TITLE: THE RISE OF THE COUNTER-HEGEMONY?: ISLAM IN
THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

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THE RISE OF THE COUNTER-HEGEMONY?: ISLAM IN THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

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Summary

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, even though all the basic assumptions regarding the Soviet system were revisited, assumptions regarding Islam remained largely unquestioned in the West as well as in the new republics. This was not an oversight, but stems from increasing fears of Islamic fundamentalism, or a search for a new monolithic global enemy of the West.

But, the confrontational aspect of Islam is both overestimated and underestimated. It is overestimated in terms of the potential for operationalizing the fundamentalist aim of creating Muslim states in the Caucasus and Central Asia. It is underestimated because official attempts to suppress Islam will not "make it go away." As a counter-hegemonic force and extension of popular culture, Islam will continue to be a framework for questioning existing arrangements in the new republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia. As much as Christianity influences American politics, Islam will continue to influence politics in the former Soviet Union. In this context, Islam, as a system of belief, is used to legitimize popular sentiment and popular demands. But while Christian discourse is entering into the mainstream of American politics, the control of religious expression and lack of freedoms in the new republics prevents Islam from becoming part of an open debate, which acts to reinforce its institutionalized counter-hegemonic status. In this preliminary report we look at why popular Islamic discourse remains confrontational in the new era, and what are some future possibilities.

Introduction

For decades, western scholars argued that Islam represented one of the most powerful challenges to the Soviet Union, particularly to Russian domination of non-Russians and official suppression of religious expression. The debate reflected expectations that, in the Caucasus and Central Asia, Islam would confront Soviet unity from within. This paradigm carried several major underlying assumptions about the nature of Islam and Muslims: "All Muslims are religious;" or "Islam is static, caught in the Middle Ages;" or "Muslims would reject communism and secularism to create some type of Islamic system, perhaps even fortified by an Islamic state." Thus, on one hand scholars were convinced that Muslims of the Caucasus and
Central Asia would challenge the Soviet system, but on the other hand they were guarded about the outcome of that challenge. Soviet intellectuals also saw Islam as a threat, an enemy to the system, a "primitive" identity and a reactionary movement, which required suppression and control in order for there to be progress.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, even though all the basic assumptions regarding the Soviet system were revisited, assumptions regarding Islam remained largely unquestioned in the West as well as in the new republics. This was not an oversight, but stems from increasing fears of Islamic fundamentalism. John Esposito argues that the fear of Islam fosters the potential to replace the "Red Menace of world communism" with the "Green Menace" of Islam, thus creating a new monolithic global enemy of the West. Russia's posture as an extension of the West further supports the construction of this "reality" of the New World Order. But, the confrontational aspect of Islam is both overestimated and underestimated. It is overestimated in terms of the potential for operationalizing the fundamentalist aim of creating Muslim states in the Caucasus and Central Asia. It is underestimated because official attempts to suppress Islam will not "make it go away." As a counter-hegemonic force and extension of popular culture, Islam was powerful during the period of the Russian Empire, maintained its power during the Soviet period, and will continue to be a counter-hegemonic force questioning existing arrangements in the new republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia. As much as Christianity influences American politics, Islam will continue to influence politics in the former Soviet Union. In this context, Islam, as a system of belief, is used to legitimize popular sentiment and popular demands. But while Christian discourse is entering into the mainstream of American politics, the control of religious expression and lack of freedoms in the new republics prevent Islam from becoming part of an open debate, which acts to reinforce its institutionalized counter-hegemonic status.

In this preliminary report we look at why popular Islamic discourse remains confrontational in the new era, and what are some future possibilities. This report reflects our interest in the historical and cross-cultural development of the discourse of social justice in the Muslim Turkic community. We are working on an article examining ways in which socialist and Islamic discourse have overlapped around the idea of social justice in the Imperial, the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, by concentrating on the works of Neriman Nerimanov, Sultan Galiev and other intellectuals.

Islam as Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony

The Muslim Republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia continue to be dominated by politicians and intellectuals who were members and leaders of the Communist Party. The
present regimes are pushing freedom of expression and the search for equality to the background in favor of creating and maintaining "stable regimes," which are characterized by the state's heavy handed "major" economic and "minor" political reforms. In an effort to define the new "nation," its ideology, and the boundaries of the new community in a complex global system, these leaders, such as Nursultan Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan and Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan, are proclaiming the importance of the Islamic heritage, at the same time they declare that a secular society is essential for progress and the peaceful coexistence of mixed ethnoreligious populations. But their position is challenged. For instance, an alternative position to that of Haydar Aliev of Azerbaijan is being put forth by politicians such as Abulféz Elchibey, who argue that "finding religion means finding history and the national culture." In Uzbekistan the organization Adalat (Justice) has called for "Islamic justice" to combat what it terms "continuing official corruption" and to ensure social justice for the community.

As a discourse, Islam represents a potential challenge to what many view as the "continuing domination of the Communist Party and Russian colonialism." At the turn of the century, modernizing Muslim intellectuals turned to the West to search for an alternative identity, and they attacked Islam as a source of backwardness. But now Muslim Turkic intellectuals are picking up popular sentiments and arguing that the suppression of Islam is the source of an underdeveloped society and community. The transformation of the argument reflects the historic loss of a sense of "self" and purpose in the community. In the absence of a clear and accessible ideology, Islam is presented as a well established political and social program which, in contrast to the "leftover arrangements of the Soviet system," not only serves as a model for a "genuinely alternative system" but also advocates an "ideal system of justice." While Islam persists as a voice of opposition confronting the state, it also tests the new attitude of the state regarding openness. In this context, as one intellectual voiced for many: "Perestroika arrived in the Caucasus, but Glasnost died on the way!"

In the absence of freedom of speech and open debate, how would the state define the new national community? Benedict Anderson argues that the principles of emerging "imagined communities" are usually defined not by "self-consciously held political ideologies" but by large cultural systems that preceded them, such as "religious community and the dynastic realm." The reasons for this identification stem from efforts to legitimize existing arrangements by reclaiming the past. But what is the past? When does it begin, and what does it include?

The problematic of the past for the new Muslim Turkic republics stems from the lingering effects of Russian colonialism and Soviet hegemony, which continue to complicate the coexistence of diverse religious and ethnic groups in the Caucasus and Central Asia. It is
difficult to recollect in "mixed company" the glories of the fight against Russian colonialism, or such stories as the burial of a Russian general's head under the Baku city gates where everybody entering the city would step on it, during the wars against Imperial Russia. In this context, it is also hard to talk about the past glories of the Shirvanshahs or the martyrdom of Genje, due to the oppressive characteristics of the feudal past. Moreover, since some fought and others collaborated, the colonial wars and Russian hegemony were divisive, not unifying, experiences for the colonized of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Thus, due to divergent interpretations of the past, "the dynastic realm" as a cultural system does not have strong legitimacy.

It is easier to define the past as Islamic, because the Islamic past evokes a feeling of unity among Turkic people and strengthens that unity with imaginary ties to other Muslims. When it was first articulated in the late nineteenth century, pan-Islamism became a political tool even for secular intellectuals, because of its premise of strength through unity. In the Caucasus and Central Asia, as in other Muslim societies, pan-Islamism was ultimately rejected as "fundamentalism and idealism," and thus marginalized. Yet, it is hard to overlook the existence, globally, of a shared sense of being Muslim, especially in terms of a confrontation with the West. The growing popular interest in Islam in the Caucasus and Central Asia is tied to this sense of unity and confrontation.

Thus, if the history of the Caucasus and Central Asia are Islamic, Russian colonization and the Soviet period merge as a single complex pattern of confrontation. In Azerbaijan, this confrontation is on display at the former Lenin Museum, now the National Native Arts Museum in Baku. Other than the building itself, everything related to the Soviet Union or Lenin has been replaced by Azerbaijani carpets and folk art. Curators insist "they are prayer rugs,...look at the patterns, they are just like Turkish rugs,...we share the same roots...they [the Russians] could not make us forget." In Uzbekistan, the Uzbek National Museum has also been redesigned since independence to reflect "Uzbek" contributions to Muslim Civilization, especially in the areas of science, philosophy and literature. But in the Central State Museum of Kazakhstan, the displays celebrate the cultures of Kazakhstan, and there is a guarded interpretation of the impact of Islam. Heavy emphasis is placed on the nomadic past and the "civilizing" effects of co-existence with the Russians. It appears that the percentage of the Russian population has an effect on the interpretation of the past and the role of religion in the official definition of the present community. The percentage of Russians is lowest in Azerbaijan; in Uzbekistan they make up about 11% and in Kazakhstan about 37% of the population.
As the new states try to define unity with varying emphasis on religion, origin, land and culture, they are attempting to avoid or suppress discussion of divisive issues. Yet they are caught in a bind. Reinterpreting the past to create a new unity raises issues that cannot be avoided. Thus, the new states maintain an uncertain relationship with official history, maintaining some aspects of the Soviet official past while rejecting others. As a result, the states of the Caucasus and Central Asia are strained by efforts to control the production of knowledge and the definition of the new national "self."

According to the assessment of some Turkic intellectuals, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, nationalism emerged as the official reactionary ideology. This new formulation secured and legitimized the elites of the former Communist Party, who now had to articulate an alternative to the previous system. But, very soon the Muslim Turkic states began to discourage nationalist sentiments as they tried to adjust their ideology to continuing Russian influence, and also attempted to reconcile different segments of the population. In fact, all the efforts at de-Russification, such as alphabet reform, were curtailed to accommodate this bargain, particularly in Kazakhstan. National ideologies, already incomplete constructs, were weakened and the vacuum began to be filled by religion, Islam.

Even though the state advocates control of religious expression under the banner of secularism, and attempts to suppress discussion of divisive issues, there is a growing popular movement in all the Muslim Turkic republics to integrate religion into everyday life and culture. In Kazakhstan for instance, in the absence of mosques, apartments or rooms are being converted into prayer space, attended mostly by men. In Uzbekistan, old mosques and medreses are being repaired to reflect the past glory of the centers of Muslim scholarship in Central Asia. The restoration of religious buildings in Uzbekistan as well as independent mosques in Kazakhstan and other religious activities in all the new republics are being supported by Muslim countries, including Saudi Arabia and Iran. Taken together, popular interest in Islam and foreign assistance reinforce each other and fuel the formulation and articulation of Islam as a popular position in conflict with official policies of the state, as counter-hegemony against hegemony.

Indeed the popular interest in Islam is growing. For example, in Azerbaijan one religious bookstore owner pointed out that since opening a year before, sales had consistently increased. For example, the five volume work "The Explanation of Nature Through Islam," a popularized form of Islamic philosophy, is being sold at the rate of 50 copies per month. The set, a high quality production made in Turkey, sells for 125,000 Manat, where the minimum wage per month is 5000 Manat and the average professional's salary is about 50,000 Manat. The owner reported that customers use the bookstore as a place to discuss books or recent developments.
which he welcomed at the beginning; but now he complains that the crowd is too large. Also, in Baku sidewalk stalls offer multiple pictures of Ali and Husayn, and during the month of Muharrem, Shi‘i Muslims hang banners and black flags in the streets mourning the martyrdom of Husayn. Not only are these overt expressions not confronted by the people, they are integrated into the city scene, the banners remaining after Muharrem. In Baku, the dominant form of "graffiti" consisted of religious slogans. Walls attract attention with crossed double swords, "Allah," written in the Arabic alphabet, or the slogan "Everyday is Ashure, Every Place is Karbala" [Her Gun Asure, Her Yer Kerbala]. So far, in the face of popular acceptance, the state has been forced to tolerate these expressions.

As a result of the state’s apparent fragmentation of ideology, and the intellectual and popular search for identity and belonging, Islam is emerging as a powerful counter-hegemony. But it does not represent a single, monolithic debate. While some are looking at Islam as an alternative system offering new ways to establish a community, equality and justice, others are emphasizing Islam as a weapon to fight against Russians and the West. When Muslim soldiers from Azerbaijan and Dagestan who previously fought against Armenia gather secretly in Baku to volunteer to fight in Chechnia or even in Bosnia, what motivates them is not nationalism but what they see as "Muslim solidarity against Russia and its Christian allies." The debate is split between those who see Islam as an aspect of freedom of expression and individual and communal identity, and those who see religion as the only alternative to confront past and present conditions. For those who believe in religion as the only possible identity for the Turkic republics, any form of national identity is a tool for oppression and division. Those intellectuals argue that nationalism is an ideology imposed by the Soviet Union, to establish the terms of Soviet unity. In this context, secularism is an aspect of state control and continuing Russian-Soviet domination. The split in the discourse on Islam exhibits not only that the state's ideology, its hegemony, is fragmented, but that popular and intellectual sentiment regarding Islam as counter-hegemony is also fragmented.

The Future of Islamic Debate in the Politics of the Caucasus and Central Asia

According to Muslim Turkic intellectuals, the collapse of the Soviet Union has resulted in "Perestroika," but not "Glasnost." Perestroika, framing rapid integration into the world economic system, became the leading item in the new republics' agendas, while Glasnost as a perception and action fostering freedom of expression, was not supported. Since Haydar Aliyev’s return to power in Azerbaijan has solidified the stronghold of former high ranking Communist Party officials as presidents of the Muslim Republics, Islam has once again become an ideology and an expression of the popular cultural memory and communal identity.
questioning the perpetuation of existing power arrangements. Over the decades, the political power of Islam has come from being an alternative first to Russian, then Soviet and now autocratic political structures. The promise of Islam remains uncertain, but it frames alternative futures, either as a religion in a secular system, allowing the coexistence of Muslims and Christians in the post-Soviet period, or as a defining ideology securing the dominance of Muslims in the post-Soviet republics. In either context, Islam remains a counter-hegemonic ideology, and its future articulation is tied to other variables.

If the economic situation in Azerbaijan and Central Asia continues to deteriorate to the point of crisis, and the states do not deliver on their promises of prosperity and democracy, Islam as a political expression has the potential to be used to rally for an alternative system. Saudi Arabia and Iran, along with other Muslim countries and unofficial groups, would likely increase efforts to influence the formulation of an alternative system. In this context, confrontation with Russia and the West would be more and more framed in religious terms.

If the economic situation improves dramatically, states might relax their control on political expression, and Islam as a religion would likely become an aspect of everyday life, just one of the available identities. Still, it might emerge as a point of friction with other religious minorities, especially dealing with the terms of secularism and terms of ethnic coexistence.

Chances are that the "reality" will lie somewhere between these two models. In this complex equation Islam will likely remain a counter-hegemonic force, yet certain debates within the Islamic discourse would enter into mainstream politics, creating the possibility that Islam could become part of both the hegemony and counter-hegemony. In the Middle East, the overlapping of religion in hegemonic and counter-hegemonic arguments has fragmented political discourse, making Islam a multi-polar political principle. Reference to Islamic precepts has helped to frame political debate in the Middle East in religious and communal terms, and has also led governments as well as their opponents to attack each other for lacking a commitment to social justice.

Yet another alternative can develop out of the merging of Islam with another counter-hegemonic discourse such as socialism. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the history and nature of socialism is being revisited by politicians, intellectuals and the people. Many believe it is still a powerful alternative, corrupted by historical circumstances that prevented fulfillment of its promise. As a program, socialism is now being reconceptualized against the harsh and confrontational realities of the passage to the capitalist system. It is seen as an alternative to the ills of the current regime, which has brought inflation, unemployment, falling standards of living and new terms of political repression. The merging of Islam and socialism to form a
foundation of legitimization has been utilized before as a model by intellectuals and politicians in Muslim societies in the Middle East and Asia as well as in the Caucasus and Central Asia. In this context, Islam together with socialism can be used to define terms of belonging and terms of social justice within the community, questioning the existing system's oppression and exploitation.

Discourses change and respond to alterations in other discourses. At this stage, yet another possibility lies in the establishment of a democratic system, with democratic guarantees which include expression of religious belief as a part of individual freedom. But it seems that in the Caucasus and Central Asia perhaps only a few intellectuals, people or politicians are considering this alternative, so few that their voices are drowned in the debate.

ENDNOTES