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**ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM IN CENTRAL ASIA:
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT**

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1. Introduction

Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) encompasses an area of some four million sq. km. It is bordered to the north by Siberia, to the east by China, to the south by Afghanistan, to the west by Iran and, across the Caspian Sea, the southern Caucasus. The strategic geographic importance of Central Asia, together with its world-class reserves of minerals and hydrocarbons, make it the focus of considerable international interest. It has a population of approximately 50 million, of whom some 35 million are Muslims. The overwhelming majority of these Muslims are Sunnis of the Hanafi school of jurisprudence. The largest non-Sunni group is the small and scattered community of Ismailis in the Pamir mountains of Tajikistan.

When the Soviet Union disintegrated at the end of 1991, many Western commentators were concerned that the newly independent states of Central Asia would fall prey to radical¹ Islamist movements, and that this in turn would promote new centres of international terrorism. These fears were heightened by the outbreak of civil war in Tajikistan in 1992. However, although Islamism certainly played a role in this conflict, a more potent factor was the power struggle between different regional groupings. The warring factions signed a peace treaty (still holding, at the time of writing) in June 1997. Yet by this time, new centres of radical Islamism were emerging in the region. The main focus of activity was in Uzbekistan, in the Ferghana Valley. Very soon, however, the movement spread to neighbouring areas of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. Its adherents were allegedly responsible for acts of terrorism; also, it was claimed, they were linked to repeated cross-border armed insurgencies.

These developments have caused great concern in Central Asia, also in Russia and the West. There is a growing conviction, at least in government circles, that Islamic radicalism represents a threat to regional, and possibly to global, security. Yet information is scant, and often highly unreliable. Attention tends to be focused on headline-grabbing incidents. However, there is usually too little corroborative evidence for it to be possible to make an objective assessment of the significance of these events. Moreover, such a “knee-jerk” approach too easily becomes enmeshed in detail, but throws little light on underlying patterns. This paper seeks to take a broader look at the situation. It begins with a survey of the historical background, pre-Soviet and Soviet, since without an understanding of the socio-cultural environment it is impossible to evaluate current trends. The next section discusses the post-Soviet politicization of Islam. Finally, the paper tries to relate developments in the Central Asian states to those in other parts of the Islamic world.

¹ There is great confusion over the designation of contemporary trends in Islam. One of the most lucid discussions is provided by Choueiri, Y. M., *Islamic Fundamentalism*, rev. ed., London; Washington: Pinter, 1997. This is the terminological model that is used here. He identifies the main trends thus: “Islamic reformism ... a modern movement which came into being in the wake of European supremacy and expansion”, its main operative concepts including a rejection of medieval Islam and a reinterpretation of Islam as a code of modern laws; and “Islamic radicalism ... a politico-cultural movement that postulates a qualitative contradiction between Western civilisation and the religion of Islam” (pp. 19 and 122 respectively). For a different approach, using different terminological categories, see Jansen, G. H., *Militant Islam*, London; Sydney: Pan Books, 1979

2. Pre-Soviet Period

2.1. Islamization of Central Asia

Islam has a history of well over a millennium in Central Asia. However, the religion penetrated Central Asia gradually, and by different means in different areas. Moreover, the cultural and ethnic heritage of the local population differed very considerably from one region to another. This was reflected in a diversity of attitudes to the religion, and to significant divergences in the ways in which it was observed. Even today, traces of older faiths - for example, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Christianity and Buddhism - as well as natural religions (shamanism and various forms of animism) are still to be found.

Islam was first introduced into Transoxiana (modern Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) in the second half of the seventh century AD by invading Arab armies. The Islamization of the region was accomplished quite rapidly. Within some 50 years, Transoxiana had been incorporated politically, culturally and economically into the Arab Caliphate. Cities such as Merv, Samarkand and Bukhara became brilliant centres of Islamic scholarship. The population of southern Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan within a relatively short period likewise adopted the new faith. However, it took far longer to reach the nomads of the steppe region in the north and some would claim that adherence to Islam here was always perfunctory, strongly influenced by animist traditions and customary tribal law. To those familiar with more conventional forms of the faith, they appeared to be “Muslim only in name”.²

Within a few centuries of the initial introduction of Islam into the region, Central Asia was almost entirely surrounded by Muslim neighbours. The only exceptions were the Mongolian Jungars (Oirots) far to the northeast, who intermittently attacked Kyrgyz and Kazaks in the border regions. Thus, Islam did not constitute a differentiating feature or an ethnic boundary. However, once the dynamic legacy of the Arab conquest began to wane, links to the Caliphate weakened, and sheer geographic constraints relegated distant, landlocked Central Asia to a peripheral position on the outer rim of the Islamic world. There were other factors that contributed to the growing isolation of Central Asia.

By the early sixteenth century trade patterns had changed; new maritime routes were used in preference to the ancient transcontinental “Silk Roads” that had previously criss-crossed Central Asia. This led to intellectual and economic stagnation in the region. Bukhara and Samarkand, once great centres of Muslim culture and learning, were now but pale reflections of their former glory. Iran’s adoption of Shiism as the state religion in the early sixteenth century also served to impede contacts between Central Asians, who remained adherents of Sunni Islam, and other parts of the Muslim world. Previously, the main route to the Middle East had passed through Iran. This was now all but closed. Hence, it became very much more difficult for Central Asians to undertake the *haj* (annual pilgrimage to Mecca), let alone to travel abroad for purposes of study.³

² Valikhanov, Sh., *Sobranije Sochinenij*, Vol. 4, Alma-Ata: Kazakhskaja Sovietskaja Enciklopedija, 1985, p. 99; see also on this subject Schuyler, E., *Turkistan*, Vol. 1, 3rd ed., London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1876, p. 37

³ For a fuller account of the historical background see Akiner, S., Islam, the State and Ethnicity in Central Asia in Historical Perspective, *Religion, State and Society*, Vol. 24, Nos. 2/3, September 1996, pp. 91-132

2.2. Tsarist Conquest

In the eighteenth century the main regional entities in the southern tier were the Khanates of Bukhara, Khiva and Kokand; in the north, there were three Kazak tribal confederations or Hordes (known respectively as the Big, the Little and the Middle Horde). The Tsarist annexation of Central Asia took place with relatively little local resistance. The Kazaks were the first to come under Russian rule. This was a creeping process which took over a century to complete, lasting from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century. The conquest of the Khanates began with the fall of Tashkent in 1865. Bukhara and Khiva became protectorates in 1868 and 1873 respectively; Kokand was fully integrated into the Russian Empire in 1876. Transcaspia (modern Turkmenistan) was conquered in the 1880s.

Tsarist policies in the north initially favoured the consolidation of Islam among the nomads. Tatar missionaries from the Volga region were given official encouragement to inculcate Islamic orthodoxy in the steppes. Later, however, a campaign was launched to convert the Kazaks to Christianity; at the same time, measures were introduced to curb Muslim activities. Yet by this time Islamic institutions were already well established and continued to expand. In the southern tier, the existing Muslim administration was retained, with little interference from the colonial authorities. *Shar'ia* law courts and Muslim educational establishments continued to function as previously.

2.3. Muslim Responses to Tsarist Rule: Collusion, Rebellion, Reformism

Russian rule in Central Asia was comparable to that of other colonial European powers. In general, however, it was less onerous and less intrusive than that of most other colonial regimes.⁴ The main response of the Muslim community was compliant collaboration. Rebellion, or even serious civil disorder was rare - very different, for example, from the situation in contemporary British India. Some degree of modernization took place, and as elsewhere in the world, this triggered a reformist movement that sought to combine Muslim values with European knowledge and practical skills.

There were two main Muslim hierarchies at this time: the *ulama* (scholars and legal experts who constituted the official religious administration) and the Sufi orders. The *ulama* were largely co-opted by the colonial administration. The Tsarist officials treated them with respect and despite some limitation of their powers, their authority was upheld and even enhanced. In return, they showed themselves to be loyal servants of the state. The majority of the *ulama* were ultra-conservative and, if contemporary accounts are to be believed, they were also venal and ill educated.⁵

⁴ Skrine, H. and E. Denison Ross, *The Heart of Asia*, London: Methuen, 1899, gives an interesting account of the Russian administration in the region, drawing informed parallels with the British administration in India (see especially pp. 408-16)

⁵ According to the Bukharan reformist thinker Fitrat, "Holy Bukhara ... has become a country ringed round by mountains of stupidity and enmeshed in chains of contempt!". Fitrat, A., *Raskazy indiiskogo puteshestvennika: Bukhara kak ona jest'* [Tales of an Indian traveller: Bukhara as it is], Samarkand: Mahmud-Hoja Begbudi, 1913, pp. 23-6

The Sufi orders were mainly represented in the large cities. In earlier centuries they had been immensely influential, frequently acting as powerbrokers in accession struggles. It was often they, rather than the *ulama*, who had provided intellectual and spiritual leadership. However, even before the advent of the Russians, their power had been largely broken by the local rulers. By the nineteenth century, their function was principally ceremonial and social. Unlike Sufi orders elsewhere in the Western-dominated Muslim world (for example, the Sudan), they were not a revolutionary force. Such opposition to Russian rule as there was came predominantly from the *ishans*. These were local religious leaders, often hereditary, who exercised considerable authority within their own communities. Some attracted quite large followings, especially in rural areas, among the nomads and semi-nomads. The *ishan* are often called Sufis, but the great majority has only a rudimentary knowledge of Islam and a very vague understanding of Sufi rituals. In effect, they practise a form of folk religion, an amalgam of various influences, including shamanism and pre-Islamic faiths. They were an important feature of pre-Soviet society, especially in rural areas. During the Soviet era, they functioned in a semi-covert manner. Yet even cases of *ishan*-led armed insurrection were comparatively rare in Central Asia. The most famous insurrection was the Andijan Uprising of 1898; led by Madali Ishan, it was no more than a night raid on a Russian military base, lasting approximately fifteen minutes and resulting in the deaths of twenty-two Russians and a somewhat smaller number of rebels.

In the nineteenth century, in response to the colonial encounter with European powers, reformist, modernizing movements emerged in several parts of the Muslim world, notably in Turkey, India and Egypt. A similar process occurred in Central Asia under Russian rule. The reformist movement here owed much to the influx of Tatar activists who came to the region in the wake of the Russian conquest. They helped to establish a local, independently owned press, and they spearheaded innovations in education by introducing new teaching methods (*usul-i jadid*, “new method”, hence the term Jadidist by which they are often known). Compared with similar movements elsewhere, Central Asian reformism was relatively small scale, with very limited impact. It was also short-lived, cut short by the imposition of Soviet rule in the early twentieth century. Thus, while similar movements elsewhere in the Muslim world evolved into national liberation struggles, here many reformists became first-generation Communists; those who opposed the new order (or were suspected of opposing it) were executed or forced into exile.

3. Soviet Period

Soviet power was established in Central Asia shortly after the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. As elsewhere in the former Tsarist empire, there was a period of civil war, during which different factions fought for different goals. There was no organized opposition, and very little co-ordination between the various groups. The most tenacious resistance came from so-called *basmachis* (guerrilla fighters), located mainly in the Ferghana Valley and in the mountains of modern Tajikistan (bordering Afghanistan, where they often established operational bases). They mounted sporadic attacks against Soviet rule until the early 1930s.

3.1. Soviet Policies Towards Islam

Soviet policies towards Islam went through several phases. The main priority in the early period was to win the loyalty of the masses. This required a certain degree of accommodation towards the *ulama*, since no matter how corrupt individual clerics might have been, they were nevertheless important and respected members of the community. Soon, however, measures were introduced that aimed at dismantling the social, legal and economic basis of Islamic institutions. These were systematically replaced by Soviet bodies. The Arabic script, which had been used in Central Asia since the introduction of Islam, was abolished in favour of the Latin script at the end of the 1920s (in turn to be replaced by the Cyrillic in 1940). The campaign for the emancipation of women was likewise used to undermine Islam by portraying the religion as a source of ignorance, oppression and social injustice. Atheistic propaganda was intensified and in the early 1930s, arbitrary arrests and executions were used to eliminate Muslim leaders who refused to co-operate with the authorities. All the *madrassahs* (Muslim colleges) were closed and religious literature confiscated. The annual *haj* was suspended and contacts with foreign Muslims virtually ceased. A hundred or so mosques remained open - out of the many thousands that had existed during the Tsarist period.

During the Second World War a more conciliatory attitude was adopted towards the Muslim community. The tiny body of *ulama* that had survived the purges of the 1930s were co-opted by the state authorities. In a personal capacity they may have been devout (some undoubtedly were), but in their formal capacity they were first and foremost Soviet officials. An administrative body, the Muslim Board for Central Asia and Kazakstan (MBCAK) was established in Tashkent, under the chairmanship of a Mufti. In 1944 the *haj* was officially reinstated, though only a very small, carefully vetted group of clerics was able to benefit from this. The following year, a single *madrassah* was reopened (the only official Muslim educational establishment in the entire Soviet Union). In 1971 a second *madrassah* was established.

The number of functioning mosques gradually increased, and the public celebration of religious ceremonies became a little easier. Also, a few religious publications began to appear, and promising *madrassah* students were sent to Islamic universities in Egypt and other Arab countries to complete their Quranic studies. The motivation for this change of policy was not so much a greater degree of tolerance towards Islam, but rather a desire to present the Soviet Union in a favourable light to the developing world, particularly the oil-rich Arab countries of the Middle East. This entailed creating at least a facade of acceptance of Soviet Islam.⁶ The effects of secularization, however, were by now deeply entrenched and the great majority of the Central Asian Muslims were unable to recite even the basic attestation of faith ("There is no God but God").

⁶ For further background, see Akiner, S., *Islam, the State and Ethnicity ... A detailed study of the later Soviet period is given by Roi, Y., Islam in the Soviet Union: From World War II to Perestroika*, London: Hurst, 2000

3.2. “Unofficial Islam” and Islam as Ethnic Identity

Some commentators believed that “underground” Sufi groups were active during this period. This notion was rooted in confusion over the definition of Sufism. As mentioned above, by the nineteenth century the major Sufi orders (*tariqa*), with their “high” tradition of mysticism, were already in a state of decay and did not exert much influence on society. However, *ishans* (local religious leaders, often untutored) did continue to wield authority, at least within their own communities. Most had very little knowledge of Muslim scriptures, though some claimed to be Sufi adepts (generally of the Naqshbandi *tariqa*). They were often called upon to conduct rituals connected with funerals, marriages and other important events. These ceremonies were inevitably surreptitious, since any open form of religious observance was frowned upon by the state. The *ishans* also practised healing, and sometimes soothsaying. Several had hereditary followings, handed on from one generation to another. Their contribution to keeping Islam alive during these years was equivocal: they focused attention on ritual and symbol, often derived from syncretic popular belief. These came to be seen as expressions of ethnic identity, a part of the “national” culture. The intellectual, epistemological content of Islam, meanwhile, was almost wholly forgotten.

3.3. Resurgence of Islam 1970s-1980s: Nascent Revivalism

The resurgence of Islam in Central Asia began in the early 1970s with the emergence of small-scale revivalist movements in Tajikistan and the Ferghana Valley (especially the Namangan district).⁷ In these areas Islam had survived somewhat better than in most other parts of the region. The physical remoteness of these areas afforded a certain protection; so, too did the attitude of local officials, many of whom were less than conscientious in their attempts to stamp out religious practices. (Even Party members would sometimes observe Muslim rites, especially after retirement.) Moreover, some of the pre-Soviet generation of Central Asian Muslim scholars had sought refuge in these areas. (One of the most influential of such teachers was Muhammad Hindustani Rustamov, known as Haji Domla. Born in Kokand in 1892, he studied in Bukhara, Afghanistan and India; he eventually returned to Tajikistan and died in Dushanbe in 1989. Several of his disciples became influential religious leaders.) Clandestinely, they began to teach the young. Small circles of adepts congregated around them and networks of devout believers began to be established. There were reports in the press of teahouses and clubs secretly being used for prayer meetings, of pilgrimages to shrines, and unregistered clerics performing religious ceremonies.

The Soviet press referred to these “revivalists” as “Wahhabis”, implying that they were backed by foreign sponsorship (presumably from Saudi Arabia), but there is no evidence to indicate that they received either external influence or support at this period. The use of the term “Wahhabi” is in itself an indication that the movement is unlikely to have originated with “genuine” members of the sect, since the followers of Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab generally call themselves *muwahhidun* (“Unitarians”);

⁷ The ideas in this section are developed more fully in Akiner, S., *Post-Soviet Central Asia: The Islamic Factor*, in U. Halbach (ed.), *The Development of the Soviet Successor States in Central Asia*, Cologne: Bundesinstitut für ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien, 1995, pp. 47-54

“Wahhabi” is the designation given to them by Westerners. Muslims dislike it and do not normally use it. It is possible that the movement drew its inspiration from an ascetic sect that was active in the Ferghana Valley at the beginning of the century, when an Arab from Medina established so-called Wahhabi communities there and in Tashkent.⁸ More probably, though, it was a spontaneous reaction against the materialism of Marxism-Leninism (similar movements of spiritual regeneration were taking place in all the main faiths in the Soviet Union at this time). These “revivalists” did not call themselves “Wahhabis” - few had even heard of the term. Their self-definition appears to have been simply “Muslim”. In the Ferghana Valley they were usually known as *qora soqol* (“black beard”), owing to their habit of growing their beards, in accordance with the tradition of the Prophet. They were known as people of upright character, given to abstinence and hard work. Their moral stance aroused the admiration of some of the urban intellectuals, especially in Uzbekistan.

In the late 1970s (by some accounts even earlier) a process of radicalization occurred in Tajikistan. There were occasional displays of animosity towards non-Muslims and, in rural areas, increasing pressure on women to adhere to Islamic codes of behaviour and dress. Groups that had previously been concerned more with ritual observances and the study of religious texts now began to favour a more political agenda. There appear to have been two trends. One took root among the marginalized urban youth. The other seems to have been more of a village phenomenon, centred on traditional mentors and bound together by local family-community networks. The movement soon spread throughout Tajikistan. In 1983 the first underground Muslim publication, *Hidoyat* (“Spiritual Guidance”), appeared there. Less information is available concerning the Ferghana Valley, but it is likely that a similar process of radicalization took place there.

It is impossible to gain an accurate idea of the number of Muslims who were involved in such activities in the 1980s, but the likelihood is that it was quite small. The most perceptive Western commentator on Tajikistan wrote, “The Islam that survives in Tajikistan has preserved much of its traditional character.... Many Muslims observe Islam as of old, and not in the spirit of the new, militant fundamentalism.”⁹ From all the available evidence this would seem to be a fair assessment. In the Ferghana Valley, first hand accounts indicate that, at a very rough estimate, active devotees numbered somewhere in the range of 8,000-10,000.¹⁰ The overwhelming majority of the population were “traditionalists”, for whom Islam was primarily an expression of their cultural identity. In so far as they sympathized with the “revivalists”, it was largely because they saw them as representing a force for moral regeneration.

3.4. Liberalization of the Religious Environment

Another, slightly later, impetus for the resurgence of Islam was that towards the end of the 1980s (under Gorbachev), the government adopted a more tolerant policy toward religion. This was happening throughout the Soviet Union, but in Central Asia, it

⁸ Rashid, A., *The Resurgence of Central Asia*, London: Zed Books, 1994, p. 44

⁹ Atkin, M., *The Subtlest Battle: Islam in Soviet Tajikistan*, Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 1989, p. 28

¹⁰ Personal communications to the author made in Uzbekistan, in 1989, by Uzbeks from the Ferghana Valley

acquired a special momentum as part of a strategy to combat “fundamentalist” influences from Iran and Afghanistan. There was a widespread belief in official circles that the most effective defence against this perceived threat was to bolster a sense of pride in indigenous Islamic traditions.¹¹

This change of attitude was marked by the appointment of a new Mufti, Muhammad Sadyk Muhammad Yusuf Hoja-ogli (less formally, Muhammad Sadyk or Mamayusupov), to head the MBCAK. In his early thirties, and previously Rector of the Tashkent *madrassah*, he was more in touch with the younger generation than the previous Mufti had been. He was a devout Muslim who genuinely believed that it was possible to liberalize the Soviet system. His avowed aim was to provide every Muslim family in Central Asia with a copy of the Holy Quran. Like the “Wahhabis” (with whom he was said to have close personal links) he, too, believed in the need for moral regeneration. He believed that by re-inculcation of Muslim values it would be possible to overcome social evils such as growing alcoholism and drug abuse. He received substantial support from the state authorities, who not only gave him a prominent role in public affairs, but also made several concessions to the Muslim community, such as permission to open more mosques, the relaxing of restrictions concerning the pilgrimage to Mecca, and the increased provision of religious literature.

Several other young men (between 30 and 40 years of age) were appointed to senior positions in the Muslim establishment at this time, among them Akbar Turajonzade, the new head of the Tajik Qaziyat (Tajik branch of the Muslim Religious Board). Turajonzade, too, sought to promote Muslim regeneration by working within the framework of the existing law. Unlike some of the more radical “Wahhabis”, he (like other members of the official religious hierarchy) was adamantly opposed to the politicization of Islam, and rejected the idea of the creation of Islamic parties. Furthermore, he was firmly convinced that it was too soon to think in terms of creating an Islamic state in Tajikistan, since there were far too few Tajiks who had any real knowledge of the faith. The first task, as he saw it, was to train teachers and clerics that could educate the masses. Among his many achievements at this time was the founding of an officially registered Islamic Institute in Dushanbe (1990), the publication of numerous booklets on Islam and the opening of over a hundred community (“Friday”) mosques.

3.5. Islamic Parties

A Muslim revival was by now in progress throughout the Soviet Union. There were some who felt that “Muslim power” should be institutionalized. Thus, in June 1990, despite the opposition of many Muslim clerics, an attempt was made to establish an all-Union Islamic party. The constituent assembly of the Islamic Rebirth Party (IRP) was held in Astrakhan (on the Volga). Several Tajiks (including Davlat Usmon and Muhammadsharif Himmatzoda, future leaders of the Tajik opposition) participated in this meeting and played a central role in organizing the new party. Later that year the Tajiks decided to set up a branch party, the Islamic Rebirth Party of Tajikistan; this was formally registered in October 1991. Popular support for this party, however, was quite weak.

¹¹ Personal discussions with members of the MBCAK and government officials in 1988-1989

4. Independence

The Soviet Union disintegrated suddenly, without warning or preparation, at the end of 1991. In Central Asia, Islam was still largely a marker of a cultural identity. The vast majority of the population still had very little knowledge of the doctrines and practices of the faith. Yet there was by this time a palpable sense of pride in the region's Muslim heritage and a preparedness - almost an expectancy - that Islam would assume an increasingly important role in public life. This is indeed what happened in the early years of independence.

4.1. Post-Soviet Islamization of the Public Space

The collapse of the Soviet Union caused massive social and economic dislocation in the Central Asian states. It also created a psychological vacuum, raising the spectre of societal implosion. In an effort to counter this threat, the ruling elites (who had all come to power under the patronage of the Soviet system) moved swiftly to promote Islam as the basis of new "state ideologies". Party officials throughout the region began to distance themselves from Communist doctrine and to use Islam as a means of furnishing themselves with an alternative, national source of legitimization. Public opinion was mobilized through articles in the press and the pronouncements of leading public figures that emphasized the need for a return to Islamic ethics.

President Akayev of Kyrgyzstan and President Karimov of Uzbekistan took their respective oaths of office on both the Quran and the Constitution to underline the dual importance of religion and law in society. The following year President Akayev proposed that the new Kyrgyz Constitution should reflect the moral values of Islam. In Uzbekistan, in the immediate aftermath of independence, President Karimov reputedly went so far as to promise to establish an Islamic state. Over the next few years, all the Presidents of the Central Asian states performed the pilgrimage to Mecca. There was a new sensitivity (at least in public) regarding the observance of dietary prohibitions; Islamic gestures (e.g. the downward stroking of the face) and pious utterances, once confined to the private sphere, became a regular feature of public discourse. During Ramadan, it became acceptable to admit to keeping the fast.

In all the Central Asian states, the separation of mosque and state was enshrined in the new, post-Soviet constitutions. Yet the promotion of Islam by some of the presidents intensified to the point where it began to threaten this principle. Thus, for example, as early as 1994, an Uzbek academic commented, "Islam in Uzbekistan will be what the president wants it to be."¹² In the other states, too, there were indications of a blurring of the boundaries between secular and religious authorities. For example, the inscription on the imposing new mosque in Almaty, the former capital of Kazakhstan, proclaims that the construction was undertaken "on the initiative, and with the personal support of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Abishevich Nazarbayev." In a 1999 interview with a Radio Liberty journalist, Nazarbayev

¹² A. Abduazizov, Dean of Faculty of Foreign Languages of Tashkent State University, quoted by Usmanov, L., in *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 6 January 1994, p. 3. President Karimov's comments on Islam are fragmentary and often made in response to particular events. In a 1997 book he sketches out his thoughts on 'The revival of spiritual values and national self-awareness'. Following the example of the Jadids, he is seeking to encourage the parallel study of secular subjects and Islam, as for example, in the new state-funded Islamic University in Tashkent. See Karimov, I., *Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century*, London: Curzon, 1997, pp. 85-94

explained, “We are Sunni Muslims and must follow this path.” As one Kazak commentator pointed out, when the head of state makes such a pronouncement, it takes on the force of a political directive - a violation of the principle of freedom of conscience that is guaranteed in the constitution. In Turkmenistan, President Niyazov began to be referred to in the press by the titles traditionally reserved for the Caliph.¹³

In all the Central Asian states, the form of Islam that is propagated by the government-sponsored religious bodies is orthodox Sunni Islam of the Hanafi school of jurisprudence. However, the sphere of application is strictly limited. The introduction of *shar'ia* law (Muslim canon law) into the legal framework of these states is not under consideration. The main concern of the government is to promote “good” Islam, regarded as beneficial to the development of the state; and to eliminate “bad” Islam. “Bad” Islam, it is emphasized is to blame for the conflicts in Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Yet there is no public debate in any of the Central Asian countries as to the criteria that determine “good” and “bad” Islam. Thus, the dividing line tends to be drawn arbitrarily. For example, men who grow beards (a traditional Muslim sign of piety) and women who wear Islamic-style dress are regarded with suspicion, particularly in Uzbekistan, where women wearing headscarves and men with beards were banned from state universities in 1997.¹⁴ Yet the making of pious gestures in public (such as the downward stroking of the face) is considered acceptable.

Most people seem prepared to accept these anomalies without question (or at least without openly voicing reservations). This may be out of fear, but it is noteworthy that even educated Central Asian Muslims show an almost total absence of curiosity regarding modern debates on Islam. There is still a striking lack of intellectual engagement with Islam. There are no Central Asian Muslim thinkers expounding a coherent vision of Islam. Equally, there is virtually no awareness of the existence of contemporary thought in other parts of the Islamic world. The writings of Mohammed Arkoun, Rachid al-Ghannouchi, Taha Husayn, Imam Khomeini, Abul A'la Maududi, Sayyid Qutb, Fazlur Rahman, Zia Sardar and Ali Shariati, to mention but a handful, are almost entirely unknown.

4.2. Re-Creating an Islamic Infrastructure

In the immediate aftermath of independence, the re-instatement of mosques, centres of worship but also of community life, became a priority. In Turkmenistan, for example, there were only four mosques open for worship in the 1980s; by 1994 there were 181 and 100 more were at the planning stage. In Uzbekistan there were 300 mosques in 1989, but by 1993, over 5,000. In Tajikistan, in the period 1989-1991, 2,000 mosques were opened, including 130 large Friday mosques. In Kyrgyzstan there were over 1,000 mosques by late 1995; in Kazakstan, 4,200.¹⁵ Schools and voluntary bodies

¹³ “The Vice-regent on Earth of the One, Great, All-Powerful God”. *Doverennyj predstavitel' na zemle velikogo vsemogushchego edinogo boga, vysokochtimyj pervyj i bessrochnyj president Turkmenistana velikii Saparmurat Turkmenbashi!*, *Neutral'nyj Turkmenistan*, 12 August 2000

¹⁴ Frantz, D., *Persecution Charged in ex-Soviet Republic*, *New York Times*, 29 October 2000, p. 6

¹⁵ Estimates drawn from conference communications made by, among others, Cholpon Akmataliyeva (Tsarskoye Selo, October 1995), Dr V. J. Boushkov (Mafraq, Jordan, April 1996), M. Kozybaev (Tehran, January 1996); also Turkmen and Uzbek official Muslim representatives 1996-2000. See also Trofimov, D., *Friday Mosques and the Imams in the Former Soviet Union*, *Religion, State and Society*, Vol. 24, Nos. 2/3, September 1996, pp. 193-219

began to teach the Arabic script and give instruction in reading the Quran. Opportunities for more advanced Muslim education were provided by the numerous *madrassahs* and Islamic centres that began to appear throughout the region. Particular attention was paid to the provision of training for girls. *Madrassah* courses for women were opened in many places. “Leagues of Muslim Women” were established in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan (though most disintegrated within a few months).

The physical proximity of places of worship encouraged people to attend services on a regular basis, and in the early 1990s mosque congregations grew rapidly. But by 1994, the novelty had begun to fade, and a marked drop in attendance was observed throughout the region. Moreover, *madrassah* entrants were not always motivated by a desire to pursue religious studies; some were more interested in benefiting from the free tuition in Arabic and other languages in order to improve their prospects in business.¹⁶ Nevertheless, there has since been a gradual but distinct rise in numbers of those who profess a genuine devotion to Islam. Some researchers believe that this trend is to be found mainly in villages, among males in the 17 to 25 year old age group. Others insist that it is more typical of the emerging entrepreneurial class and of university students.

The institutional control of Islamic activities in Central Asia today largely follows the Soviet model. The chief difference is that separate national administrations (Muftiats) have now replaced the Soviet-era unified administration (i.e. the former Muslim Board of Central Asia and Kazakhstan). The work of these Muftiats is closely monitored by a Committee or Council for Religious Affairs, a body that serves as the interface between the government and the religious communities - another Soviet-era survival. (In Turkmenistan, the Muftiat and the Committee have virtually merged into a single entity, as the Chairman of the latter body is the Deputy Mufti, while the Mufti is Deputy Chairman of the Committee.) The interests of Muslims as well as adherents of other established faiths - chiefly Orthodox Christianity and Judaism - are officially represented in these Committees/Councils. The “non-traditional” faiths such as Bahais, Pentecostals and Jehovah’s Witnesses are regarded with suspicion and given little opportunity for official representation. Laws regulating freedom of conscience and the obligations and responsibilities of religious organizations have been passed in all the Central Asian states. Political parties of a religious orientation are proscribed everywhere except in Tajikistan, where the Islamic Rebirth Party, outlawed in 1993, was in mid-1999 legalized again in the run-up to parliamentary elections.

The new national Muslim administrations are responsible for the formal examination and registration of the *ulama*. Unregistered preachers are liable to criminal prosecution. The ostensible aim of registration is to disbar unqualified individuals from holding religious posts. At the same time, registration enables the state authorities to keep a close check on the ideological orientation of the religious establishment. Clerics who hold views that do not conform to the official line, or who are felt to be lacking in loyalty to the government, can be excluded from the system. This has happened on numerous occasions, particularly in Uzbekistan. Mufti Muhammad Sadyk, once the embodiment of Soviet religious liberalization, was ousted from office in the spring of 1993. The ostensible reason was corruption in the

¹⁶ Personal communication to the author by *madrassah* students in 1996

religious administration, but there were also hints that the Mufti had radical leanings; he is currently in voluntary exile in Saudi Arabia.

4.3. Tajik Civil War

A few months after independence, Tajikistan was engulfed by civil war. This seemed to many to herald the onset of a wave of radical Islamic insurrection in the region. There was certainly a contest between Islamists and secularists for control of the state. However, this was soon overlaid by other cleavages. The conflict gradually transmuted from an ideological struggle to a regional, communal and even personal power struggle. The country was soon virtually divided between two warring factions: on the one hand there was the Dushanbe government, on the other, an umbrella group known as the United Tajik Opposition (UTO). The UTO initially included quite a wide spectrum of political views, but within a short time the Islamist element became the dominant force. In early 1993, the UTO set up a government in exile in northern Afghanistan. A massive exodus of refugees accompanied the UTO leadership. Many of these refugees then joined the ranks of the UTO forces.

Neither the Dushanbe government nor the UTO was strong enough to win an outright victory. By 1994, having reached the point of a “hurting stalemate”, the two parties finally agreed to come to the negotiating table. Iran, Russia and the UN were instrumental in initiating the peace process. After some three years of effort, punctuated by eight rounds of “Inter-Tajik” talks, the General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord in Tajikistan was finally signed in Moscow on 27 June 1997. The provisions of the peace agreement required, amongst other conditions, that the UTO be given 30 per cent of the seats in national and local government. There were innumerable delays and difficulties in implementing the agreement, but at the time of writing it is still holding.

It is possibly because the Islamists in Tajikistan were so focused on the national arena that there was very little spillover effect from the ideological struggle into the surrounding states. Some Uzbek radicals supported the UTO and fought alongside them from bases in Afghanistan and in Tajikistan. After the peace agreement, some of these Uzbeks remained in Tajikistan, in the high mountains bordering Kyrgyzstan. The Tajik Islamists, meanwhile, began to fragment. They also lost much of the popular support that they had had in the early 1990s. This was partly because the population was weary of war and were prepared to accept - or at least to tolerate - the Dushanbe government. Partly, too, though, it was because in the areas that had been under Islamist control during the civil war there had been little sense of social justice. Women in particular had been treated brutally and forced, often against their will, to observe strict Islamic codes of dress and behaviour. Thus, by the late 1990s, the Islamist movement was still active in Tajikistan, but it was no longer as powerful as it had been previously. The situation is still fragile, and the peace process can certainly not be taken for granted, but the outlook today is far better than might have been anticipated five years ago.¹⁷

¹⁷ The Tajik civil war and subsequent peace process are far too complex to summarise adequately in this brief format. For further background see Abdullaev, K. and C. Barnes (eds.), *Politics of Compromise: The Tajikistan Peace Process, Accord: An International Review of Peace Initiatives* [London], No. 10, 2001. Also Akiner, S., *Tajikistan: Disintegration or Reconciliation?*, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, fc 2001

4.4. Radical Islamic Movements

After the collapse of the Soviet Union several small Islamic groups emerged in Central Asia. Most were very short-lived and little is known of them other than their names.¹⁸ The great majority was located in the Ferghana Valley (see section below). In Kazakhstan, a xenophobic nationalist group, *Alash* (named after the legendary forefather of the Kazaks), advocated a return to Islamic precepts; however, it found few supporters and by 1995 had all but ceased to exist. There are occasional reports of other, newer Islamic groups in southern Kazakhstan, but information is very scanty. No radical movements have so far been noted in Turkmenistan (though this does not necessarily mean the absence of such movements, merely that information is more tightly controlled there than elsewhere). In the mid-1990s two organizations emerged that were soon to become the dominant Islamist movements in the region. These were the Hezb-e Tahrir (Liberation Party) and the Islom Harakati Ozbekiston (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan).

Hezb-e Tahrir (HT) is an international organization, established in 1953 in (Jordanian) Jerusalem. The founder was a leading Palestinian, Sheikh Taki ad-din Nabhani (1909-1978), who, prior to partition, was a judge in the *sha'ria* court, Haifa; he later moved to Nablus. The party was banned almost immediately. Originally based in Jordan, it soon attracted members elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa and is now active in the Russian Federation and other parts of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). It appeared in Central Asia in the mid-1990s. It seems to have established an initial base in the Namangan region, and from there to have fanned out throughout the Ferghana Valley (including to the Tajik and Kyrgyz sections) and also to Tashkent and Dushanbe. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it has a regional membership of several thousand (at a rough estimate, around 10,000). It is reputed to have a strong organizational structure (based on hermetically divided cells), an energetic recruitment policy, and a strategic training programme. Apart from word-of-mouth proselytizing, it disseminates considerable quantities of its own literature. The state authorities in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan report that large consignments of the party's journal *Al-Wa'i* (Consciousness), as well as leaflets and books, have been confiscated in recent years. Titles include standard HT texts such as *Islom nizomi* (The Islamic Order), *Hizbut-Tahrir tushunchalari* (Concepts of Hezb-i Tahrir) and *Siyosat va khalqaro siyosat* (Politics and International Politics); these texts are sometimes in Arabic, sometimes in competent Kyrgyz or Uzbek translations. Several underground printing presses have been discovered. Local editions of such works are said to have been produced in print runs of 1,000 or so. Distribution of such material is mostly covert: typically, copies are scattered in public places under cover of night, or handed out by casual hired labour.¹⁹ Fearful of arrest and persecution, most people are afraid to be seen to handle this material. Thus, it is very difficult to judge how much, if any of it, is actually read by the population at large.

¹⁸ Abasov, R., *Islamskoje vozrozhdenije v tsentral'noaziatskikh novykh nezavisimykh gosudarstvakh*, *Polis*, No. 3 (27), 1995, pp. 61-7, mentions twenty "Islamic political and politicised organisations in the Central Asian newly independent states". Unfortunately, he gives almost no information on the size, structure, origin or aims of these groups, also no sources or references as to how he learnt of their existence.

¹⁹ Warning, G., *Propaganda und Prozesse gegen Hizbut-Tahrir*, *Erk Info*, 25 February 2001 (electronic format); Botobekov, U., *Hizb at-Tahrir Challenges the Central Asia Ruling Regimes*, *Times of Central Asia*, Vol. 3, No. 9, 1 March 2001

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is a home-grown group, based predominantly in the Ferghana Valley (eastern Uzbekistan and bordering regions of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan). Its spiritual roots are in the revivalist “Wahhabi” movements of the late Soviet period. The leaders of the IMU are Jumabai Khojiev and Tohir Yoldashev. The former, better known as Juma Namangani or “Tajibai” (born 1969, Namangan district) served with the Soviet army in Afghanistan (1987-1988). On his return to Uzbekistan, he became a disciple of one of the leading “Wahhabi” teachers of the day, Abduvali Qari Andijani. A member of *Tovba* (Repentance), one of the first Islamist groups to appear in the early 1990s, Juma Namangani went to Tajikistan in 1992 to support the Islamist opposition in the civil war. He later spent some time in Afghanistan, where he is said to have received military training, from, among others, Pakistani instructors. In 1997, he is reputed to have become the “Commander in Chief” of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

Tohir Yoldashev (born 1968, Namangan district) is a more shadowy figure. He, too, is said to have studied with leading “Wahhabi” teachers in the Ferghana Valley in the 1980s. In 1991 he was reputedly connected with several new Islamist groups, such as *Islom lashkarlari* (Soldiers of Islam) and *Tovba* (along with Juma Namangani). In 1992 he went to Afghanistan (where he learnt to speak excellent Dari), and also visited Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries. In 1996 he became the “political leader” of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

International opinion, at least at government level, is increasingly convinced that these militants represent a genuine threat to regional, and possibly global, security. Accordingly, in September 2000 the US State Department placed the IMU on its list of international terrorist organizations to which US citizens are forbidden to give assistance, and whose members are denied entry to the USA.

Given the dearth of reliable information (as opposed to vacuous speculation), it is impossible to know the degree to which HT and the IMU are linked. They seem to have started out as quite separate groups, but there may now be some degree of collaboration. On the surface, their aims and objectives seem to coincide, though only HT attempts to present a reasoned explanation of its position. Both groups are said to want to establish an Islamic state based on the model of the early Caliphate (without, however, specifying how this concept is to be interpreted in the modern world). They are critical of the incumbent governments and regard the official Muslim hierarchy as corrupt and spiritually bankrupt. They believe that society as a whole is in need of moral regeneration. The IMU espouses militant confrontation (see below), but HT publications advocate the use of peaceful means to convince and convert society to true Islam. However, HT publications do hint at the possibility of using force if all else fails.

It is virtually impossible to assess either the strength of these movements or the degree to which they represent a genuine security threat. Statements from official sources and reports in the mass media are based on a prejudgment of the situation: the very fact that these are unregistered, anti-government movements is already sufficient grounds on which to condemn them. Anecdotal accounts are almost as unreliable, tending to sensationalism and exaggeration. For example, estimates of the numbers of HT members who are in detention range from 2,000 to 100,000 and both HT and the IMU are accused, especially in Uzbekistan, of plotting to overthrow the government and the constitutional system of the country by force. Yet the evidence that has been produced

in testimony against them is inconclusive; several of the supposedly incriminating documents do advocate the establishment of an Islamic system, but by non-violent means. Human rights organizations, both Uzbek and international, that have been monitoring developments in the region for some years are dubious as to the validity of such evidence.

4.5. Geographic Focus

Currently, the main geographic focus of radical Islam is the Ferghana Valley. Together with the surrounding mountains, this broad, fertile region encompasses an area of some 110,000 sq. km. It is divided between Uzbekistan (three provinces, centre of the valley), Kyrgyzstan (two provinces, northeastern rim) and Tajikistan (one province, southwestern rim). The following table gives basic comparative data.²⁰

Geographic unit (state/province)	Area (km ²)	Population (million)	Pop. Density (per km ²)	Main Ethnic Groups (%)
Uzbekistan	447,400	23.0	53.4	75.8 Uzbeks 6.0 Tajiks
Ferghana Valley (Andijan+Ferghana+Namangan)	192,000	6.2	340.8	84.2 Uzbeks 5.0 Tajiks
Kyrgyzstan	198,500	4.7	22.1	60.3 Kyrgyz
*Ferghana Valley (Osh +Jalal-Abad)	65,600	2.4	28.3	73.5 Kyrgyz 27.7 Uzbeks
Tajikistan	143,100	5.9	41.3	68.4 Tajiks 24.8 Uzbeks
*Ferghana Valley (Leninabad/Soghd)	26,100	1.8	66.6	56.9 Tajiks 31.3 Uzbeks 6.5 Russians

*The territories of these provinces extend into the adjacent mountains; population densities in the areas that lie within the valley (as opposed to overall averages for these provinces) are comparable to those in the Uzbek section.

²⁰ Source: Center for Preventative Action, Ferghana Valley Working Group, *Calming the Ferghana Valley: Development and Dialogue in the Heart of Central Asia*, New York: Century Foundation Press, 1999, pp. 35-7. NB: The population figures relate mostly to 1996-1998 and are now slightly outdated. They have been retained here however, for the sake of the overall comparison. It should also be noted that Leninabad province was renamed Soghd in autumn 2000

The Ferghana Valley is a region of great economic potential, but it is also beset by acute societal problems. It has excellent agricultural land; watered by the Syr Darya and its tributaries, it yields large volumes of cotton, also grain and other valuable crops. It is also one of the most urbanized and industrially developed regions of Central Asia. There are substantial reserves of oil and a large oil refinery in the Ferghana province; likewise in the Kyrgyz and Tajik sections of the Ferghana Valley there are important industrial plants. Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, however, industry and agriculture alike have experienced severe falls in production, owing to such factors as disrupted supplies of fuel, raw materials and other inputs, also chronic shortages of spare parts for machinery and vehicles. This has triggered a sharp rise in unemployment. At the same time, public services have been declining; health care and education in particular have suffered. The result has been a rapid fall in the standard of living, with massive reductions in family incomes as well as in access to resources.

The high population densities and high rates of demographic growth exacerbate these problems. It is estimated that almost half the population in the Ferghana Valley is less than 16 years of age. For the majority of them, the outlook for the future is not encouraging. Job prospects are meagre, with few opportunities for advancement. There has been some investment in the area, including the creation of a number of joint ventures with foreign partners. Nevertheless, the local economy is still depressed. Concomitantly, crime and substance abuse are proliferating, fostered by a massive illegal trade in narcotics and arms.

Increasing population densities have heightened competition over land and water resources. They are also fuelling inter-communal tensions. There have long been rivalries and hostile relations between different ethnic groups; in 1989-1990 there were riots and bloody clashes in several parts of the Ferghana Valley (e.g. between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in Osh, June 1990). Resentments and grievances still rankle and these conflicts could very easily be re-ignited.

It is in these conditions of social and economic deprivation, frustration and alienation, that radical Islam appears to be attracting growing numbers of adherents. Anecdotal evidence (supported by fragmentary comments in the media) suggests that it has found a natural constituency among young, unemployed youths. In the first post-Soviet phase, the new Islamist groups focused mainly on personal morality, and on efforts to combat alcoholism, drug addiction and other social evils.²¹ More recently, however, the trend seems to be shifting more towards ideological protest and militant struggle. There also seems to be some element of ethnic politics, with the power balance predominantly in favour of the Uzbeks. There are, too, indications that a subnational consolidation is in progress. Eyewitness accounts in recent years have sometimes mentioned the use of slogans and banners calling for a re-establishment of the Khanate of Kokand, which was one of the three main states of the southern tier in the pre-colonial period; it encompassed eastern Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and, intermittently, adjacent areas of Afghanistan and China. The Khanate was abolished, and its territory was annexed by the Tsarist empire, in 1876.

²¹ Personal communications made to the author during a visit to the Ferghana Valley in April 1994

4.6. Government Responses to Nascent Islamic Radicalism

The post-Soviet state authorities have responded with suspicion and hostility to nascent signs of radical Islam, regarding it as a dangerously subversive force. The fiercest reaction has been in Uzbekistan. Initially, however, there was a certain degree of tolerance, even of encouragement, for such movements since they were seen as a useful antidote to Soviet ideology. Thus, during the 1991 Uzbek presidential elections, Namangan was the site of several peaceful demonstrations calling for the establishment of an Islamic state. The Islamic party Adolat (“Justice”) was created that same year (according to local sources, principally with the aim of combating crime and raising moral standards). It received some support from the authorities at this time, and there were reports that President Karimov himself was sympathetic to its views. Within a few months, however, its main leaders had been arrested and given substantial jail sentences.

Since 1992, unregistered religious groups have been kept under close surveillance by the security services. Waves of arrests soon followed, justified by allegations that such groups were spreading anti-constitutional propaganda and stockpiling arms in preparation for an Islamic revolution. There have also been numerous reports of assault, torture of those in custody, and the unexplained disappearances of Muslim clerics. Local governments are now required to take a vigilant, proactive stance in these matters. Thus, whereas provincial administrators in the Soviet era frequently turned a blind eye to the activities of Muslim leaders, today they are held personally accountable.

There were many instances of multiple arrests in Uzbekistan during the 1990s, but nowhere on such a scale as in Namangan. In 1996 and 1998 the repression reached a new level of intensity - well over a hundred cases of summary arrest have been documented for this period.²² This followed the murders of several police officers and a senior government official. It is possible that these crimes were committed by drug smugglers. However, many of those who were detained and subsequently punished were leading members of mosques and religious organizations. Relatives of Muslim activists were also arrested. Some of the evidence used to convict the prisoners, including narcotics, weapons, and illegal literature, was, according to human rights observers, planted by the security forces.

4.7. Terrorism and Armed Insurgencies

On 16 February 1999 there was an attempt on the life of President Karimov in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. Within hours of the incident, “Islamic fundamentalists” were being blamed for the outrage, triggering a renewed onslaught on supposedly dissident Muslims. This time, however, accusations were also levelled at dissidents living abroad. The principal target was Muhammad Salih, the leader of Erk (“Freedom”), an opposition movement founded during the late Soviet period. He was eventually tried and sentenced in absentia. Official explanations, including a bizarre propaganda film made in Tashkent, aroused suspicions that these charges were

²² See *Informatsionnyi byulleten' po pravam cheloveka* [Namangan], No. 1, 1998 (produced under the aegis of Namanganskoe otdelenie komiteta zashchity prav lichnosti Uzbekistana (KZPLU) and Namanganskoe otdelenie obshchestva prav cheloveka Uzbekistana (OPChU)). See also Human Rights Watch, *World Report 1999*, New York, 1999, sections on the Central Asian states

manufactured by the authorities as a pretext for further repression. The ensuing show trials further heightened this impression. Nevertheless, the possibility that the attack was carried out by militant Islamists cannot be ruled out.

Violent incidents continue to proliferate. The most serious clash to date occurred in the summer of 1999. Armed fighters, reportedly members of the IMU, crossed into Kyrgyzstan in August of that year, allegedly with the intention of “establishing an Islamic state”. Estimates of the size of this troop vary greatly, but it seems likely to have numbered somewhat under 500 men. When the guerrillas reached the border they found Uzbek troops blocking their route; they thereupon retreated into the Kyrgyz mountains, taking with them a number of hostages (including four Japanese geologists). The Kyrgyz army was unable to dislodge them for over two months. The Uzbek Government, meanwhile, took a unilateral decision to bomb the guerrillas’ suspected stronghold. The aircraft misjudged their target and innocent Kyrgyz villagers were killed. Tajik villages were also bombed. The hostages were eventually released in October 1999, reputedly after the Japanese Government had paid a large ransom (estimates vary between US\$ 6 and 7 million). There were similar armed clashes in the same area in mid-2000, though on a smaller scale. At the time of writing, renewed assaults were expected in 2001.

The August 1999 insurgency was an escalation of violence from isolated acts of terrorism to a sustained, relatively large-scale operation. There is no information as to why such an attack was launched at precisely this juncture. Ostensibly, the action was prompted by the Tajik Government’s decision to expel some 700 to 1,000 IMU members from bases that they had established in Tajikistan. It may, too, have been retaliation for the repression that followed the February bombing in Tashkent. The possibility that field commanders and/or foreign sponsors (international terrorist organizations?) judged that their men had reached a sufficient level of combat readiness for it to be feasible to mount such an operation should not be excluded. By some accounts, the combatants were armed with sophisticated modern weapons.²³ It is also possible that it was part of a struggle by local mafia barons to gain control of lucrative narcotic-trafficking routes - or perhaps all these factors were interlinked.

5. Foreign Involvement

5.1. Institutional links

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, links with the Islamic world were renewed. Several hundreds of Central Asian students, male and female, were sent abroad for higher Islamic education to countries such as Turkey, Egypt, and Pakistan. On a structural level, the Central Asian states joined such bodies as the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), the Economic Cooperation Organization (other members are Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Azerbaijan) and the Islamic Development Bank. These contacts facilitated the development of cultural, political and economic links with Muslim countries. Some of the finance for the construction of mosques and *madrassahs* and for the restoration of Islamic monuments has come from abroad, from

²³ Personal communications to the author by Uzbek and Kyrgyz military-security personnel at a conference held in Tashkent, May 2000, under the auspices of the George C. Marshall Center for European Security and the Uzbek Ministry of Defence

private sources, and from government funds. On an individual level, since independence, thousands of Central Asians have been able to participate in the *haj* and through it to experience membership of the global Muslim community. In 1990, 1991 and 1992 Saudi Arabia provided financial support for Central Asian pilgrims, but thereafter they had to cover their own costs (estimated at US\$ 1,500 - 2,000). This severely reduced numbers.

5.2. Muslim Missionaries

The main external influence on Central Asian Islam in recent years has been that of visiting missionaries. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, they arrived from many parts of the Muslim world to preach and to open schools. At first they were welcomed, but gradually resentment and suspicion set in. Ordinary believers objected to attempts to replace local customs by more orthodox procedures (in Kyrgyzstan, for example, foreign missionaries were shocked by the traditional funeral rites, which they regarded as pagan rather than Islamic). The state authorities were equally displeased by the introduction of alien ideas and practices. Uzbekistan was the first to impose restrictions on Muslim missionaries from abroad. Similar concerns emerged in the other states and throughout Central Asia the activities of foreign Muslims are now very carefully monitored.

Foreign commentators initially expected that Iran would play the lead role in the re-Islamization of Central Asia. In fact, Iranian clerics have been conspicuous largely by their absence. After the collapse of the Soviet Union delegations from Iran began to visit the Central Asian states and to acquire firsthand familiarity with the region. They soon realized that an Islamic revolution along the lines of the Iranian model was not a realistic prospect. This was partly because of the very low level of knowledge of Islam among the population at large, but more especially because of the lack of a trained, independent-minded *ulama*. The fact that the Iranians represent the Shia tradition also placed them at a disadvantage.

By contrast, Sunni Muslim missionaries were active from the first years of independence. Turkish missionaries have played a special role in Central Asia. According to Kyrgyz official statistics, for example, there were 55 Turkish Muslim missionaries in the country in 1999; missionaries from Pakistan, the second largest group, numbered less than 40.²⁴ The great majority of the Turkish missionaries were Nurus, followers of Said Nursi and of his disciple Fethulla Gülen. The Nurus opened many schools and commercial enterprises in the Central Asian states. Their teaching programmes concentrated on scientific subjects and technical skills, and they appeared to be advocating a moderate, modernized form of Islam. However, their extra-curricular activities conveyed a more radical message. There were increasing concerns that their ultimate political project was the creation of an Islamic state.

²⁴ N. Shadrova, Deputy Chairman of the Kyrgyz State Committee on Religious Affairs, Bishkek. Personal communication, September 1999

The Uzbek authorities have since claimed that some of the Central Asian students who studied in Turkey received “terrorist training”. The Turkish missionaries are also accused of having a pan-Turkic agenda. As a result of such suspicions, their newspaper *Zaman* (“Time”) was banned in Uzbekistan in 1994; several Turkish teachers were expelled at around the same time. In other Central Asian states a similar sense of unease is emerging concerning the activities of this group; their work is now being more closely monitored, especially in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakstan.

5.3. Other Exogenous Social and Religious Influences

In order to set the influence of Muslim missionaries in context, it is important to bear in mind that they are not the only external influence in Central Asia today. Improved communication and information technologies are broadening horizons, particularly for the younger generation. Foreign trade and investment opportunities are beginning to attract substantial interest and there are now quite large expatriate business communities in all the Central Asian capitals. There are, too, several internationally funded aid programmes in place, several of which include training and technical assistance components. All these developments are helping to introduce new ideas.

In the field of religion, a large number of faiths and denominations are now represented in the region. These include many dynamic and financially well endowed Christian missions, particularly from evangelical Protestant sects. For example, over 400 Christian missionaries are currently registered in Kyrgyzstan, more than twice the total number of Muslim missionaries in the country; well over half of these Christians come from Korea.²⁵ Ethnic Central Asians, particularly Kyrgyz and Kazaks, are converting to these sects in substantial numbers. Non-traditional faiths such as Hare Krishnaism, Transcendental Meditation, and Scientology are also attracting followers. Thus, although Islam continues to be the main religious influence in Central Asia, it is by no means unchallenged.

5.4. Afghanistan and International Militant Islamists

For centuries there has been a symbiotic relationship between Afghanistan and Central Asia. In times of peace this has been of mutual economic and cultural benefit. Today, however, the conflict in Afghanistan is a constant threat to the stability of the Central Asian states. There is a massive cross-border trade in illegal drugs;²⁶ there is also a substantial trade in arms. This has led to a huge proliferation of international crime cartels, reaching from Afghanistan across Central Asia to other CIS states, also to Pakistan, the Middle East and Western Europe. Afghanistan is also increasingly a haven for international Islamic militants. There are persistent reports of organized guerrilla training camps peopled by Arabs, Chechens, and Pakistanis, as well as Uzbeks, Tajiks and other Central Asians. It is likewise alleged that the dissident Saudi Islamist Osama bin Laden is funding militant operations in Central Asia. Pakistan is also said to be providing financial and logistical support for the HT and the IMU. How

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ For details of quantities, prices and routes, see *Informatsionnyi byulleten' o narkosituatsii v Tsentral'no-Aziatskom regione*, No. 1, 2000 (produced under the aegis of the Uzbek Cabinet of Ministers, and Central Asian Economic Union); also Olcott, M. B. and N. Udalova, *Drug Trafficking on the Great Silk Road: The Security Environment in Central Asia*, Working Papers, No. 11, Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2000

far any of these claims should be believed is open to question, since as yet little concrete evidence has been produced.

What is beyond doubt, however, is that Afghanistan serves as a convenient asylum for rebels, warlords and dissidents from the Central Asian states. The Tajik opposition had its headquarters here during the civil war and more recently, the insurgents who have been attacking Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have come from bases in Afghanistan. Some of the leaders of the IMU (e.g. Juma Namangani and Tahir Yoldashev) have close personal links with Afghan commanders and possibly receive military support from them.

It has been claimed that the ruling Taliban regime in Afghanistan is poised to invade the Central Asian states and to “capture Bukhara and Samarkand”. This seems far-fetched. It is also unlikely that their ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam would be likely to find much support in Central Asia, where there is still a strong imprint of the secularization of the Soviet period. Nevertheless, the very proximity of such a radical regime is inevitably a cause for concern, particularly for the possible effect it might have on the alienated youth of the region. Not surprisingly, the Central Asian governments regard Afghanistan as a major threat to regional stability and have consistently pressed the international community to take steps to resolve the Afghan conflict. To date, however, there has been little progress on this issue.

6. Central Asian State-Mosque Relations in the Broader Islamic Context

It is only since independence - less than a decade - that there has been a direct relationship between the national governments and the religious authorities in Central Asia. As discussed above, these new states are adhering closely to Soviet models of state control. Yet these models are not unique to that system: similar features are to be found elsewhere in the Islamic world. Thus, for example, state control of Islamic institutions (e.g. appointments to senior posts and the monitoring of community activities) is common practice in most member states of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). Moreover, in several OIC states political leaders consciously draw on Islamic rhetoric and symbolism to validate their regimes. Regime manipulation of Islam, far from being a Central Asian phenomenon, is very much within the experience of the modern Islamic world.

Another similarity is that the strongest opposition to incumbent political regimes often comes from Islamist movements. In some OIC countries, governments have accepted the need for a degree of dialogue with such organizations (e.g. in Jordan and Malaysia). However, successful examples of power sharing within the Islamic world are few, and to date, have generally been short-lived. In most places, the state response has been one of harsh repression (e.g. in Egypt and Algeria). The Uzbek Government (and to a lesser extent the other Central Asian governments) is conforming to this latter pattern, opposing nascent Islamist groups with force. Whether or not this uncompromising stance will bring peace and stability to the region is questionable, but it certainly falls within the spectrum of “conventional” practice in the Islamic world.

7. Conclusions and Outlook

Looking at the history of Central Asia, two points emerge. Firstly, for over half a millennium, the region has been on the periphery of the Islamic world, cut off from the main trends. It is only within the past decade that the independent Central Asian states have begun to emerge from this isolation. They are already beginning to exhibit tendencies similar to those that are to be found in other parts of the Muslim world, but the process of re-adjustment is still at an early stage and the situation is very much in flux. Secondly, Islam in Central Asia has virtually never been an extremist, revolutionary force. It is worth remembering the comment of Eugene Schuyler, the American diplomat who travelled extensively in Central Asia in the late nineteenth century: "Much has been said of the fanaticism of Central Asia, but the fanaticism seems to me more apparent than real".²⁷ On the contrary, it has tended to be highly conservative, and moreover, loyal to the incumbent ruling regime (whether domestic or foreign). The fact that radical Islamist movements have now appeared, and are in open opposition to the present governments, is not only a new development, it is also highly disconcerting for the great majority of the population.

There are massive social and economic problems, hence there is certainly a predisposition to support those who criticize and fight against the current elites. Yet it is very difficult to gauge the strength of such feelings - whether there is "grumbling discontent" or genuine anger that might be channelled into an actual commitment to the IMU or HT. At present, the great majority of the population does not appear to support open resistance to the status quo. This is not only out of a habit of passivity, but also because there are very real concerns about the dangers of "fundamentalist" Islam.

However, there are two factors, which might change this situation. One is the demographic balance: there is already a new generation that has grown up since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The social restraints that were a powerful influence on their parents are no longer part of their mental outlook. The second factor is the lack of stability in Afghanistan: the constant cross-border flow of arms, drugs and militant extremists fuels unrest in the Central Asian states.

Under these circumstances, recurring bouts of conflict seem unavoidable, even if they remain fairly localized, confined to particular "hot spots" (e.g. the Ferghana Valley and parts of Tajikistan). A vicious cycle of violence and military confrontation has been set in motion and it is difficult to see how this might now be halted. International observers argue that it is essential to initiate a process of dialogue with the radical Islamists, ultimately leading to inclusion in government. In this context Tajikistan is often cited as a successful example of such a strategy (though it should be noted that when attention is focused solely on Tajikistan, the same international observers are eager to emphasize the shortcomings of the Tajik peace process). Leaving aside the merits (or otherwise) of the Tajik case, the situations are not, in fact, comparable. In Tajikistan, the civil war was largely rooted in a struggle for political power. The struggle that is today taking place in Uzbekistan and adjacent regions, is a fight between proponents of different visions of Islam, different principles of belief. Each

²⁷ Schuyler, E., *Turkistan: Vol. 1*, 3rd ed., London, Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1876, p. 161

faction - on the one hand, the adherents of government-sponsored Islam, on the other, of radical Islam - is convinced that they have legitimacy and doctrinal sanction on their side. Hence, there is no room for compromise.

Most non-Muslim observers gravely underestimate the deep incompatibility of radical Islam with the “secularized” Islam favoured by contemporary regimes in the great majority of member states of the OIC. Under these circumstances, modern Western concepts of civil society, of negotiated rights for different faiths and sects, have no resonance. In many ways, the situation in the Islamic world today is reminiscent of an earlier period of European history, namely, of the bitter struggles of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. There are no easy solutions to such fundamental clashes of conviction. The “secularized” governments of the Islamic world have all opted for repression of the radical opposition. The only difference has been in the degree of force that has been used. In general, the more measured the government action, the greater the success in containing and defusing the radical threat (compare, for example, the situation in Tunisia to that in Algeria). This experience is surely of direct relevance to the Central Asian governments of today. Excessive aggression is likely to exacerbate tensions rather than minimizing them.

8. Bibliography

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