. They, in turn, orientalize other Central Asian nations as “artificial and uprooted.” Turkmen orientalize everyone else by claiming their own unique five-millennia-old nationhood and culture that goes back to the times of Prophet Noah.

Internet forums, individual blogs, and posts on social media vividly illustrate how Central Asians employ orientalizing discourses and practices in relation to others. The orientalistic discourses transpire in heated altercations over a wide range of social and political issues, such as trans-boundary watercourses, the construction of hydro-stations, and others. The othering is particularly noticeable in Central Asians’ attitudes toward mixed marriages, which are often regarded as a disgrace by members of different ethnic groups. Furthermore, Central Asian orientalism fuels inter-ethnic tensions within the communities of Central Asian migrant workers, and students, and contributes to systematic hazing and harassment of ethnic minorities in the military establishments across Central Asian states. The perpetrators of these types of violence tend to view their ethnic opponents through the orientalistically homogenizing prism as inferior, stupid, and treacherous. It is not surprising, therefore, that ethnic minorities in all Central Asian republics—Uzbeks in Tajikistan, Tajiks in Uzbekistan, Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan, and so on—attempt to evade draft at any cost.

In addition to the discussed dichotomous categorization of ethnicities into developed/underdeveloped, civilized/uncivilized, and superior/inferior, the Central Asian orientalism involves debates about ethnicities and nations that are more *autochthonous* to the region. At a deeper level, the content of these debates concerns claims to cultural superiority of individual Central Asian nations. The cultural superiority, in turn, is gauged by the antiquity of a nation and its ties to the region. Consequently all Central Asian ethnic
groups—Uzbeks, Tajik, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen—lay claims to their autochthony. In these debates, “an ethnic group’s antiquity alludes to its cultural richness and superiority.” \(^{10}\) “Cultural supremacy is understood as being proportional to how long a people have been present on their national territory.” \(^{11}\) In general, a theme concerning the immemorial history of a nation’s presence on the territory that it inhibits today has become a vital element of national identity-building discourses. \(^{12}\) These discourses have been employed by not only “titular” ethnic groups (i.e., those ethnic groups that constitute majorities within the Central Asian republics), but indigenous and migrant minorities as well.

To summarize, Central Asian orientalism provides an ideational basis for building exclusivist identities, which are based on the prejudiced perception of the superiority of one’s own nation, fanatical glorification of one’s own culture, language, and history, and militant patriotism. Exclusivist identities are constructed in opposition to and, in the extreme cases, against the other(s). In other words, to be Kazakh means not to be/or be against the Russians, and to be Uzbek means not to be/or be against the Tajik.

**MECHANISMS AND DRIVING FORCES IN ESTABLISHING EXCLUSIVIST IDENTITIES**

The local and native (pseudo-) intellectuals have played an important role in bolstering the orientalizing discourses through their “scholarship” aimed at re-writing the national histories of Central Asian states. The new historical accounts gloss over the shared history of Central Asian peoples in favor of the history of a particular ethnic group. While this group’s historical experiences get glorified in the modern historiographies of the Central Asian nations, the role of other ethnicities is downgraded or completely excluded from the new historical narratives. This process of re-writing national histories has become the primary mechanism for fostering Central Asian orientalism.

The uncritical acceptance of the new “truths” about Central Asian history has been happening on the backdrop of rampant politicization of historical scholarship and science to serve the exigencies of governing political regimes. The practice of politics interfering with scientific enquiry for political gains is not new to the region. During the Soviet time, science was a captive of the Communist regime. Scientific inquiry was carried out under strict ideological control. Serving the Soviet regime’s ideological goals was considered part of the scientific mission. Although it is contrary to the principle of academic freedom, the practice of state interference in science survived the Soviet time. The Central Asian academicians continue playing an important role in imparting “scientific” legitimacy to dubious political initiatives.
and programs. Participating in the creation of narratives about exclusivist (ethnicity-based) national identities is one way in which local intelligentsia assist in the legitimization of the Central Asian regimes. Certainly, not all states of the region pursue this policy to the same degree. For instance, Kyrgyz and Kazakh scholars have more academic freedoms than their counterparts in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan offer a greater space for independent intellectual pursuits than Tajikistan. The Turkmen and Uzbek governments exercise the utmost control over the national narrative-creation. Still, even in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the heads of the state attempted to rewrite the history of their own nations.13

The governments of Central Asian republics describe their relationship with academia as “patronage” over science, which in practice appears under the guise of the policy of “Gos-zakaz.” The latter stands for “state order” and refers to projects that are initiated and funded by the state. These projects, therefore, are inevitably ideologically driven. For instance, all Central Asian governments support historical and anthropological research, which supports claims of the titular nations to their autochthony and cultural superiority, or studies that derive the lineage of their nations from prominent historical figures—scholars, religious leaders, and warriors. Some of the examples of historical debates featured in the state-backed publications are those that concern the national origin of al-Khorezmi, al-Farabi, and Avicenna. “Was Biruni Uzbek?” “Was Ulugbek Uzbek?” “Was Yassawi Kazakh?” Debates over these and similar questions began in Soviet times but have intensified after the independence of Central Asian republics.

The never-ending process of determining who of the common ancestors were Uzbek, Kazakh, Tajik, or Kyrgyz is futile since the contemporary ethnic divisions are a creation of the modern time. Still, many scholars and politicians in Central Asia ignore calls for avoiding the imposition of “present-day national categories on earlier periods.”14 The myths of origin are merely a tool for claiming autochthony over the territory and cultural supremacy, and a method of building exclusivist identities. In general, the contemporary Central Asian intelligentsia hardly resembles the idealist and humanist Jadid, that is, the native Central Asian intelligentsia of pre-Soviet period, either in their ideas or ways of life. The prevalence of post-Soviet mentality and materialistic values (including power and status aspirations) among the academicians diverts their attention from concerns with the so-called post-material values, such as protection of human rights, environmental issues, and the like.

Alongside the “scholarship” that aims at rewriting the histories of individual Central Asian states, the national history curricula in schools across Central Asia have been instilled with the content conducive to fostering exclusivist perceptions of national identity among the new generation. For instance, historical texts used in the school curricula in Uzbekistan promote the idea
that Uzbek nationhood embraces Amir Timur’s imperial achievements. History textbooks instruct Uzbek students that before the Russian colonization of Central Asia, the region’s population was divided into three Uzbek khanates and spoke predominantly Uzbek language. These assertions conflict with conclusions of the renowned historians who maintain that the population of khanates was extremely heterogeneous and many people were bilingual. Furthermore, ethnicity and language did not play a dominant role in the social structure and forms of governance in the political entities across pre-Soviet Central Asia. The geographical expanse of the khanates encompassed swathes of land of today’s Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and some parts of Kazakhstan.  

Official efforts at building an exclusivist national identity through schooling are particularly conspicuous in Turkmenistan. The book *Rukhnama* authored by the late Turkmenbashi is still compulsory reading across all levels of the educational system in Turkmenistan. It represents a framework for official Turkmen history and a primary source for writing and teaching national history. *Rukhnama* teaches that “Turkmen people have a history of five thousand years.” “Turkmen were founders of more than seventy great states and principalities. . . . The history of the Turkmen nation can be traced back to the Flood of Noah . . . Oguz Han is the national prophet of the Turkmen, but his name is not listed among the names of the prophets. He is only referred to by the word Torg in the old Hebrew books like the Torah.” Similar, if less flagrant, claims to the uniqueness, greatness, and special place of the titular nation in the history of all humankind can be found in school textbooks in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan. On the whole, the content of educational curricula across Central Asia provides a breeding ground for orientalism and exclusivist identities.

The unique forms of governmentality in Central Asia function as another mechanism for furthering exclusivist identities and orientalism in the states of the region. For instance, Assel Rustemova points out that Uzbekistan’s mode of governmentality based on the cult of Amir Timur “supports the concept of Uzbekistan’s cultural superiority over its neighbors” and “defines the essential traits of what it is to be an Uzbek.” The cult of Amir Timur “sets out strong divisions domestically and abroad.” It “erects mental barriers and fosters divisions.” The official national historiography and school curriculum embracing the cult of the political leader and military conqueror lends itself to the process of orientalizing the others.

Finally, some ethnic groups in Central Asia represent themselves as historical victims and employ the rekindled perceptions of victimhood for constructing exclusivist identities. In Central Asia this phenomenon manifests itself in different ways. For instance, in Tajikistan the victimhood of Tajiks is asserted at the highest political level through the discourse condemning the millennium-long yoke of Turkic tribes followed by the modern rebirth of the
Tajik nation. As a result of intermarriages and cultural and linguistic intermingling of Tajik and other Turkic tribes over centuries, their communities became more alike, according to the official view in Tajikistan. In Kazakhstan, Kazakh nationalists tend to cultivate the sense of victimhood against Russians, even though Russian people cannot be held directly responsible for injustices and cultural onslaught against Kazaks. The suffering of Kazaks, as well as millions of Russians and their culture, religion, and traditions, was the fallout of the totalitarian system. Many ethnic Kazaks themselves were implicated in the workings of totalitarianism in their republic. The victimhood of Turkmen against “ruthless cruelties and destructions of Amir Timur and Chengis Khan” (who have been privatized by the Uzbek official historiography) has been asserted in Rukhnama.19

Politicians and scholars heralding exclusionary identities purport to create homogeneous national identities corresponding to their standards. Although these exclusivist ideas are commonly presented under the guide of new patriotism, they represent the remnants of the Soviet-style thinking. The latter kind of thinking is distinguished by its unwillingness and inability to accept ideological and paradigmatic diversity or ideational pluralism. Ethnic groups masterminding exclusionary identities feel deep suspicion toward others including ethnic and religious minorities, diasporas, and even those in-group members who show dissent because disagreement is viewed as a threat of the social cohesiveness of the society.

THE ROLE OF THE INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF ISLAM IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITIES

Religion, particularly Islam, is indispensible to national identities in Central Asia, where the majority of locals identify themselves as Muslims. After the collapse of the Soviet ideological edifice with concomitant beliefs in virtues of atheism, Central Asia witnessed a revival of Islamic traditions manifested in the growing number of people perceiving Islam as their “way of life” and practicing the religion. Two trends that undermine both the traditional forms of Islam in Central Asia and transnational Islamic currents have been underway in the region in response to the Islamic renaissance. On the one hand, some representatives of local intelligentsia and political elites have tried to diminish the role of Islam in national identity by prioritizing pre-Islamic practices and traditions such as Zoroastrianism, Shamanism, and Tengerism. There are also those propagating combative secularism that downplays the role of any religious beliefs in the identity structure. On the other hand, governments and religious leaders hand-picked by the governing regimes have exploited state-controlled Islam for both shaping national identities and also legitimizing their own exclusionary perceptions of national identities.20
The deliberate discursive representations of Islam that package references to the religion with various themes and emotional appeals for highlighting some selected aspects of religion while muting or disparaging others, all for accomplishing distinctive political aims, is known as the instrumentalization of religion. The governments of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, for example, have actively promoted the localized Muslim identities. Turkmenistan’s *Rukhnama*, which represents both a historical and religious source, describes Turkmen as “Türk-iman” defined as “asli nur.” The latter can be translated as “Turk-faith-divine light essence,” that is, “essential, fundamental (divine) light,” and interpreted as sanctification of ethnic Turkmen. In Kazakhstan, a pseudo-Sufi community has propagated an interpretation of Islam comprised of a mixture of Sufism and Kazakh nationalism in recent years. The community members of this Sufi “order” believe that the Kazakh perception of Islam, Kazakh traditions, and their way of life are not only the best, but they are also the only “truth.”

One of the primary reasons for using Islam in support of nationalistic sentiments is the acceptance of Islamic practices and traditions in all Central Asian communities and, therefore, the potency of Islam to serve as a mobilizing force. For some Kazakhs, the nationalization of religion serves an important psychological function by offering a consolation for the supposed loss of the Kazakh nomadic civilization during the Soviet period. Furthermore, attempts at controlling and managing religious activities through the states’ bureaus of religious affairs or the government-backed religious authorities impart legitimacy to nationalistic policies, despite the fact that religious teachings, by and large, do not tolerate nationalism.

The claims about religious superiority just like the claims about the superiority of secularism over various forms of religiosity feed into the orientalizing discourses in Central Asia. The orientalistic binaries that counterpoise pious Muslims with not pious or corrupt Muslims, and fundamentalists with nominal believers and Shamanists have become commonplace in Central Asia. The susceptibility of the Central Asian people to this kind of dichotomous thinking explains the popularity of binary opposites that translate into the orientalization of others and construction of exclusivist identities. For instance, the older generation of Central Asians who were brought up during the Soviet period and who are currently at the helm of Central Asian politics regard Islam as part of local traditions. It is perceived as a cultural artifact, rather than a framework of moral and ethical values that shape and direct the lives of individuals and whole communities. This generation interprets the spread of Islam through the lens of “narrow traditionalism,” which excludes an understanding of Islam as the “ethical and enlightened” religion based on tolerance, inclusiveness, good morality, and trustworthiness.
One of the distinct processes of instrumentalization of Islam is known as securitization of religion. Securitization entails a discursive practice of defining a phenomenon that does not necessarily belong to a security realm as security threat. The securitization of Islam in Central Asia contributes to the rise of exclusivist identities in the region by strengthening the position of those social and political forces that advocate for homogeneous national identities based on arbitrarily (if deliberately) selected features, including an understanding of religion that fits the agendas of the ruling elites. Fears of radicalization of Islam certainly contribute to its securitization by the Central Asian governments. However, the spread of perceptions of Islam as a threat is also enabled by the increasingly diversified social fabric of the Central Asian societies and the emergence of religious groups that are not extremist or violent but “alien” to the host states and societies. A simplistic and narrow perception of religion, in general, and Islam, in particular, is still prevalent in Central Asia. Subsequently, any non-local and, therefore, non-traditional religious group engaged in lawful practices that appears in the communities of Central Asians is habitually perceived as alien and labeled fundamentalist. Under the lasting impact of the Soviet period, many representatives of the contemporary political and intellectual elites in Central Asia continue interpreting the Islamic awakening as an inherently political and dangerous phenomenon, despite the fact that the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence that has been the prevalent form of Sunni Islam in Central Asia focuses primarily and predominantly on the moral and spiritual upbringing of a believer and his community.

THE IMPACT OF EXCLUSIVIST IDENTITIES ON REGIONAL SECURITY AND COOPERATION

Post-Soviet Central Asia is a region where nearly all integration projects that were launched following the breakup of the Soviet Union have failed. This is not what one would expect of a group of states with common pre-Soviet and Soviet history and cultural, religious, and linguistic affinities of indigenous populations. Some Central Asian ethno-es have common ancestry—Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek, for example, draw their origins from the same Qipchak, Kongrat, and Nayman tribes. Turkic-speaking and Persian-speaking peoples have intermingled over the course of centuries of living side-by-side, while the inter-ethnic marriages have fostered close blood relations.

The fallout of regional integration and cooperation is a complex problem with multiple factors contributing to it. Central Asian states have adopted different models of economic development. Their foreign policy goals and domestic political agendas often go contrary to those of the neighboring states. Regional integration is hindered by a host of unresolved problems
concerning water rights, disputed borders, and contested territories. Until these latter problems are resolved, meaningful integration and sustainable regional security will not be attained.

While the listed above factors are important for understanding the failings of regional integration, they emphasize the role of “material” considerations and exclude ideational concerns. I take a position that foregrounds the importance of perceptions of the Self and Others in explaining relations among the Central Asian republics including the prospects for sustainable regional cooperation. Specifically, the discussed categorization (identification) patterns that construe the “other” in negative and homogenous terms can serve as a catalyst for inter-communal conflicts. In other words, the discourses of exclusivist identities foster inter-ethnic and inter-communal tensions and, therefore, should be regarded as one of the biggest stumbling blocks in furthering stable and harmonious relations within and across Central Asian republics.

As demonstrated in this chapter, all Central Asian states have engaged in the process of building exclusivist national identities centered on the so-called “titular” (or majority) nation defined in ethnic terms. The intensity of this process has varied across the states of Central Asia from unofficial and concealed efforts to official endorsements of ethnocentrism of a titular ethnic group. Ethnocentrism typically entails glorification of the ethnic group’s culture, traditions, and values and perceptions of inferiority of other ethnic groups and accompanying negative evaluations of these ethnic groups. A Russian analyst summarized the alarming prevalence of ethnocentric tendencies in Central Asia in the following way:

Regional integration is not possible on the backdrop of the ethnocentric orientalist discourses representing a particular ethnic group as exceptional and superior to all others. As long as these discourses are perpetuated in national myths of cultural superiority and official histories defending the claims of ethnic groups to the land, intellectual heritage, and leadership in Central Asia, regional cooperation and integration will hardly be achievable.

The construction of exclusivist national identities impedes any effort at building peaceful and harmonious relations within individual Central Asian
republics, and also in their relations with the neighboring states. It is not only a broad range of economic and social problems, such as high rates of unemployment and shortage of water resources and arable land that can trigger ethnic hatred and sentiments, but “the ways in which people form perceptions of themselves and others” that constitute the most important root cause of conflict. By manipulating the concept of identity, people have fomented hatred and instigated violence, including genocide, against people who were previously neighbors, friends, and even relatives living together in peace.

Bosnia of the early 1990s offers an extreme example of a place where different ethnic groups, which had been neighbors for generations, turned violent toward each other. Committed on an unprecedented scale, this violence was enabled by the process of dehumanization of the other (e.g., dehumanization of Bosniaks by Serbian Chetniks) unleashed by the nationalist intelligentsia and, later, accepted by the segments of the population. The inter-communal conflicts that erupted in the post-Soviet Central Asia, primarily the civil war in Tajikistan and a series of violent clashes in the Fergana valley region of Uzbekistan and southern Kyrgyzstan, also shocked the observers by the scale of violence aimed at innocent people who were chosen deliberately as targets. Neither standing armies nor foreign mercenaries were involved in these violent acts of killing and torture, and other types of bodily harm. For these massive and indiscriminate atrocities to take place, perpetrators must be de-sensitized to killing and mutilating others, who come from the neighboring communities. The manifest orientalist thinking that underlies the process of othering is indispensible to the creation of dehumanizing perceptions of others. This is not to suggest that the host of social, economic, and political problems in Central Asian have not contributed to the volatile situation in the region. Rather, my intent is to highlight the role of the creeping Central Asian orientalism, which leads to demonization and dehumanization of the others, in destabilizing inter-ethnic relations. In other words, the negative perceptions of neighboring communities solidified by exclusivist identities reproduce inter-communal tensions and trigger inter-ethnic clashes in Central Asia.

The construction of exclusivist identities based upon the Central Asian orientalism can be thought of as the ideational source of failed efforts at integration and cooperation in the region. If minds and hearts are not ready to embrace and accept others and, in extreme cases, perceive others in derogatory terms, even the best political initiatives will be futile. Competing claims to historical legacy and cultural supremacy of the nations accompanied by the systematical process of orientalizing the neighboring others will continue posing the major challenge to the resolution of inter-state problems with disputed borders, minorities, and trans-boundary rivers and trade. As one commentator from Uzbekistan noted, nobody else but Central Asians themselves hinder the process of regional integration. A saying that “neighbor-
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hood does not mean to be close to each other” describes post-Soviet Central Asia. Individual Central Asian states have stronger affinity to states outside the Central Asian region—Russia, Turkey, and South Korea are prime examples of these states—than to their immediate Central Asian neighbors.

To sum up, the construction of exclusivist identities in Central Asia bears negative implications for regional integration and security in the region. At its “best,” it obstructs regional cooperation. At its worst, it may engender inter-ethnic and inter-communal enmity, which can evolve into violent conflict. The most extreme cases of orientalistic thinking support the emergence of extreme exclusivist identities, which embrace the denial or maltreatment and dehumanization of the other. This, in turn, constitutes a serious threat to the regional security.

There is another dimension of the phenomenon of exclusivist identities in Central Asia, which also undermines the process of regional integration. It concerns the formation of exclusivist identities at the local level in all Central Asian republics. These exclusivist identities are based upon either sub-ethnic and sub-regional categories, such as clans, tribes, and regional networks, or ethnic and religious categories, such as local religious communities, minority groups, and diasporas. Even when the official policy of a Central Asian republic purports to build comprehensive nationalism, some segments of its population will still prefer mostly exclusivist local identities. For example, in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, despite the rigid state policy, intense official propaganda, and strict school curriculum that are aimed at building comprehensive national (ethnically based) identity, the sub-ethnic and regional groups are still very powerful. In Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan where the space for relative pluralism of ideas and choices exists, democratic institutions are exploited for sustaining sub-ethnic and regional cleavages. For instance, it is commonplace for the rural Central Asians to vote based on their clan affiliations. In these circumstances, opposition emerges due to the exclusion of the representative of the same or different group from power and access to resources, rather than due to democratic pluralism or the maturity of civil society.

CONCLUSION

What are the sources of interethnic and inter-communal tensions in Central Asia? This chapter illuminated one of these sources, namely, the processes of constructing exclusivist identities in Central Asian states. Built at the state level and below, these exclusivist identities engender inter-communal peace and also undermine efforts at regional cooperation and integration. Both exclusivist identities and Central Asian orientalism are an unfortunate product of the Soviet-era policies that transformed the sociological and psycho-
logical fabric of the Central Asian societies. The pre-Soviet identities of the Central Asian peoples had little to do with contemporary ethnic identifications, which were imposed by the nationalities policy of the Soviet Union as a necessary step toward socialism. However artificial these ethnic and national definitions are, the fact remains that Central Asian peoples have come to perceive them as real and identify themselves and others according to these categories. This, in turn, has opened the space for ethnic-based exclusivist group identities. It can be argued that the construction of exclusivist identities in Central Asia has resulted from the pervasiveness of post-Soviet mentality across the region. The post-Soviet mentality, in the context of this chapter, refers to a unique mind-set, which accepts primordial ethno-centric understanding of national identity and relegates religion to the position of a cultural artifact. This mindset is also overwhelmed with the orientalistic patterns of thinking that construe “others” in negative terms, neglect the heterogeneity of “others,” and represent the categories used to describe “others” as comprehensive descriptions of diverse groups. Finally, the post-Soviet mentality embraces legal relativism and domination of materialistic values over non-materialistic and post-materialistic considerations.

The fact that different ethnic groups and communities experienced more or less peaceful relations during the Soviet period did not translate into stability in the post-Soviet era. As the history of inter-ethnic and inter-state relations in Central Asian has shown, the formal acceptance of pluralism by the Soviet regime did not result in inter-ethnic peace in the post-independence period. The peaceful co-existence of “brotherly nations” during the Soviet era was unsustainable in the post-Soviet period, because in the past it was held together by an ideology intolerant of other paradigms and ways of life. The social cohesion began breaking down even before the dismemberment of the Soviet Union; the inter-ethnic peace held by the ideological glue was shuttered by the nascent ideological pluralism of the late 1980s. I argue that the classic Central Asian civilization or traditional Central Asian ways of thinking and perception of the other would have offered a more constructive basis for the creation of national identities had it not been destroyed during the Soviet time. The reason is as follows: the pre-Soviet patterns of identification and political organization, such as the multi-ethnic Central Asian Khantes or the inter-ethnic “Six Alash” tribe of Kazakh Turks, did not tie ethnicity with statehood and culture with territory. The Central Asian identities at different levels—from familial to regional—were defined and maintained within the larger context of an Islamic moral order and nomadic, semi-nomadic, or sedentary ways of life. The Central Asian civilization served as an immune system against any kind of social conflict. By destroying it in Central Asia, the Soviet system laid grounds for building exclusivist identities and subsequent inter-ethnic tensions in the region. Under these circumstances, the prospects for regional integration in Central Asia are very
slim, and the future of regional organizations seems to be murky. Historically, only those states that have been able to overcome mutual mistrust and orientalizing tendencies have succeeded in building viable integration projects and fostering regional stability.

It is well established that education and scholarship play a crucial role in the formation of national identity. Using education and science as its tools, the Soviet regime was able to transform the patterns of life and mentality of the whole Central Asian societies. As a result of the Soviet-era education, many in the older generation of the Central Asians became alienated from their very own traditional civilization. The educational legacy of the Soviet period and problems that emerged from it could be remedied with a new kind of education and scientific inquiry. The academic institutions in the Central Asian region have to be liberated from politics, and the whole system of education, especially higher education, which places greater emphasis on the humanities, should undergo critical reappraisal. The humanities curriculum should promote the ideas of pluralism that support the creation of inclusive identities. The latter are more human-centered and, therefore, will be more apt to foster tolerant political culture and patriotic commitment to a state.

The comprehensive secular education funded by the state, which nurtures respect for the rule of law and acceptance of the cultural and ideational pluralism and democracy, is necessary for preventing the emergence of any comprehensive othering and curbing the rise of ethnic, communal and religious intolerance. In addition, Islam in pre-Soviet Central Asia that combined classical Central Asian Islamic understanding with the Hanafi doctrine and Sunni Sufi tradition can be best described as “ethical and enlightened.” This kind of interpretation of Islam should be promoted in contemporary Central Asia. Viewing Islam as an ethical and moral code can greatly contribute to overcoming the problem of Central Asian orientalism and exclusivist identities, and help in building peace, stability, and cooperation in the region.

In the past, to be a Central Asian, whether of sedentary or nomadic origin, meant to be hospitable, inclusive, and tolerant. Truly the civilizational and cultural heritage of the region is antithetical to building exclusionary identities. Therefore, Central Asian societies should strive to develop positive nationalism, which implies serving one’s own country and society by developing them in terms of global competitiveness and getting one’s own history, language, and culture loved and respected in the world. Central Asians must regard ethical and cultural differences and ethnic diversity as unifying factors.

NOTES

9. Personal communications with former soldiers of different ethnic origins.
17. *Rukhnama*.
20. Personal communication with Uzbek and Turkmen academicians working abroad.
22. *Rukhnama*.
23. Personal communication with one of the leading members of this community.
25. For the assessment of Kazakhstan’s case, see Omelicheva, “Islam in Kazakhstan,” 252.
30. Ibid.
32. V. Ponomarev, “We Have the Common Aim to Perish Ourselves,” *Svoboda Slova*, no. 44 (290).
33. Personal communications with anonymous Central Asian experts of Uzbek and Turkmen origin living abroad, April 2013.