



Islam in post-disintegrated Central Asia: Realistic Approach

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Abstract: From times of immemorial Central Asia was subjugation of foreign rule. Islam preserved its identity, despite of foreign rule. It is imperative to identify and analyze the different dimension of Islam in the central Asian after the dissolution of seven decades communist regime. The paper investigates the revivalism and radicalism of Islam in newly installed central Asia Republics. The approach followed by the Republics to satisfy the demand of Muslim population is also imperative to analyze. The movements like Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Hizb-ul-Tahrir were the sole threats to established governments. The approach followed by the respective governments was more or less same as Soviet approach.

Keywords: Central Asia, Islam Hizb ut-Tahrir, Radicalism, Revivalism

I. Introduction

The call of Islam reached central Asia during the mid of 7th century, through three distinctive ways, via the Arab armies (led by Qutayba Ibn Muslim), Scholaristic way and traders' way. The Islamization of the region was accomplished quite rapidly. Within some fifty years, Transoxiana had been politically, culturally and economically incorporated into the Islamic Caliphate. The roots of Islamic faith were strengthened during the Karakhanid and Seljuk empires. Islam developed deeper historical roots in the non-nomadic Tajik and Uzbek populations than among the nomadic Kyrgyz, Turkmen, and Kazakh tribes.¹ Arriving in Central Asia in the mid-seventh century, Islam became the dominant religion in the region by the eighth century.² Until the rise of the Soviet Union in the twentieth century Islam continued to be the major force shaping the culture and identity of Central Asian people. The dominant figures are the clergy. Islam in tribal zones on the other hand was imposed and penetrated through the intermediary of *Sufi* brotherhoods such as the *Yasawiyya*, which incorporate elements deriving from the shamanistic traditions of Turkic nomads³. Overall the Islam in Central Asia was *quietist*⁴, following the liberal *Hanafi* Sunni School which is known because of its respect for individual freedoms as in Afghanistan and throughout the Indian subcontinent. Under Soviet rule, Islam throughout Central Asia had been driven underground, but even Soviet totalitarianism could not destroy it entirely. Mosques were closed, destroyed, or turned into something else⁵. Young Muslims joined the Soviet youth organization rather than going to the mosque. The repression of Islam under Stalin was very severe from 1927 onwards. In 1943 the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims in Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) was created. Two offensives against Islam were to follow after Stalin's death. Khrushchev delivered the heaviest blow by forcing the closure of 25 percent of official mosques between 1958 and 1964. The effect was particularly felt in Tajikistan (16 out of 34) and Uzbekistan (23 out of 90). The four official mosques stayed open in Turkmenistan and of the 26 Kazakh and 34 Kyrgyz mosques only one in each republic closed⁶ (Anderson). The last offensive was under Gorbachev in 1986, which was largely overshadowed by the general liberalization atmosphere. During the Soviet rule Central Asia was on the edge of the Islamic world, with no contact with the major centres of Islamic civilization. The Israeli-Arab conflicts, the Islamic revolution in Iran, the Palestinian issue and much more had passed them by. When independence came to the former Soviet Republics of Central Asia most Muslims possessed a rudimentary knowledge of Islamic teachings⁷.

¹ Ahmed Rashid, "The New Struggle in Central Asia: A Primer for the Baffled," *World Policy Journal* 17, no.4 (2000/2001): 33.

² Christian, David. *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia*. British: Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.

³ Roy, Olivier. *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations*. New York: New York University, 2000

⁴ David Lewis, *Temptations of Tyranny in Central Asia*, (London: Hurst Publishers, 2008), p. 185.

⁵ Yaacov Ro'i, *Islam in the Soviet Union: From the Second World War to Gorbachev*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), pp. 1-70.

⁶ Anderson, John. "'Islam in the Soviet Archives: a Research Note'", *Central Asian Survey* 13 (1994): 46.

⁷ T. Jeremy Gunn, "Shaping an Islamic Identity", *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 64, No. 3, 2003, p. 390.

II. Post independent era

After independence many hypotheses regarding the future of the independent region has been put forth. Politico-Economic issues remained the sole concern of historians, politicians, economists, and scholars. Religion particularly Islam emerged with a new orientation. After demise of seven decades communist rule in 1991, a threat was realised that radical Islamic movements would engulf these countries. Initially, the various newly installed governments of these Central Asian countries facilitated the building of mosques in order to restore the religion particularly Islam.

After dissolution of USSR, Islam emerged with three folded interpretations. One section of the society viewed Islam, as religion of rituals; other section represented Islam as socio-political and socio-Economic set up, and third section who were either supporters of Communist or secular ideologies. This section of society was the rulers. They viewed Islam as private affair. The second group remained more or less conflicted with the third one. While responding to the call of second group (sometimes called Fundamentalists, extremists or like names.) The various governments of these Central Asian countries facilitated the building of mosques to help restore religion, while trying to keep religious activity under state supervision. This course of action was followed in particular in the southern parts of Central Asia, namely Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and the Fergana Valley⁸.

This concise historical overview allows us to make three points with regard to Islam in Central Asia after the collapse of Soviet Union. First, although the Islamic teachings and learning were damaged under Soviet rule, the majority of the population's self-perception as Muslim was still intact. The consciousness of Islamic heritage is one of the determinants of Central Asian identity "even if a particular individual knew almost nothing about religion and observed none of its tenets⁹". Therefore Islam is an integral part of the identity of the majority of people in the region. Second, the religious revivalism which emerged in the 1980s, after a period of underground development is not foreign import. According to Roy, "It is the public appearance of a culture and a religious practice that never entirely disappeared¹⁰". Third the political movements. The networks of such movements existed under the Soviet Empire such as *Adolat* (Justice), *Tawba* (Repentance), and *Islam Lashkari* (Warriors of Islam) and re-emerged on the surface with the political reforms of the 1980s.¹¹

As one young man quoted regarding the revival of Islam, "All we have got (from the post-soviet secular order) is poverty, unemployment, strife and immorality all around. People need to be brought up properly. If we had Islamic laws here, we would have peace and order"¹²

Islamic movements in post-soviet central Asia could be categorized into two main groups according to their way of operation. Islamic revivalist groups can be defined as social movements based on their principles, organization and goals towards understanding of Islam as political reality. Radical Islamist groups aimed are to bring about a radical change in social, political and economic aspects of the region. While radical movements refuse to work within the established state institutions, not all of them favour violent methods to achieve their goals.

The main centres of Islamic revivalism and radical Islamic movements in Central Asia has been the Fergana Valley, a fertile and densely populated region with deeply religious residents. Uzbekistan remained the main centre of radical cum revival movements. Since independence Central Asia's former Soviet elite's have clung to power ruthlessly. Many leaders used the outbreak of the Tajik civil war in 1992 to justify the outlawing of all forms of political opposition. Islam Karimov, President of Uzbekistan epitomized this trend. Beginning in 1992, Karimov clamped down upon all forms of opposition. He has reserved all his ferocity for the Islamist opposition and all Muslims '....who practice their religion beyond the tight restrictions imposed by the government...' Since the bombing in Tashkent in 1997, the Uzbek regime has failed decisively answer the Islamists intellectually or politically, the regime has used mass arrests and torture in order to silence its critics. All the Central Asian regimes have reverted to the policies that the Soviet Union adopted in dealing with Islam. Each regime has sponsored a particular version of Islam which the state approves of and is non-threatening to the status quo.

III. Hizb ut-Tahrir al Islamiyya and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

The Hizb ut-Tahrir, set up by a Palestinian Islamic scholar and political activist, Taqiuddin an-Nabhani, in 1952, was a marginal group in most Muslim countries. Hizb ut-Tahrir combined many aspects of socialist party organization with a commitment to the creation of an Islamic state and the restoration of the original Islamic caliphate. Hizb ut-Tahrir sought to overthrow of all Muslim regimes, since they had failed to implement Islamic norms, and the unification of all Islamic countries in a recreation of the Caliphate, which was abolished in 1924

⁸Svante E. Cornell and R. A. Spector, "Central Asia: More than Islamic Extremists," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 1, winter 2002, Washington, D.C., pp. 193-206.

⁹Martha Brill Olcott, "Islam and Fundamentalism in Independent Central Asia" in Yaacov Ro'i (Ed.), *Muslim Eurasia: Conflicting Legacies*, (Portlan: F. Cass, 1995), p. 21.

¹⁰Olivier Roy. *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations*, p. 144.

¹¹Vitaly N. Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Between Pen and Rifle*, (New York: Rowman Publishers, 2005), p. 61.

¹²Fred Weir, "Islamic Gambit in Central Asia," *Christian Science Monitor* (19 July 2006).P.45

in Turkey by Mustafa Kamal Ataturk. Tactically, Hizb ut-Tahrir differentiated itself from other radical organizations; it did not join coalitions with other groups. The group officially rejects violence as a method and disregards military struggle for re-establishing the Caliphate.¹³ In 1996 and 1997, the Islamic party in Tajikistan choose nationalism over an international Islamic radicalism.

In Tajikistan's civil war, Islam was used for mobilization and legitimization. These groups were mobilized, they used Islam, and made certain Islamic demands such as making Muslim holidays into public holidays but it would be quite misleading to call it a religious conflict. The mullahs belonging to the regional groupings of northern Tajikistan and the other group, the Kolabis, who were in power and supplied the troops, did not support the Islamic Party because it was Islamic.

In Uzbekistan, an intense Islamic revival took place in Farghana Valley, a centre of resistance to Soviet rule in the 1920s and 1930s. During the transition to independence in 1991-1992, crime rose and security became an issue. Young men affiliated with unofficial mosques in the city of Andijan stepped into the vacuum to restore law and order. Eventually they developed into a movement called "Adl" (justice) and asked for Shariah laws. The government suppressed them. Several hundred ran away and joined the Islamic fighters in Tajikistan and eventually fought in Afghanistan, where they formed the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). But things were relatively quiet in Farghana.

Countering the Islamist threat has driven the government agenda of newly independent Central Asian republics since 1999 and the central focus of the government's response has been to suppression. The campaign against Islamic radicals is broadened to general curtailment of all religious activity that is not controlled by the central authority. On the other hand, enjoying their independence Central Asian leaders have demonstrated strong reluctance to becoming overly dependent on regional powers such as Russia and China, and regional security alliance such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) on their struggle with radical Islam. In addition unresolved disputes over borders, trade and natural resources such as water and gas hinder cooperation among the central Asian states themselves. What then, are the prospects for radical Islam in Central Asia? First, while some might argue that in the post 9/11 era Islamic militancy in Central Asia is in demise, the trajectory of groups like the HT and the IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) has laid the foundation for a trend that will likely persist. Especially given the fact that dissatisfaction with and opposition to authoritarian regimes and corrupt ruling are growing. Second, external factors such as "war on terror" in Afghanistan and regional instability have been and will continue to be substantial for the dynamics of Islamist mobilization in Central Asia. Finally it is clear that central authorities in the region are convinced that the iron fist is the best way to protect the stability and security of their country. This repression and consequential exclusion of Islamic groups from legitimate governmental procedures will continue to cause them to seek out different ways to express their grievances.

IV. Conclusion

In summation Central Asia republics have emerged with stability and prosperity after 9/11 episode. These Republics are presenting themselves domestically as well as internationally as front-line states in American-led war against terrorism. the Islamic radical movements and Islamic revivalist movements in the post-soviet Central Asia, were having two separate aims and objectives. The difference is only because of their approaches. Former wanted the abrupt change while later followed the moderate policy. By hook and crook the Republics ensure peace in their respective countries. The countries quickly get rid from civil wars and ensure intra and inter stability.

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¹³For more Hizb ut-Tahrir in Britain, "*The Method to Re-establish Khilafah and Resume Islamic Way of Life*", (London: Al-Khilafah Publications, 2000).