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ISLAM, FUNDAMENTALISM AND PUBLIC POLICY IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract

This paper describes the roles of Islam and fundamentalism in various aspects of the Central Asian republics (see the Table of Contents), and concludes:
1) The Islamic revival that began in the late 1970s and early 1980s throughout most of Central Asia now seems to be irreversible. Religious training for children has gone from being the exception to being the rule. In Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan every community of size has its own mosque, and religious burials and weddings are now the norms, as are big celebrations to mark circumcision. Even Kazakhstan's newspapers constantly report the opening of new mosques, wherever Kazakhs live in the republic. The same is true in Kyrgyzstan, particularly in the south where the size of the Kirghiz population is only slightly higher than that of the Uzbek. Nonetheless it is by no means clear that this revival will push the population towards "fundamentalism," a threat that has been much bandied about in the Central Asian and central Russian press since the outbreak of the civil war in Tajikistan.

2) In the long run, however, particularly given the dismal economic picture throughout the region, the reversion to politics of repression is likely to increase the popularity of Islamic activists, and make them join up with the secret fundamentalist organizations that are forming throughout the area. As the long campaign against the Muslim Brethren in Egypt, or the clerical movement in Iran have shown, Islamic opposition groups can survive long periods of government persecution. The Central Asian states gained their independence without a revolutionary struggle, and may only now, post-independence, produce their revolutionary heroes.
Introduction

Islam In Five Newly Independent Muslim States

Less than two years ago, Central Asia was a collective term for a geographic region of the Soviet Union. Technically five separate republics, for most questions of policy they functioned as one, fulfilling Moscow's directives. This was particularly true with regard to ideological questions—-which included public policies toward religion.

Now of course, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are all independent, and technically free to pursue their own individual policy lines---towards religion as well as anything else. Though the rights and responsibilities of policy-makers have changed, the policy-makers have not. With the exception of civil-war-torn Tajikistan, each of the Central Asian states is still headed by its Soviet-era president.

Moreover these men had little time to prepare for the tasks that they face. The USSR's transformation from a single state to twelve republics occurred with no forewarning and in the span of a week. By comparison, England's pull-out from India and Pakistan is one of gradual withdrawal. While there were lots of signs to indicate that the USSR was on the verge of collapse, Central Asia's leaders ignored these forewarnings. They supported the failing union to the end, making no contingency plans for its possible demise.

In the process of this transition Islam has gone from being a minority faith, a largely suppressed religion of the colonized, to being the majority faith of newly independent populations. While the Central Asians once had to hide their practice of Islam, now they are not only free to follow the dictates of their conscience, but laws have been changed to make it easier for them to do so.

However, the question of the relationship of Islam to the
state remains as contentious as ever. In certain situations each of the region's presidents has boasted of leading a Muslim nation, while in other circumstances they have denied that their countries are Islamic.

All five countries are secular states, though constitutions or fundamental state laws in all but Kazakhstan proclaim that Islam has a special status. However, none of these societies have fully worked out what this special status should be, or to what degree the new state's social legislation should overlap the principles of Shar'ia law.

This is an ongoing dilemma in all Muslim societies, and in a broader sense the relationship between religion and state rule is a problem which all modern civil societies grapple with continuously. But the question takes on a special timeliness in Central Asia, where inflation is rampant and economic productivity is dropping rapidly, making the region's leaders feel that they are in a battle to forestall disaster in which every day counts.

In such an environment leaders are particularly sensitive to neutralize all potential threats. They not only want to stay in power but are concerned that even signs of instability will scare off potential investors. The search for investors however is itself a problem. On the one hand Western investors are strongly partial to secular societies. On the other hand, Muslim societies are themselves good sources of potential investment, but they often link foreign aid programs to projects designed to further propagate the faith.

Obviously, it should not be assumed that each of the region's leaders will make the same accommodations with Islam. Historically, Islam has not played an identical role in each of these societies, and is unlikely to in the future as well. Even today, the leaders of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and initially Tajikistan, have made closer alliance with religious leaders than have those of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

One reason for this is that the first three countries are
more mono-religious. Equally important though is the fact that the sedentary Uzbeks and Tajiks, and even the nomadic Turkmens, were always "better" Muslims than the Kazakh and Kirghiz nomads. The whole region is experiencing a religious rival; new mosques and religious schools open weekly, and the general popular observance of religious traditions is increasing. The effect of this revival is most apparent in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, where religious parties have formed and can fairly make claim to mass membership in selected parts of their respective countries.

The pattern this revival is likely to take, and whether it will "jump" republic boundaries to "infect" neighboring Kazakhstan and Kirghizstan are both unclear. Numerous factors will affect the relations that develop between Islam and the state in each of Central Asia's new nations.

One factor is sure to be the speed or existence of an economic recovery. The current secular elite may discredit a secular model of development as well as their own leadership if current economic strategies fail. Another factor will be the laws enacted which regulate religious life. Currently, Islamic parties are banned in each republic.

Foreign policy, and the influence of foreign actors will also affect developments, as will the developments within the region itself. Central Asia does not yet have international borders in place between the states of the region; unarmed religious activists are free to move throughout the region and even armed "insurgents" are generally able to dodge road-blocks such as those now on the mountain passes between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

One thing is clear. Each of Central Asia's current leaders views a further "tilt" to Islam as antithetical to the strengthening of their personal political fortunes. Each of these leaders has advanced a secular model of leadership to help strengthen his authority and increase his popularity.

Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbaev sees himself as the leader of Asia's new economic "dragon", Kyrgyzstan's Askar Akaev styles
himself the head of an Asiatic Switzerland, Turkmenistan's Saparmurad Niazov has had himself proclaimed "Father" of the Turkmen people, while Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov sees himself as a just ruler turned dictator by the force of circumstance, and Tajikistan's Imomali Rahmonov is the liberator of his people from the tyranny of Islamic democracy.

Each of these leaders has already faced a considerable challenge in playing the role of national leader. In doing this, all have made important accommodations to religion. Whereas less than a half decade ago both Islam and nationalism were condemned as deviations, social and political respectively, now both are seen as both good and interconnected, in moderation. Central Asia's leaders all now credit Islam with playing a positive role in their nations' past. However, if any of these men were now to actively advance Islam's cause in his society, they would strain popular credulity to the breaking point. Yet to pursue policies which deny Islam a privileged position would also call into question their reputations as national leaders.

Islam as Enemy of Progress

Official attitudes toward religion have changed dramatically in Central Asia since the late 1980s. Glasnost', Gorbachev's policy of "openness," which promoted first a social and then a political thaw in the USSR, was a policy that was intended to serve mainstream Soviet—substitute for this Russian—society. Gorbachev, encouraged by his wife Raisa and her circle of Russian nationalist friends, was concerned to help Russian society fill its spiritual void. One important feature of this policy was the rapprochement that the Soviet state sought with the Russian Orthodox Church. However, there was no similar sensitivity shown toward Islam. Rather, the opposite was true. Islam was seen as a detriment to both the economic and the political reforms that the Gorbachev leadership sought.

One of the things that glasnost' did bring was better
reporting about social and political conditions in the Soviet Union. The 1989 census offered a more honest statistical portrait of the nation than the survey of a decade earlier, including the revelation that the majority of Central Asians and Azerbaijanis claimed not to know Russian fluently.¹

Soviet sociologists sought explanations for this, and concluded that Islam, whose practices their studies now revealed to be more pervasive than was previously thought to be the case, was the cause.² Islam was said to breed a form of mental parochialism, which led those under its "influence" not to learn Russia, to serve poorly in the military, and to be potentially disloyal to the Soviet state, generally speaking.³

In these early Gorbachev years, Islam was defined as synonymous with backwardness. The relative industrial underdevelopment of Azerbaijan and the Central Asian republics as compared to the Slavic and other European republics was considered to be the direct result of the pervasiveness of traditional "Islamic" practices—marrying young, having large families, and not wanting to move from Central Asia, where there were few jobs, to the European regions, which were labor deficient.⁴

The political corruption which Gorbachev and, especially, Communist Party Second Secretary Yegor Ligachev saw as rife throughout the region was also blamed on Islamic practices.⁵ In their minds such "Islamic" practices ranged from extorting state and party funds to pay for religious weddings and funerals to the favoring of family, clan members or co-nationals in making official appointments.

The Gorbachev regime thus declared an unofficial war on "Islam" in general, and corrupt Central Asian party officials in particular. The features of the campaign were generally left to local political officials to decide. In Uzbekistan, whose party organization had come under special scrutiny because of the abuses in the cotton industry under Uzbek party boss Sharif Rashidov (died 1983), the anti-religious campaign was carried out
with particular vengeance.

Anxious to escape dismissal, or worse yet jail, party leaders demonstrated their vigilance by turning on each other. One leader from Samarkand was dismissed for attending his own mother's funeral. If he was a good communist, it was claimed, he would have kept his family from observing such archaic anti-social rituals. This campaign did not distinguish fundamentalists from conservatives, or "extreme" forms of observance from normal customary practices.

Islam and State Building--Pre-Independence

Moscow began to back away from this policy in 1988 and 1989. Ideological vigilance had been the domain of the Communist Party, but by the late 1980s the party was in visible retreat, under attack by both the reformist wing of the Politburo leadership (led by Aleksandr Yakovlev) and by "nationalists" in the Baltic republic communist parties. In 1989 Lithuania's communist party even went so far as to formally sever ties with the CPSU in Moscow.

To try to salvage the situation---and to appease the demands of growing nationalist movements in other republics---the party began to grant republic leaders greater control over "the ideological sphere", which included policies covering religion. When Moscow's policies shifted, so too did those of Central Asia's leaders.

Two of Central Asia's leaders participated directly in the campaign, but they were able to reverse their policies on questions of religion and culture without political consequences. Then first secretary of the Turkmenistan's communist party Niazov took direct responsibility for this campaign in his republic. As chairman of the Council of Minister's, Nazarbaev played a more indirect role, but his public statements of those years left no doubt that he was a staunch opponent of Kazakhstan's traditional ways.
Islam Karimov's connection with the campaign was somewhat more indirect, as for most of the period his position, though a senior one, was exclusively connected with economics. When he took over as first secretary of Uzbekistan's communist party in 1989, he quickly disassociated himself with the "excesses" of this campaign and the attack on Uzbekistan's communist party more generally.

Only Kakhar Makhkamov, first secretary of Tajikistan's communist party, was politically damaged by his role in the anti-Islamic campaign. Though he shifted from attacking widespread popular observance of Islamic customs and arresting "illegal" clerics to becoming a practitioner himself—he even participated in a public service to mark the departure of Tajikistan's pilgrims to Mecca—public disapproval, especially that of believers, remained high. In February 1990 a protest partly inspired by religion failed to dislodge Makhkamov, who successfully retained power until September 1991, only to fall just after the failed Communist Party putsch.

Absamat Masaliev, the Kirghiz party boss who had presided over that republic's anti-religious campaign, was also pushed from office, in October 1990 when the Supreme Soviet of the republic failed to elect him to the post of president. His political defeat was linked to the unpopularity of his policies generally, and especially to the critical evaluation of his performance at the time of the June-July 1990 uprising in Osh oblast, when local Kirghiz and Uzbeks turned on each other near Kyrgyzstan's border with Uzbekistan. Like the interethnic fighting (between Uzbeks and Meshket Turks) in Uzbekistan's Fergana Valley the year before, these disturbances were along ethnic and not religious lines.

Obviously, this ceding of power to the republics was intended to make it easier for the local leaders to deal with problems like those encountered in Fergana and Osh. Soviet leaders were confused over the causes of such disturbances. Partly they thought they were witnessing an imitation effect.
Courtesy of glasnost', events—including disturbances—that occurred at the local level were being covered by the national press, and many felt that national groups in relatively quiescent regions were following the lead of those from other parts of the country that had already been politicized.

However, after watching nationalist protests spread from the Baltic republics to the Nagorno-Karabakh, then to Armenia and then in the Caucasus, the leadership did finally accept that the "sensibilities" of the USSR's various national minorities had been violated, and that "nationality policy"—as they termed the whole collection of policies which dealt with history, culture and religion, as well as discriminatory practices in employment—had to be modified.9 They never fully resolved how they would do this, save devolve even more policy to the republics, and let them cope with the situation as best they could, and use special troops of the MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs) if that failed.

Moreover, the whole nature of governing was changing in the USSR, which was conducive to the decentralization of nationality policy as well. In spring 1989 an all-union Congress of People's Deputies was chosen on a quasi-democratic basis in places (but not in Central Asia), and elections were planned for late 1989 for republic legislative bodies which were also intended to partly usurp the functions of republic communist organizations. These elections were intended to turn the supreme soviets from rubber stamps of local communist parties into semi-sovereign legislatures.

As part of this shift to popular empowerment, laws governing public organizations were changed as well. Now, depending upon the republic, private individuals were more or less free to form voluntary associations and interest groups which could participate in the public life of their republic, through organizing public lectures, petitioning for legislation, and even backing candidates for election.

Most public organizations in Central Asia developed to support changes in policy which were acceptable to the local
party leadership. In each of the five republics, groups were formed to press for an increased role for the local language—newly declared state languages in each of the republics—in public life. Groups were also formed to support the rehabilitation of "repressed" historical figures both pre- and post-revolutionary, and to rewrite history.

Societies were formed to support the restoration of historical monuments, including well-known pilgrimage sites like the mausoleum of Khoja Ahmad Yasavi in Turkestan, Kazakhstan, which was already officially a state historic site and as such under state administration. The Kazakhstan government though did not promote the restoration of the buildings in Otrar, just up the road, because these shrines were run directly by unsanctioned religious groups.

Central Asia's leaders still displayed a real nervousness about their dealings with Islam, which was in marked contrast to the policies that were being pursued in those republics in which Christianity was the majority faith. Even in the Muslim republics Christian groups were seen as more harmless than Muslim groups; Christian groups, even evangelical Christian groups, were not seen as having an extreme side.

Obviously, groups formed that were not to the liking of Central Asia's leaders, and many of these even got officially registered, like the nationalist-democratic movements Azat in Kazakhstan, Erk in Uzbekistan, and the Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan. Groups with explicitly religious agendas were not, such as the pro-Islamic Alash in Kazakhstan, which asked little more than that Islam be recognized as a state religion in Kazakhstan, or the Islamic Renaissance Party in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

Nonetheless, the changes in this period helped further stimulate the religious revival that was already proceeding, and provided new legal channels to help stimulate its development. Laws were passed in each of the republics which provided for freedom of religion—the right of religious believers to
practice their faith without government interference.¹⁰

This ended de facto the existing practice of restricting the number of religious establishments through official licensing. Since 1943, only the Religious Board of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) had the right to open mosques and religious schools, and to appoint the mullahs and teachers who served in them. In 1985 there were fewer than 100 registered mosques throughout the former Soviet Union, and two medresseh to serve all of Central Asia.

By 1989, the actual number of mosques was probably 100 times greater than the official figure. But those running these mosques had no legal standing, and almost always lacked formal religious training---although the quality of the informal training varied enormously.

Virtually all of those considered to be "fundamentalists" in Central Asia came from this latter group. Most of these individuals received their religious training in study groups in the Fergana Valley, in Namangan, Andizhan and Margilan in Uzbekistan,¹¹ and then either stayed attached to the "seminaries" of their training or fanned out to form mosques and small religious schools of their own in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, southern Kyrgyzstan or southern Kazakhstan.

When official attitudes toward Islam changed, most of the illegally formed mosques were able to come under the supervision of the Religious Board---and receive some funding and official support for local building drives that in community after community replaced small semi-hidden structures with large "cathedral-style" mosques. However, there is no religious "census" that gives the name and formal training of local mullahs and Islamic leaders.

Given the fact that religious activists are still considered to be politically suspect, such a document, which would require the cooperation of the local clerics themselves, is unlikely to be produced in the foreseeable future. Clerics that do not seek direct affiliation with SADUM are free to run their mosques if
they can find the necessary financial resources to do so—but then they and their followers could not participate in official delegations to Mecca or as part of SADUM sponsored trips.

SADUM was able to show this generosity, because of its own changed official role. SADUM was an organization that had traditionally been viewed with suspicion by many believers, because, like all other officially-sponsored Soviet religious bodies it was assumed to be riddled with KGB spies and staffed with clerics chosen for their political reliability more than their religious piety.

SADUM underwent a coup of its own in 1989, when Mufti Shamsuddin Babikhanov, himself the son and grandson of SADUM leaders, was ousted by supporters of the current Mufti, Muhammad Yusuf (known initially as Muhammad Yusuf Mamaiusupov). Babikhanov was ousted for drinking and womanizing.12

A trained Orientalist (and he is currently employed as a Professor in Uzbekistan's Academy of Sciences), Babikhanov has qualifications which are more formal and familial than spiritual. Muhammad Yusuf, who had received his religious training in Central Asia and in the Middle East, brought another religious (and economic) dynasty to power, this time from the Fergana Valley rather than Tashkent.

The change in state policy toward religion made the post of head of SADUM a very powerful one, and the post of mufti was worth the fight. The revenues collected by SADUM increased dramatically as the number of mosques and schools under its jurisdiction increased.

Moreover, by 1989 it was already clear that there was a new foreign policy dimension to the post as well. Soviet republics were now expected to pursue more active foreign ties, and encourage foreign investment in their republic. The senior Islamic leader of Central Asia was now an honored figure, and was encouraged to accept official invitations to travel in the Middle East in general and to the oil-rich states in particular.

Though a creation of the Soviet state (or more technically
the revival of a structure that had been created by Russian authorities after the colonization of the area), there was no serious proposal to replace this institution designed by secular authorities with a power structure designed by the Muslim community itself.

However there was an attack on SADUM by the secular authorities themselves. Each of Central Asia's leaders understood that religion had to play a role in the particular national revival that was going on in his own republic, and he wanted to make sure that this revival was at least partly under his control. In Tajikistan, Makhkamov failed at this.

In Kyrgyzstan, Masaliev achieved a temporary victory; he successfully pressured SADUM to remove Satimzhan Kamalov, a dynamic cleric who headed Bishkek's mosque. But Imam Kamalov outsmarted Masaliev, and with the help of Kyrgyzstan's democrats whom he was actively supporting, he created his own Islamic Center in Bishkek. After Akaev became president the rift between SADUM and the Islamic Center was healed, and Kyrgyzstan's mosques remain titularly under SADUM, but effectively under local control.

In 1989 Nursultan Nazarbaev formally removed Kazakhstan from the jurisdiction of SADUM, although, it is not clear that as a republic leader he then had the authority to effectively annul a provision of Soviet law. No one in Moscow objected, and Nazarbaev named Ratbek Nysanbaev, a local official of SADUM, to be Mufti of Kazakhstan.

The Mufti of SADUM did not accept the division of his empire, claiming that his power over Central Asia was recognized by all the region's believers, and that Islam does not know state boundaries. He still dispenses favors throughout the region---most significantly the privilege of making a sponsored pilgrimage. But with the dissolution of the USSR, there are other ways to get plane tickets. More importantly he lacks the juridical authority to collect fees from the mosques that are formally under his jurisdiction but lie outside of Uzbekistan.
Nysanbaev's authority in Kazakhstan is directly linked to Nazarbaev's support, and it is not clear how deep the mufti's support runs among Kazakhstan's believers. A December 1991 effort by Alash to organize his removal, ended with Nysanbaev getting his leg broken and three members of Alash being jailed. Nor does Nazarbaev's support come cheaply. The "muftiate" is under the direct supervision of the department of religious affairs, which is headed by a former ideologist from the communist party who leaves no doubt that he holds professional clerics in contempt. But Nysanbaev and those running Kazakhstan's largest mosques all perform dutifully, offering interviews and delivering speeches that are strongly reminiscent of the Soviet period—praising the beneficence of the secular leaders who have empowered them.

Though SADUM in Uzbekistan generally functioned as a freer actor than did the Mufti in Kazakhstan prior to the dissolution of the USSR in December 1991, religious authorities still saw themselves as serving at the behest of secular authorities. When attempts were made in 1990 and 1991 to oust Muhammad Yusuf, he turned each time to Uzbekistan's president Islam Karimov for protection.

However, as these societies became more "democratic"—less under Moscow's direct control—subtle differences began to emerge. They were most obvious in Tajikistan, where in September 1991 Islamic activists, led by a charismatic Kazi of Dushanbe's main mosque, Akbar Turadjonzade, joined forces with Tajikistan's secular democrats to push for the removal of President Kakhkar Makhkamov.

Secular politicians, who had entered into an alliance with a previously (1985) ousted party chief Rahmon Nabiev, dominated behind the scenes. On the streets, however, the event had a decidedly Islamic flavor. Prayer sessions were held in the main Freedom Square, banners with quotations from the Quran were visible throughout the crowd, and the dias from which Makhkamov's resignation was announced to the crowd included a group of
prominent religious leaders. Anti-Makhkamov activists had seized the republic's television facilities and broadcast the proceedings live through the republic--- and by coincidence in Uzbekistan, which had already been scheduled to broadcast Dushanbe's evening programs. However, when Islam Karimov chanced to discover this, the program suddenly went off the air.

Even in Uzbekistan, where Karimov's nervousness about Islamic "excesses" was already evident, an effort was made by the president to court support of SADUM at the time of the December 1991 presidential election. The election, held just days after the creation of the CIS, had of course been scheduled over two months previously. By that time Muhammad Yusuf's support of Karimov was considered to be a real political plus, and Karimov had to make political concessions to the Mufti in order to get it.

Islam and State Building Post-Independence

The overnight transformation of Central Asia from five republics into five independent states created a subtle and almost immediate change in the balance between secular and religious authorities. Now, for the first time it was possible for religious authorities to aspire for power. Save in Tajikistan, activists throughout the region did not see the development of Islamic democracies as probable or even desirable in the short run, but for the first time they believed that Islamic activists had a right to demand major political concessions from their governments.

This is especially true in three republics---Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. To a lesser extent an Islamic agenda has developed in Kyrgyzstan---albeit a less extensive one than in the other two republics. It seems to be only a matter of time before a similar agenda develops in Kazakhstan.

Religious authorities could now claim greater rights than ever before. The role of SADUM, though, has changed since the
collapse of central authority. The Spiritual Directorate no longer enjoys a monopoly on the religious life of the Central Asians, even in Uzbekistan. The local communities themselves now play a much greater role in regulating and funding local religious life.

However, the role religion plays in society has significantly expanded, which gives the formal religious establishment a whole range of new responsibilities which previously they did not have. In addition to being responsible for distributing "haj" pilgrimage trips to Mecca, SADUM can now receive large sums of money from foreign governments to send students abroad for religious education and for the construction, renovation, and repair of mosques.

Islamic clerics have also begun to play a certain role in government. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan there is formal, if limited, clerical participation in the government; Islamic clerics—rather than party ideologists—now head departments of religious affairs, where part of their task is to introduce limited formal religious (Islamic) instruction in state schools.16 Both Kirghizstan and Kazakhstan are determinedly secular in their government philosophy, but the Akaev government's draft constitution specifically recognizes the Islamic heritage and nature of Kyrgyzstan.17

In all the republics the growth of religion has increased the role of the formerly non-SADUM clerics even more than it has that of the SADUM clerics. Local clerics now derive real power from their communities, both in the cities and, even more so, in the countryside. The religious authority of most of the formerly "unofficial" mullahs, most of whom are conservative traditionalists, has been formally recognized by SADUM. These clerics often lack the formal religious education which the "fundamentalists" enjoy, and so they have fewer hesitations over seeking support from SADUM. In some cases fundamentalists have joined SADUM, but generally the graduates of the underground seminaries of the Fergana Valley are reluctant to receive direct
support from the Islamic organization which so long opposed their very existence. However, the vision of society that many of the SADUM clerics are promoting is no more modern than that of the fundamentalists. This is particularly true in Uzbekistan.

Distinct from the newly recognized "unofficial" mullahs, but often working in parallel, are the medresseh-trained 'fundamentalists', who are opening religious schools and trying to increase public observance of Islamic tenets. They often deal easily with and make common purpose with SADUM-recognized officials. In rural areas local political authorities tolerate their activities as well.

However, it is the local clerics actively involved in trying to bring Islam into village schools who are in closest contact with the populace. This group is influenced by the fundamentalists, with whom they share the goal of returning their people to Islam. The influence of both the fundamentalists and the village clerics is expanding locally as the two groups develop economic bases, build mosques and other structures through contributions and businesses.

It is hard to know how to label these people. Given how cut off the region was from direct contacts with the rest of the Islamic world, it is difficult to know how to define a fundamentalist in the Central Asian context. Is it just a member of an illegal anti-government organization, seeking to overthrow the existing order in favor of a vaguely worded call for an Islamic democracy? Or is it anyone who subscribes to a radical Islamic agenda?

Few of the graduates of the formerly underground and now openly operating fundamentalist seminaries would claim to be in the former category. Like Said Qutb or Maulana Sayyid Abdul Aya Mauiliudi, both of whom Central Asia's fundamentalists frequently cite, they would claim to be doing little more than seeking to introduce Islamic values in everyday life. Moreover, many other mullahs proselytizing Islam throughout the countryside of these five new states would share this goal—even though they might
not ever have heard of either Qutb or Mauliudi.

One thing that seems clear—the Islamic revival that began in the late 1970s and early 1980s throughout most of Central Asia now seems to be irreversible. Religious training for children has gone from being the exception to being the rule. In Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan every community of size has its own mosque, and religious burials and weddings are now the norms, as are big celebrations to mark circumcisions. Even Kazakhstan's newspapers constantly report the opening of new mosques, wherever Kazakhs live in the republic. The same is true in Kyrgyzstan, particularly in the south where the size of the Kirghiz population is only slightly higher than that of the Uzbek. Nonetheless it is by no means clear that this revival will push the population towards "fundamentalism," a threat that has been much bandied about in the Central Asian and central Russian press since the outbreak of the civil war in Tajikistan.

Tajikistan, and the Problem of Islamic Opposition

Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are the most traditional of the Central Asian countries. The population of both countries is overwhelmingly rural, and are observant Muslims, if one defines this to mean practicing Islamic rituals as a part of daily life rather than having knowledge about why these rituals are practiced. The traditions of religious education are stronger among the Tajiks, a sedentary population, and in recent years increasing numbers of young Tajiks came to the Fergana Valley to study in the underground "fundamentalist" seminaries—a drive of only several hours for most.

Obviously, in Tajikistan, radical Islamic elements can claim to have had the greatest role in politics, and even briefly attained control of the government. However, the struggle of fundamentalist Islamic elements for control is only one dimension of Tajikistan's political struggle. Many studying the situation in situ see the civil war in Tajikistan as far more an inter-clan
struggle than a struggle between secular and religious elements.

For most of the Soviet period, politics in Tajikistan were dominated by three large clans—-from Khojent (Leninabad), Kurgan Tiube, and Kuliab, with the Pamiri Tajiks barred even from competing. The current crisis has been slow to build, and certainly has been exacerbated by the presence of a large Islamic opposition.

The crisis began in February 1990 with small demonstrations occasioned by rumors that thousands of Armenians would be settled in Dushanbe; then with mass demonstrations that brought down the Makhkamov government in the September 1991 coup; then with three months of nation-wide disturbances in spring 1992 that were prompted by Nabiev's refusal to grant political concessions to the secular and religious opposition groups which had helped him come to power the preceding autumn; then with three months of even greater mass disorder after the May 1992 accord between Nabiev and the opposition, which made Nabiev into a virtual puppet; then with an all-out civil war after Nabiev's ouster in September 1992; and since late November with the conquest of Dushanbe by pro-Nabiev forces from Kuliab which brought Imomali Rahkmonov to power and sent the Islamic forces, including Kazi Turadjonzade, into hiding.

Throughout the whole drama clan/regional ties have played a critical role. Nabiev himself is from Khojent, the province (adjoining Uzbekistan) from which the republic of Tajikistan has long been ruled. This is the most developed of the provinces—-it is the center of what industry exists in Tajikistan (most of which was run by various branches of the USSR defense ministries). These are the enterprises that the Russian army was sent in to protect. Obviously, it is the wealthiest of Tajikistan's oblasts. The poorest was Kuliab, whose party organization had been the major rival of the Khojent group. It is their forces who retook Dushanbe and are now in control.

The center of the opposition was Kurgan Tiube, a region of disparate Tajik and Uzbek family groups. For most of the Soviet
period, it was the part of Tajikistan in which forcibly resettled peoples were placed. In fact, the general weak nature of family ties is often offered as an explanation as to why this area has developed into a fundamentalist Islamic center. There has also been a loose alliance between those in Kurgan Tiube and those from the Pamirs.

Central Asia's leaders all fear the contagion effect of Tajikistan, and in the elaboration of their fears they concentrate on the threat that the spread of fundamentalism poses to political stability in the region. It is clear that political stability is fragile in each of the successor states of the former Soviet Union. But political stability is no less tenuous in the non-Muslim states than in the Muslim ones. Boris Yeltsin after all does not head a Muslim state, and the Russian nationalists and former communists who oppose him are criticized for being autocrats, not "religious zealots", as the Islamic activists of Central Asia are termed.

Certainly Central Asia's political leaders are at risk politically. But the "Islamic fundamentalist threat" has become a slogan around which to rally the population—and more importantly, to use in the crack down against potential political rivals, secular and religious, rather than as an expression of genuinely conceived political threat. Islam itself has not become a target, and in each of the republics, the state-recognized Islamic institutions have continued to enjoy official favor.

Islam and Foreign Policy

One possible reason for this is the foreign policy advantage that each Central Asian leader hopes to get from being seen as the leader of a Muslim state. This is a role that all but Nazarbaev play with great frequency—including Askar Akaev, who has become less "Eurocentered" with each passing day of his worsening economic crisis.
Islamic societies represent a real hope for foreign investment, and foreign investment is something that all of them need. There is no foreign state that is considered too dangerous to associate with. For all his anti-Islamic rattlings, Tajikistan's Makhkamov courted uranium-seeking Libyans prior to his ouster (they are reported to have gone home disappointed). While Islam Karimov spent all fall 1992 railing against "foreign" actors intervening in Tajikistan, and dropped enough hints in his speeches to make it clear that it was Iran he was referring to, when the prospect of improved economic cooperation between Iran and Uzbekistan appeared, Karimov warmly welcomed Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Veliyati to his republic in January 1993 and was quick to sign the necessary paperwork.

Much of the anti-Iranian rhetoric in Central Asia seems targeted at Western audiences, to encourage them to invest in autocratic but secular Central Asia. Central Asia's own leaders know that Iran is not playing a great role in the Islamic revival of Central Asia, which is to be expected in a Sunni region. Saudi Arabia is, directly funding SADUM and other official Muslim groups, and quite possibly indirectly funding missionary work by Islamic activists from Bangladesh and the Gulf States. Saudi Arabia is also the source of a scholarship program for the religious education of Central Asians in their own country, and is said to be the source of funding for scholarships offered by fundamentalist groups in Turkey as well.

Yet there is little public criticism of Saudi Arabia's role. In fact, in preparation for his October 1992 visit to Saudi Arabia, Kyrgyzstan's Akaev said that if the price was right he would become a pilgrim himself. Nonetheless, saving the souls of the Central Asian leaders does not seem a priority of Saudi or other Middle Eastern leaders, and their financial involvement in these republics has not been appreciably more forthcoming than that of Western investors. Moreover, like the Western governments, they are concerned to shape their Central Asia policies keeping a close watch on Russia's response. Russia
is still a far more valuable potential ally—a major market, a key future player in the international oil market, and, particularly in the case of Iran, of great importance as a potential arms merchant.

None of Central Asia's Muslim partners will put the advancement of the cause of Islam above that of securing their own national interests. However, while these states are not leaping to the aid of the new Muslim Soviet successor states, Central Asia's leaders are not apt to risk alienating them through ill-conceived anti-Islamic drives.

Looking Toward the Future: The Contradictions of the Situation

The major reason why Central Asia's leaders are reluctant to turn on Islam, however, has little to do with foreign policy. Most of the dilemmas that these men face are not unique ones, and some have little to do with Islam. Post-communist societies are facing a difficult challenge, having to create a new political order at a time of economic crisis.

They must do this by revitalizing nationalism and religion. Modern societies may have a shared notion of nationalism—though of course not all do; Basque nationalists would reject the nationalism of most Spaniards, African-Americans complain of "white history" and of the racism that they see as implicit in most of formal American patriotism. However, modern societies are even more divided over the question of what role to accord religion in public life.

The post-communist societies are strange places, and this is particularly true of the five new Central Asian states. For these republics, the break-up of the Soviet Union has meant the beginning of decolonization. The old pro-colonial administration is still largely in place, but their political agenda has changed. A large number of "colonizers" still live in the region, but their social and political status is now sharply diminished.
Unlike many of the newly decolonized states of the 1950s and 1960s, these societies are as modern as they are underdeveloped. Part of the population, and all of the elite, were raised in a secular society and lived in the modern world. They are not a small group, they would be ten to twenty percent of the non-European population; close to forty percent of Central Asia's fifty million people probably fit into this category.

The rural population of Central Asia, over fifty percent of the non-European population in each of the republics—and more than two thirds of the non-European population in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan—lives in a traditional agrarian society.

This society has been modified by the more than seven decades of Soviet rule; the entire region is electrified and over ninety percent of the homes have television; the entire population is literate—in the local language but not in Russian; the traditional village and clan leadership structure was partly destroyed and partly usurped through Soviet rule. Nonetheless life in the countryside remains very different from that in the city, and it would be impossible to call it representative of a modern, secular world.

For all the current political instability in these post-communist societies, the fall of communism has meant an increased perception of popular empowerment, and this empowerment has brought to light the fracture between the secularized and non-secularized parts of society.

There is a contradiction between the goals of society at large and those of the ruling elite. The ruling elite are themselves, without exception, fully secularized. As such, they feel a particular target of the fundamentalists, and also indignant at the possible change to their life styles that a tilt toward empowered religious activists would produce in their societies.

This is not a problem which is exclusive to the Islamic societies. The Catholic Church is already playing a far greater
political role in Catholic-dominated post-communist societies than Islamic "fundamentalists" are in Muslim ones. Moreover, though granted this authority by the state, the Church's exercise of power is meeting with strong opposition from the secularized part of the population.

The Catholic Church believes it has a moral right to insure that civil society helps uphold religious law, hence it has successfully lobbied for a new highly restrictive abortion law in Poland. It is also lobbying for similar legislation in Hungary. In Poland and in Lithuania state schools already teach religion as part of the curriculum, oftentimes filling precisely those slots in which "scientific atheism" was taught. Polish, Lithuanian and Hungarian intellectuals---very few of whom are devout and some of whom are even avowed atheists---are very uncomfortable with the situation.

No elite group likes to be pushed from power. All of Central Asia's rulers will sacrifice their new-found democratic values in an effort to defeat a popularly-led movement to defeat them. Blaming their instability on Islamic "extremists" may make their "strong-man" tactics more palatable to foreign leaders, leaving aid-flows intact and buying them some additional time in power.

In the long run, however, particularly given the dismal economic picture throughout the region, the reversion to politics of repression is likely to increase the popularity of Islamic activists, and make them join up with the secret fundamentalist organizations that are forming throughout the area. As the long campaign against the Muslim Brethren in Egypt, or the clerical movement in Iran have shown, Islamic opposition groups can survive long periods of government persecution. The Central Asian states gained their independence without a revolutionary struggle, and may only now, post-independence, produce their revolutionary heroes.
Footnotes


7. See his speeches at the fifteenth party congress of Kazakhstan's communist party (Kazakhstanskaia pravda, February 1-10, 1986) or that at the all-union twenty-seventh party congress of the CPSU.

8. Makhkamov's address which appeared in Kommunist Tadzhikistana, August 6, 1986, was probably the most detailed condemnation of Islam of any party leader.

9. This was the theme of a September, 1989 plenum of the Central Committee of the CPSU. See Pravda September 19-21, 1989.

10. For a survey of these bills see FBIS Daily Report. Soviet Union. FBIS-SOV-89-029.


14. For an example see the interview with Zulqarnay qazi Muratuli, imam of the Merk mosque that was published in Zhas Alash on 16 May 1992, and translated in English in FBIS Central Eurasian Affairs, FBIS-USSR-92-084, 4 July 1992, p. 63

15. The author watched the events live on Uzbekistan's television until their interruption.

