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## Islam and Security in the New States of Central Asia: How Genuine is the Islamic Threat?\*

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Since the breakup of the Soviet Union a strong tendency has emerged to refer to any form of public religious activity in the Muslim republics of Central Asia as a manifestation of 'religious fundamentalism', often described as 'Wahhabism'. Both terms are applied indiscriminately and have become completely meaningless, possessing only excessive emotional content.

In reality, the Islamic revival in Central Asia has two distinct aspects: social and political. The first is the return to Islam as a way of life and an important component of the people's identity. The second is the rise of political Islam (the emergence of Islamic parties; the appeal to Islam by the government and secular parties). Generally labelled as 'fundamentalism', political Islam includes many diverse tendencies. 'Wahhabism' is only one form of political Islam, and as I will try to show below it is a term which at best can be applied only tentatively.

In order to clarify which party or active Islamic group, if any, represents Wahhabi Islam in Central Asia, let us first investigate what 'Wahhabism' is in the broader Islamic context and how it relates to other forms of political Islamic movement.

### Wahhabi Islam and the Evolution of Political Islam in the Twentieth Century

The Wahhabi movement was the first modern religious political movement. It emerged and developed in Arabia in the eighteenth century. The ideological foundation was formulated by Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab (1703–92), after whom the movement became known as Wahhabiyya and the trend in Islam as Wahhabism. Abd al-Wahhab was one of the first modern religious thinkers who appealed to Islam as a political force capable of bringing the Muslim world out of a state of internal decline. Muslims were called upon to restore Islam in its original purity and to rid it of later innovations and practices, particularly those associated with Sufism. The extremist nature of the movement revealed itself in the fact that the Wahhabis divided the Muslim community into true Muslims and apostates, accused all those who did not uphold their agenda of being the enemies of Islam, and promoted violent means in the politico-religious struggle. This 'declassification' of the Muslim adversaries of the followers of Abd al-Wahhab allowed the latter to declare holy war against other Muslims, which in principle is not acceptable in Islam.<sup>1</sup> The clear and militant

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ideology of the Wahhabi movement united various Arabian tribes and brought them a number of military victories. The legacy of the Wahhabiyya as the ideological basis for tribal unification revealed itself when in 1925 it was declared the official form of Islam in the newly-formed Saudi Arabian Kingdom. Once officialised, Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia became a religious institution subordinate to the state. However, it never lost its revolutionary appeal and up to the present day is utilised as the ideology for religious opposition movements – including those in Saudi Arabia itself.

The Wahhabi movement was only one form of political and fundamental Islam, rather than an all-encompassing concept. In the nineteenth century Wahhabi revivalism was replaced by 'Islamic Reformation', which became the dominant form of political Islam at the time. Unlike Wahhabism, which had developed in the context of Islamic history, the nineteenth-century reformation emerged as a response to European pressure. The new generation of thinkers turned to Islam as the only force capable of safeguarding the Muslim community at a time of economic and political crisis. In so doing they also appealed to fundamental Islam, but interpreted it in different terms. They sought in Islam values that they deemed essential to European success. In doing so they became convinced that the success of European states rested on the strict supremacy of laws in their society. In the Islamic context the drive towards the legally-bound society became interpreted as the need strictly to follow the *sharia* laws as laid down in the Quran and Sunna, the two main sources of Islamic legislation.

The reformers argued that when the Muslim community was governed by lawful rulers (the Prophet Muhammed and later the four rightful khalifs) and was organised under Divine legislature (*sharia*) the Muslims were strong and victorious. In order to restore their former glory, therefore, Muslims must reaffirm the supremacy of *sharia* law in all spheres of public and private life. Unlike the Wahhabis the late nineteenth-century reformers did not call for violent political methods. They advocated co-operation with indigenous Muslim rulers in order to enlighten and guide them, and saw constitutional monarchy as the ideal political system.

The third stage in the reformist movement occurred in the twentieth century and is generally described as 'Salafiyya'. Unlike Wahhabism or Islamic Reformation, the new movement interpreted Islam as part of the national patriotic struggle for independence. Salafiyya was primarily concerned with the ethical and educational role of religion; it was a cultural and educational rather than a political endeavour. The adherents of Salafi ideology operated as welfare organisations and occupied themselves with education and providing assistance to the needy. In order to achieve their aims they first formed local groups that operated on the communal level. Later, in an attempt to achieve some degree of coordination amongst different local groups, the first political Muslim parties emerged (for example the Muslim Brethren in Egypt).

These early Muslim parties were political but not radical or extremist organisations. For a number of years (at least between 1950 and 1956) the Muslim Brethren in Egypt, for example, put social activities above political ones. They declared that the key weapons in their social struggle were faith and work. However, within a few years they had moved to the extreme wing of the political spectrum. From 1956 they turned to violent means: terrorist attacks, political assassinations, antiwestern activities.

The question whether this radicalisation was inevitable is highly speculative and is beyond the subject of this paper. Here it is sufficient to stress the fact that political radicalisation has not occurred in all parties of Muslim Brethren: the best example of

Muslim Brethren maintaining a moderate agenda is to be found in Jordan.<sup>2</sup>

It is vital to differentiate between various forms of political Islam when we look into the religious life of postsoviet Central Asia. While the ultimate goal of political Islam in general is to establish an 'Islamic state', different groups approach this task differently. Some see the way through education, ethical purification and welfare activities; some see it through democratic methods of political competition; while others appeal to violence as both permissible and the most efficient form of political struggle. Strictly speaking the term 'Wahhabism' can be applied only to political Muslim groups of the last category (that is, those who accept violent means for political struggle) and even then with a certain degree of historical generalisation.

### The Soviet Legacy in Central Asian Islam

If we accept the statement by Yaqob Ro'i that '... fundamentalism is by definition a reaction to secularism or secularization'<sup>3</sup> it becomes clear that in order to understand the nature and different forms of activation of Islam in postsoviet Central Asia it is essential to look at how Islam functioned in that region under Soviet rule.

The Bolsheviks saw religion as completely incompatible with communism and the Soviet state. Official policy aimed at its outright destruction. Shortly after their victory over the Islamic-led antisoviet resistance the Bolsheviks launched a massive onslaught on Islam. Mosques were closed, clergy arrested, religious schools and institutions outlawed, religious endowments confiscated. However, Islam proved to be impossible to crush. It continued to function at local level in the form of popular rites and festivals. The Bolsheviks had to recognise that despite persecution Islam was continuing to be an important social factor. Eventually they legalised Islam as a faith. In 1943 Stalin set up three Muslim Spiritual Directorates (including one for Central Asia). They were designed to function as 'transmission belts' between Moscow and the Muslim population. A limited number of mosques were registered and a small number of religious authorities trained in the two Islamic institutions (al-Bukhari and al-Tirmizi). However, the number of mosques and official clergy – 10–15 graduates from both institutes a year – was so minuscule that it could not satisfy the religious needs of the population. Moreover, from the very beginning the Spiritual Directorates became the functionaries of the state<sup>4</sup> and as such came to be distrusted by the local population.

Genuine religious activity was organised illegally within the so-called 'Parallel Islam', which functioned through a network of underground schools, mosques and structures of Sufi (mystical) orders centred around local sheikhs. In the late 1960s, and particularly in the 1970s, a powerful new trend emerged within Parallel Islam. A number of unofficial mullahs and religious thinkers began advocating the restoration of Islam in its original purity. This led to the formation of the communes of 'pure Islam'. Members of these communes called themselves *ahl al-Quran* – 'People of the Book' – and became known for their strict adherence to the sharia. The first communes of 'pure Islam' emerged in Uzbekistan in the villages around Tashkent and later spread to the Ferghana valley, to Osh, Andijan and Namangan. In 1978 'pure Islam' communes were also formed in Tajikistan.

In Uzbekistan the communes never formed a party. They were similar to the early Salafi groups and operated on the local level through the network of underground mosques and official and unofficial welfare institutions. In Tajikistan, however, the communes came to resemble an underground political party. The peak of their activity was the formulation of a letter to the CPSU Congress in Moscow, in which

they described the crisis in the Central Asian republics and listed the necessary reforms. The result was the arrest of most of their leading members for antisoviet propaganda. The rest went underground and continued to function in a way similar to their Uzbek counterparts through a network of unofficial mosques and schools in Kurgan-Tyube, Kulyab, the Gissar valley and Leninabad.<sup>5</sup>

By the end of Soviet rule in Central Asia Islam was functioning on three distinct levels: 'official' Islam, otherwise known as Communist or Soviet Islam; 'traditional' Islam, organised around unofficial clergy, both Sufi and non-Sufi; and 'reformist' Islam, which since the 1970s had become separate from both official and traditional Islam and can be seen as the first manifestation of the polarisation of Islam in Central Asia.

### **Postsoviet Islam: General Observations**

At the beginning of *perestroika* Gorbachev tried to demonstrate that communism could be compatible with religion. The Soviet Muslims saw this as an opportunity to legalise their religious practices and the institutions of Parallel Islam. The turn to Islam was universal, affecting all social and political groups. Ordinary people welcomed the opportunity to practise their faith freely without fear of persecution from the state. The largely secularised urban intelligentsia turned to Islam out of nationalist rather than religious motives and interpreted it as part of their national heritage. The representatives of official Islam tried to cross the gap between the state-sponsored institutions and those of popular Parallel Islam. At the same time they attempted to break loose from tight state control and reestablish official Islam as a genuinely religious authority. For those involved in Parallel Islam, including the reformist groups, liberalisation allowed them to legalise their activities.

The revival and polarisation of Islam in Central Asia took place on various levels, both social and political. On the political level it took several forms:

- (1) The emergence of the secular political parties that incorporated Islam in their agendas;
- (2) An appeal to Islam as the source of legitimation by local governments;
- (3) Attempts by official Islam to become an independent religious and political force; and
- (4) The emergence of politically active Islamic groups and parties within unofficial Islam and reformist Islam.

Although most Central Asian republics share many common features and tendencies in their religious and political life, the situation in each of them has developed differently. At the same time, the interdependence of Central Asian states makes it impossible to understand the dynamics of religious and political developments without addressing the region as a whole. What follows is an attempt to look into the main features of Islamic revival in five Central Asian states: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan.

### **Uzbekistan**

It makes sense to start with Uzbekistan. Several factors give Uzbekistan a central importance in the region. Uzbeks have traditionally been dominant there. All three khanates which existed in Central Asia prior to the Russian conquest were ruled by

Uzbek dynasties. After the redrawing of national boundaries in 1925, which erased the khanates, Uzbekistan emerged as the strongest of all the Central Asian republics.<sup>6</sup> It gained all the prize areas: the greater part of the fertile lands of the Ferghana valley; those ancient centres of Islamic civilisation, Bukhara and Samarkand, which were claimed by the Tajiks who traditionally formed the majority of the population in these cities; and Tashkent and the surrounding region, which were claimed by the Kazakhs. The Bolsheviks did not make a secret of their plans for Uzbekistan as the dominant regional power. In 1925, at the First Congress of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan in Tashkent, Mikhail Kalinin (a representative from Moscow) declared that 'Uzbekistan should relate to the rest of Central Asia as Moscow relates to Uzbekistan itself.'<sup>7</sup>

The central role of Uzbekistan was further enhanced when the Soviet authorities created a Central Spiritual Directorate for the Muslims of Central Asia. Its central headquarters were in Tashkent, the head mufti was always an Uzbek and Uzbeks consistently filled the highest official ranks. This was a reflection partly of the role of Uzbekistan as the regional power and partly of the high level of religiosity, which in Central Asia has traditionally been strongest among the Uzbeks and Tajiks, where Islam was the main source of communal identity and the basis of the political system.

Not surprisingly the Uzbeks were among the first to respond to religious liberalisation. In the late 1980s a wave of religious gatherings and demonstrations swept throughout the whole of Central Asia, and particularly in Namangan and Andijan, cities of the Uzbek Ferghana valley. These manifestations were not centrally coordinated, nor did they relate to the wider political contexts; they centred on demands for the return of old mosques and for permission to build new ones, for the legalisation of religious education and for freedom to practise religious rites and festivals. Local authorities were generally concerned at this spontaneous social activity and tried to curtail it. In 1989 there was a confrontation in Namangan between the authorities and Muslims demanding the return of a mosque which for decades had been a wine store.<sup>8</sup>

One of the focal points of popular protest were corrupt officials in the Spiritual Directorate. The first major religious demonstration in Uzbekistan was against the acting mufti Babakhan (from a dynasty of religious authorities with direct links to the Naqshbandi order), who was accused of corruption and a decadent life-style. In this atmosphere, some in the Directorate made attempts to bridge the gap between them and ordinary Muslims and to reestablish the Directorate as a truly religious institution. In 1989 Babakhan was replaced by Muhammad Yusup, a native of the Ferghana valley and a man generally respected for his knowledge of Islam by both official and unofficial religious groups.

Initially Karimov, the new Uzbek leader, allowed the muftiate to act as a relatively independent political force, accepting and cooperating with Yusup. This was to a large extent because of the initial weakness of his political position. In order to broaden the logistical base for his rule he needed to acquire Islamic credentials. However, once he had consolidated his power, by the spring of 1992, Karimov set out to undermine his political competitors. A representative of the secularised Soviet *nomenklatura*, and generically suspicious of Islam, Karimov certainly identified it as the main challenge to his power.

Two main developments seemed to play the major role in increasing Karimov's inbuilt distrust. One was the growing independence of the Spiritual Directorate: it was rapidly becoming a significant political player, with wide public support and an independent financial base (based on religious taxation and voluntary donations).

When Yusup openly criticised Karimov and declared himself a candidate in the 1991 presidential elections it became clear that the mufti had high political ambitions. Shortly after his election as the Uzbek president, Karimov made a first attempt to force Yusup out of office. To his dismay, the meeting which was designed to discredit Yusup led to an unprecedented demonstration of loyalty towards the mufti. Numerous respected religious authorities kissed the hand of the young Yusup and gave him a ceremonial oath of loyalty (*bayat*).

Karimov was further alerted to the 'Islamic threat' when in 1992 the Islamic/Democratic opposition gained power in neighbouring Tajikistan. It seems that this was the last straw, prompting him to immediate action. He was quick to interfere in the Tajik conflict and provided direct assistance (military and financial) to the communist opposition. At home he resumed his pressure on Yusup and in 1993 finally managed to force him to retire 'at his own request'. Shortly afterwards Yusup emigrated to Saudi Arabia and the muftiate fell under direct governmental control. The current mufti, Mukhtarjan Abdulla, follows a strictly progovernmental line and does not allow himself any criticism of Karimov's policies. The subordination of the muftiate, however, is a double-edged blessing for the government. By virtue of becoming an instrument of government policy it has lost its appeal among the faithful and is becoming increasingly marginalised from genuine religious life in the republic.

### *Islamic Political Parties and Organisations in Uzbekistan*

#### *The Islamic Renaissance Party*

The first Islamic political party was the all-union Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP). It was formed by representatives of various illegal Muslim groups, including the communes of pure Islam that had emerged during the 1970s.<sup>9</sup> All of them aimed at the purification of Islam and furthering the knowledge of 'true Islam' among Soviet Muslims. However, they had different ideas regarding the place of Islam in society and adhered to different models of Islamic states. From the very first days of its existence, therefore, the IRP lacked a comprehensive ideology and a coherent internal structure. Furthermore, it was dominated by Dagestani Avars and by Tatars, who had different views from their Central Asian counterparts.

The Soviet authorities in all the Central Asian republics treated the IRP with great suspicion and distrust. Although the party succeeded in holding local congresses and registered local branches it had to do so in an atmosphere of secrecy and in defiance of the local authorities. In Uzbekistan the party was registered in February 1991 at a congress attended by 300 deputies.<sup>10</sup> Immediately after registration the party was declared illegal by the local authorities. Karimov used the occasion of the government campaign against the IRP to undermine any other forces that might promote the establishment of Islam on the political level. Karimov accuses every active Islamic group, particularly members of *ahl al-Quran*, of association with the IRP. It appears that to a certain extent the party did indeed originally endorse ideas first propagated by the Islamic reformers. However, even if a link between the Islamic groups and the IRP did exist, it was on the ideological rather than the structural or political level.

Despite the big issue made by the Uzbek authorities out of the IRP, it was a rather moderate force. While the Soviet Union still existed the IRP argued against its dissolution and openly supported Gorbachev's policies. Within a few years after the disintegration of the Soviet Union the IRP ceased to be an all-union party and in 1994 was not even reregistered. It remains unclear in what form, if any, it exists in present-day Uzbekistan.

### *The Adolat Movement*

In 1991 the Muslims of the Ferghana valley organised brigades of volunteers to patrol the area. Their leaders were both secular and religious, but they were all based on Islamic ideology. The members of the brigade called Adolat (Justice) declared that their ultimate goal was to establish a 'just Islamic state'. They saw their immediate tasks as suppressing growing criminality, establishing control over rising costs in the markets and rendering assistance to the poorest members of society. The Adolat brigades proved highly effective: in the areas they policed the cost of food fell and the level of criminality sharply declined. These successes boosted the popularity of the Adolat brigades throughout the Ferghana valley: within months some 60 brigades had emerged, with a total membership of 8000–10,000. Adolat was soon at the forefront of political life in Uzbekistan. In 1992 it was listed as one of the main political forces alongside the secular opposition parties Erk and Birlik.

The politicisation of the Adolat movement revealed itself in 1992 when its members sent a list of demands to President Karimov. The most important of these were: the official recognition of the Adolat brigades as local police forces; the handing over to Adolat of the former Communist Party regional office in Namangan; the declaration of Islam as the official religion of Uzbekistan; and the official registration of the IRP. This last demand allowed Karimov to make a direct link between the two forces. The appeal was signed by the imams of mosques in Namangan, Andijan and Kokand, which means that the movement represented the Muslims of the whole Ferghana valley.

In response to the appeal Karimov visited the region, made immediate concessions by handing over the former Communist Party building, and promised to put the issue of the official status of Islam on the agenda. On his return to Tashkent, however, he issued a decree which banned Adolat formations and launched a campaign of religious persecution against the movement's leaders.

Ironically, but not surprisingly, this persecution served only to boost the popularity of Adolat and increased the general respect for its leaders. Even after the ban on its activity Adolat has continued to exist in a covert way. It trains its members at local sports clubs and provides religious education for children.

It is not surprising that Adolat did not try to become a party. The concept of western-style political parties is by and large alien to traditional Islamic societies. Adolat is powerful as an integral part of traditional Islamic social structure. It operates within *mahalla* Islam, which is centred on a district or neighbourhood in a town or village and forms the nucleus of local Uzbek society. Such neighbourhood communities have for centuries been centred on the mosque, where religious festivals are celebrated but also where the elders (representatives of each family) and religious authorities hold councils and dispense justice. These structures survived Soviet administrative reforms. Unable to crush the self-organisation of Uzbek society, the Soviet authorities had to incorporate it into their administrative system.

### *Other Muslim Parties in Uzbekistan*

Other Muslim parties in Uzbekistan are hardly representative and require only brief description.

Taub-e (Repentance) was formed shortly after Adolat was declared illegal, mainly by former criminals who had turned to God. Its political agenda was extremely radical. It aimed at establishing an Islamic state under the strict supremacy of God and advocated any means, including violent struggle. The mass antireligious

campaign launched by Karimov in 1993 led to the arrest of most of its members and at present it is neither numerous nor influential.

Khizb Allah is another Muslim party that operates illegally in Uzbekistan. Founded in 1990, it declared its aim as the establishment of a sharia-based constitution. From the very beginning it served the political ambitions of its founder, Ergashev, and was hardly a genuine political force. It never had more than 300 members and a very limited appeal.

The Islamic Party of Turkestan is a Muslim party with regional claims. It was founded by a small circle of Uzbek intellectuals who aimed at the creation of a united Turkmenistan under Uzbek leadership. Islam was to form the backbone of this pan-Turkic state. The party was very small and virtually disappeared shortly after its creation.

### *Secular Parties in Uzbekistan and their Appeal to Islam*

Islamic ideas form an integral part of the programmes of the secular Uzbek opposition parties. There is a direct link between the democratic nationalist secular movement Birlik and the Islamic Renaissance Party: at one time the chairman of both was Abdurahim Pulatov. The official position of Birlik was that it did not endorse the IRP's agenda but supported its right to exist. This declaration alarmed the Uzbek government, which feared a possible coalition between Islamists and democrats similar to the one that had developed in Tajikistan. As a result Karimov declared the Birlik movement illegal as well.

### *Appeals to Islam at Governmental Level*

In the early years of his presidency Karimov had to make certain concessions to the Islamic identity of his state. He swore the presidential oath on the Quran and shortly afterwards, in April 1992, undertook the *haj*. However, his consistent attempts to crush any form of Islamic activity outside state control have deprived him of any Islamic credentials. In fact his religious policy is a direct continuation of Soviet policy. The Uzbek government attributes all terrorist acts, of which there has been no shortage in recent years, to the Islamists, and uses this ploy to justify its onslaught on independent religious institutions.<sup>11</sup> Forcing Islam into the underground proved totally ineffective in Soviet times and is likely to be just as fruitless now. As in Soviet times, people pack the official mosques on Fridays and holidays, while for everyday purposes as well as mahallah self-administration they gather in private homes. Karimov's current policy thus seems to be totally counterproductive. Far from bringing Islamic institutions safely under state control, it leads to growing discontent and the dissociation of local government from society, and creates a broad base for the opposition. In a country which lacks the tradition of political parties and developed democratic institutions any popular discontent is bound to be expressed within the Islamic movement.

### **Tajikistan**

Despite its small size and mountainous terrain, Tajikistan is one of the most important components in the religious complexion of the region and holds the key to an understanding of the tendencies within political Islam in Central Asia as a whole. It is the only country where official and unofficial forms of Islam have merged into a

united and dominant political force. Alongside the generally weaker and less numerous democratic parties, the Islamic Renaissance Party initially formed a strong opposition front and later ousted the communist government (May 1992). This event to a considerable degree shaped the religious policy of other Central Asian rulers, who saw it as a dangerous precedent and a direct political threat.

Although widely presented as a takeover by Islamic fundamentalists, the rise to power of an Islamic-led opposition had many stimuli other than religious ones and hence should be interpreted against both religious and secular backgrounds.

Developments within the official Islamic establishment in Tajikistan were generally along the same lines as elsewhere in Central Asia. The new mufti of Tajikistan (elected in 1990), Kazi Akbar Turajonzade, was a figure similar to Mama Yusup. He was educated within the official establishment, but his learning and his Islamic way of life gave him a wide appeal among Tajik believers and the leaders of illegal Islam. Like Yusup, Turajonzade was initially against the formation of Islamic political parties, seeing his main task as reconciliation between traditional and official Islam. He supported Gorbachev and the idea of the Soviet Union in a trade-off for official recognition of Islam by the 'reformed' communist leaders.

The situation changed after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. When after independence Turajonzade was faced with the dilemma whether to put the muftiate under the control of the local Tajik government or to allow further polarisation of Islam, he opted for the latter. With his supporters he formed a coalition with the democratic opposition and actively involved himself in the political struggle, which led them to power in the autumn of 1992.

It is impossible to understand this power struggle if it is viewed exclusively in terms of political preferences – democracy, Islam or communism. The puzzle of alliances and enmities becomes clear only if seen through the prism of regional differences and inherent tensions. In this respect, the Tajik example is indicative of the kind of time-bombs that exist throughout Central Asia.

### *The Issue of Regionalism*

Of all Central Asian states Tajikistan is, perhaps, the most artificial formation. It was created by the Bolsheviks as an enclave for the diverse Persian-speaking peoples, but in effect it lumped together distinct groups, which to the present day have not developed into a coherent nation and have preserved their independent identities. There are several distinct geographical regions, with their own distinctive populations. Eastern Tajikistan (the Pamir region) makes up about half the country as the region of Gorno-Badakhshan. The population is Ismaili Shia and speaks a distinct language. Northwestern Tajikistan (the region of Leninabad and Khujand) is populated by Uzbeks, and indeed was part of Uzbekistan from 1925 to 1929. South-western Tajikistan contains two distinctive subregions: Kulyab and Kurgan Tyubeh.

All Soviet party and administrative officials originated from the economically more developed Leninabad region. When the Soviet Union disintegrated there was an inter-clan power struggle. The multiple political parties formed in Tajikistan turned out to be little more than representations of regional divisions. The 'democrats' mostly represented the Pamir, Garm and Karategin regions, the Islamists Kurgan Tyube, and the communists Leninabad and Kulyab. Viewed through the prism of regionalism, the civil war emerges as essentially a rebellion of the less developed and strongly Islamic south against the more urbanised and modernised pro-Uzbek and pro-Russian north.

The importance of the Tajik civil war in religious terms lies in its manifestation of the great mobilising potential of Islam. It showed clearly how economic, social and regional conflicts can easily attain religious overtones, and conversely, how once Islam is mobilised as an ideological framework for social or economic movements, the various domestic conflicts can attain a universalised appeal and generate a considerable following. Their Islamic ideology won for the various opposition groups assistance at various levels from other Islamic countries including Afghanistan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

### **Kazakhstan**

Like Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan puts forward claims to regional hegemony. The foundation for its claim is very different from that of Uzbekistan, however. It is largely associated with the size of Kazakh territory and the relatively high degree of modernisation, which to a considerable degree accounts for a less pronounced role for Islam in its social and political life.

Unlike the Uzbeks and Tajiks, the Kazakhs have never seen Islam as a way of life or a source of communal identity. The only region where Islam is comparatively strong is the southern area bordering on Uzbekistan, which in the past experienced political domination by the Uzbeks, and even there Islamic identity takes second place to tribal identity. Overall, Islam in Kazakhstan has revealed itself as an integral part of the national heritage, rather than an independent political force.

### *Official Islam*

As in all Central Asian republics apart from Uzbekistan, the emancipation of official Islam was intricately linked to its 'nationalisation'. In the immediate aftermath of the disintegration of the Soviet Union the Central Spiritual Directorate for the Muslims of Central Asia became accountable to the Uzbek government rather than Moscow. This was totally unacceptable both to Central Asian national leaders and to local Muslim authorities. Throughout Central Asia Muslim clergy tried to break away from Uzbek domination, while the national administrations sought to put religious institutions under their own direct control.

In Kazakhstan President Nazyrbayev immediately brought the local muftiate under his direct control. This was possible partly because of the weakness of unofficial Islam in Kazakhstan and the absence of local independent Muslim leaders like Yusup or Turajonzade. Thus when in 1990 the Kazakh muftiate broke with the Uzbek Spiritual Directorate and established itself as an independent institution Nazyrbayev in effect appointed its first mufti, Ratbek Nasyrbay (Nasyrbayev). It is hardly surprising that the Kazakh muftiate has never been able to assert a truly religious identity and act as an independent force. However, the possible negative effects of the weakness of the Kazakh muftiate are to a considerable degree neutralised by the lack of social basis for religious opposition.

### *Islamic Political Parties*

The only Islamic party nominally present in Kazakhstan is the IRP. It was, however, registered by a mere five members and now allegedly numbers no more than a meagre 15 members, all of whom live in Chimkent.<sup>12</sup>

*Secular Parties in Kazakhstan and their Appeal to Islam*

Political life in Kazakhstan can best be understood in terms of the tribal division of Kazakh society. Three tribal associations are dominant: the Elder Juz comprising 11 tribes in southern Kazakhstan; the Middle Juz, comprising 12 tribes which traditionally lived in central and eastern Kazakhstan; and the Younger Juz, comprising three tribes which traditionally lived in western and northern Kazakhstan. The political parties active in Kazakhstan largely operate within and express the interests of a particular clan. The 'party of government' has always been that of the Elder Juz. The Middle Juz are the source of the local intelligentsia, and provide the basis for the Alash Party (the party of the intellectuals) and to a certain extent for the communist opposition. The Younger Juz were always on the margins of the political map. They were the main social base for communism, but once the Bolsheviks came to power they were supplanted by the Elder Juz. The Parasat (Wisdom) Party consists almost exclusively of members of the Younger Juz. It demands greater autonomy for north-western Kazakhstan (the location of the Mangyshlak oil deposit) and quotas on oil extraction and sturgeon fishing. The north is the most secular part of Kazakhstan; Parasat does not put forward any religious demands, and Islam is completely absent from its political identity.

The only party in Kazakhstan which has religious overtones is Alash. Its ultimate aim is the creation of a pan-Turkic state in Turkestan where Islam will be the official religion. Alash argues against local nationalism and aspires to restore the pan-Turkic and pan-Islamic identities of the Central Asian peoples (its programme is similar to that of the strictly secular party of Abdulfaz Elchibey in Azerbaijan). As an immediate demand in the religious sphere it calls for the recognition of Islam as the state religion and the establishment of the Kazakh muftiate as an independent institution. On these grounds Alash clashed with the Kazakh authorities over the appointment of Nasynbay. In retaliation Nazyrbayev had leading members of Alash arrested. The founder of the party, Atabek, was forced to emigrate; he first moved to Moscow and later applied successfully for status as a political refugee in Azerbaijan, thus becoming the first political refugee within the former Soviet Union. In 1993 the activities of Alash almost ceased and in 1994 it split into two sections. One accepted cooperation with the procommunist and Russian-oriented opposition; the other kept true to pan-Turkic and pan-Islamic ideas. The social base of Alash is extremely limited. It has appeal only among intellectuals in Almaty and some southern cities.

It is not only its limited social base that makes Alash a highly unlikely candidate for power. Its vision of a united Turkestan led by the Kazakh nation is unacceptable to both government and opposition in Uzbekistan, united as they are by all-Uzbek claims to hegemony in Central Asia. Meanwhile the Turkmens and Kyrgyz also appear to be uninspired by the prospect of becoming a minority in a united Turkestan. Furthermore, at least in the immediate future, any attempts to alter the geopolitical map of Central Asia are likely to encounter fierce international resistance from all, including Russia and the USA.

*Appeals to Islam at Governmental Level*

Even in predominantly secular Kazakhstan the president has had to make concessions to the Islamic identity of the Kazakh population. Albeit the last of the Central Asian leaders to do so, he has undertaken the haj, and has made public appearances at religious ceremonies. He also sponsors the construction of mosques and has

funded the Islamic Institute in Almaty. The latter serves geopolitical rather than purely religious ends. Along with the two previously existing institutions of higher religious learning in Kazakhstan, the Islamic Institute seeks to put an end to the religious domination of Uzbekistan and to cater for indigenous religious cadres.

### **Kyrgyzstan**

In the context of political Islam the main importance of Kyrgyzstan is associated with the situation in the Ferghana valley, where in the Osh region the population is over 50 per cent Uzbek. Apart from this region, Kyrgyzstan is the most homogenous and stable of all the Central Asian states (alongside Turkmenistan). Islam has never been a dominant force nor the source of social or political identity.

The present-day religious situation in Kyrgyzstan thus has two dimensions. Like that of their Kazakh neighbours, to whom the Kyrgyz are closely related,<sup>13</sup> the Kyrgyz social structure is dominated by the tribal factor. The Kyrgyz tribes have greater coherence than the Kazakh tribes, however, and have come close to the development of a modern national identity. The differences amongst tribes are economic – the north is more developed than the south – rather than ethnic or clan-based (as in Kazakhstan). This coherence is to a great extent responsible for political stability in the republic. The second dimension, which complicates the socio-political and religious structure of Kyrgyzstan, is the presence of the significant Uzbek population in the southern Osh region. Traditionally part of the Uzbek-dominated Ferghana valley, the Osh region constitutes a distinct entity and its religious situation is characterised by the tendencies found in Uzbekistan, particularly in the Namangan and Andijan regions of the Ferghana valley.

### *The Kyrgyz Adolat*

The boundaries drawn by the Bolsheviks (1924–25) divided the Ferghana valley – the most fertile and the most deeply islamised area in the whole of Central Asia – between three states, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. However, the persistence of traditional forms of social organisation and the continuing identification of the local people along family, clan and regional lines mean that to the present day the Ferghana valley is a coherent region with a common social structure and ethnic composition (the dominant ethnic group throughout being the Uzbeks).

In the Kyrgyz Ferghana valley (Osh region) Adolat brigades appeared shortly after they had been formed in Uzbekistan. It is not clear, however, whether the Kyrgyz brigades were an offshoot of the Uzbek ones, as Kyrgyz officials claim, or whether they were totally unrelated, as members of the Kyrgyz Adolat themselves insist. The same name and similar tasks certainly point to common ground between them, but there are hardly any indications of structural subordination of the Osh group to the Uzbek group.

For the Kyrgyz government the emergence of Adolat is not merely a religious threat. President Akayev has rightly seen the emergence of an ideologically united movement in the whole of the Ferghana valley as a potential threat to Kyrgyz integrity. Certainly the valley provides plenty of potential for regional destabilisation. One of the most socially coherent areas in the region, it is also unique in economic terms: not only is it the most fertile area in the whole of Central Asia, but in the Uzbek part there are considerable oil deposits, which might prompt attempts to break away as an independent region. Alternatively, if a different government comes to

power in Uzbekistan the population of the Kyrgyz side of the valley might start agitating to join Uzbekistan. Should a movement for political unification develop, it would undoubtedly be organised according to Islamic ideology. For the time being, however, the Kyrgyz and Uzbek presidents are acting in unison against the Islamic activists of the valley, and have signed an agreement to this effect.

### *Official Islam*

When religious liberalisation began the qadi of Kyrgyzstan, Sadigjan Kamalov, advocated reforms and forged an alliance with the Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan (DDK). After Akayev was elected president in 1990 both the DDK and Kamalov, now the mufti of Kyrgyzstan, endorsed the new president and his government. For his part Akayev extended his financial and political support to the muftiate and fostered close links with Kamalov himself. Apart from personal cooperation, Akayev demonstrated his adherence to Islamic identity by encouraging the reestablishment of Muslim institutions and practices. In 1992 he sponsored a showy new Islamic centre on the central square in Bishkek which was designed to highlight the government's Islamic credentials.

However, the politicisation and radicalisation of Islam in Osh, combined with the psychological effects of the Tajik civil war on the Central Asian rulers, have instilled in the Kyrgyz government a fear of Islam as an independent political force. An additional factor that has to a certain extent upset the relationship between state and religion was Kamalov's open support for the Islamic-Democratic movement in Tajikistan. Although the Kyrgyz muftiate was dominated by ethnic Kyrgyz rather than by Uzbeks from Osh, Akayev accused Kamalov of close association with the Muslims of the Fergana valley and in 1993 forced him to resign.

### *Political Parties*

Islam features to a limited extent in the programmes of the regional parties, such as Erkin and Asaba, which call for the recognition of Islam as the official religion. However, apart from the special situation in the Fergana valley, there are no serious religious groups or parties.

With the exception of the Osh region, Kyrgyzstan is one of the most stable political formations (after Turkmenistan), with a virtually democratic political system. Islam is interpreted largely in the context of national identity and national heritage and represents an independent and potentially disruptive political force only in the Osh region.

### **Turkmenistan**

The Turkmen tribes were the most profoundly Islamicised of all the formerly nomadic tribes of Central Asia. Islam has not revealed itself as an independent political force in Turkmenistan, however, and is unlikely to do so. This is partly due to the internal stability of the state. The Turkmen (alongside the Kyrgyz) are the most coherent nation in the region. The borders of the republic by and large correspond to those of the territories traditionally populated by the Turkmen tribes, all of whom have the same level of religiosity (unlike the situation in Kazakhstan).

The merging of national and religious institutions started immediately after the breakup of the Soviet Union. President Niyazov works continuously at the incor-

poration of Islam into the new Turkmen patriotism. As a gesture towards full recognition of the Islamic identity of Turkmenistan, Niyazov was the first local leader to undertake the haj (in 1992). He later organised an 'Islamic Council', Gengeshi, manned by his loyal followers, incorporated into the governmental structure and under direct financial and administrative state control. The heads of religious councils receive state salaries and all foreign assistance is channelled through the qadiate.

The state also effectively controls religious education by including it in the state school curriculum and sponsoring Quranic evening classes in local mosques. Reportedly, Niyazov likes to say that it does not matter what people study as long as they are taught by loyal teachers. In line with this thinking the government has sponsored the opening of a theology faculty at the state university and is building numerous imposing mosques.

### *Political Parties*

There are no secular or religious political parties registered in Turkmenistan. To some extent this fact reflects the dictatorial tendencies of the Turkmen leader, but can also be attributed to a relatively low level of political activism among the population. Niyazov seems to have struck a balance between different tribal groups that compose the Turkmen nation.<sup>14</sup>

Religious political activity is largely confined to competition among the local mullahs (for example, the imam of Ashghabat mosque in opposition to the qadi Nasrullah Ibadullah) and has no apparent overall political connotations.

In a country where no political parties are allowed to function Islam and Islamic institutions provide the only vehicle for the articulation of dissatisfaction with state policies. In 1995, for example, a demonstration brought about by food shortages was organised from the Azadi mosque in Ashghabat. It would, however, be overstating the case to see such events as a sign of the rise of Islam as an independent political force.

The combination of social coherency, low levels of religiosity and careful governmental religious policy makes Turkmenistan the only country in Central Asia free from any threat of Islamic opposition in both the near and distant future.

### **The International Islamic Context**

It is impossible to discuss political Islam in Central Asia without taking account of the outside forces involved in the region. Although political Islam is largely a home-grown phenomenon, there is always the possibility that other powers might be interested in pushing it in a more radical and fundamentalist direction. The most important actual and potential players here are Iran, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

#### *Iran*

Iran's potential support of religious movements in Central Asia has been checked by its attempts to reestablish its own international credentials. The Iranian government has been carefully constructing a neutral image in respect to the religious and political situation in Central Asia. On the other hand, Iran views with growing alarm the increasing involvement of Saudi Arabia, its main religious rival, in the religious life of Central Asian Muslims.

### *Saudi Arabia*

It appears that Saudi Arabia is one of the key countries that has been fostering links with the Islamic political activists of Central Asia. It established its influence in the area immediately after the end of communist power, donating considerable sums for the promotion of religious education, the construction of mosques and the provision of religious literature. Most of this money (allegedly around \$60 million in total) was channelled through Saudi banks operating within the representative structure of the Islamic Conference Organisation. There is also evidence that the Saudis have been actively involved in providing other forms of assistance in religious education and military training, although it is difficult to ascertain how extensive this has been.

### *Afghanistan*

Afghanistan is certainly one of the key players in the security of the whole Central Asian region. The fact that it plays an important role in furthering political Islam is also indisputable. However, the degree to which it is instrumental in backing the Islamic groups in Central Asia is far from clear and tends to be grossly exaggerated by the local governments.

Officials in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Moscow have constantly pointed to Afghanistan as the main source of support, if not the very *raison d'être*, for political Islam in Central Asia. To support this view they cite cross-boundary migration between Tajikistan and Afghanistan as a sign of the military involvement of Afghans in the Tajik civil war, cross-boundary arms trade between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, and the existence of military training camps in north Afghanistan, where Islamic guerrilla fighters are being trained for terrorist activities.

It will be useful to address each of these accusations separately.

In respect of the first point, it should be said that the partly opened borders between the two countries have certainly allowed the Islamic-led Tajik opposition to cross freely into Afghanistan, where they have been able to rest and regroup. Afghanistan has also been the destination for an estimated 60,000–70,000 Tajik refugees. According to the UN High Commission for Refugees some 3000–5000 of them have formed armed groups with some degree of aid from Afghani mujaheddins and have staged cross-boundary raids. Other refugees have provided a fertile ground for missionary activities to various Islamic political groups from Afghanistan and other Muslim countries, which must have contributed to the strengthening and politicising of their Islamic identity. There is also evidence that Afghan citizens – allegedly several hundred – have crossed into Tajik territory. Undoubtedly some of them have done so in order to join the Islamic opposition. However, it seems that the majority of these migrants have been ethnic Tajik refugees fleeing from the Taliban, or even former communists fleeing to Russia via Tajikistan.

I would argue therefore that the importance of Afghanistan lies in its geographical proximity to the newly-independent Central Asian states, its ethnic composition (with a mixed Tajik, Uzbek and Pushtun population) and its historical links with the region rather than in the physical involvement of Afghans in Central Asian affairs. The consolidation of power in the hands of the Taliban has caused considerable migration of ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks into the respective Central Asian states, and is likely to continue to do so. This migration of a relatively highly religious rural population might well change the secular–religious balance in the populations of the host countries.

As to the role of Afghanistan in supplying the region with arms, its importance seems to be somewhat exaggerated. No more than 10 per cent of the total number of arms in Tajikistan has come from trade with Afghanistan. Moreover, those arms that have arrived have tended to be old and far inferior to those readily available from the Russians.

The issue of training camps and the role played by Afghanistan in installing them seems as important as it is unclear. It has been repeatedly claimed – and it is possible now to say with some credibility – that there exists a number of military camps in northern Afghanistan, heavily subsidised mainly by Saudi and Pakistani money, that are designed to provide politically active Islamic groups with access to military training and sophisticated weaponry. The number of those who have received training in these camps, however, seems to be grossly exaggerated. The claim made by the Uzbek government that between 3000 and 5000 members of the Islamic Renaissance Party have received terrorist training in these camps appears to be totally out of proportion. Even more difficult to verify is the existence of ‘underground military bases’ on the territory of the Central Asian states themselves.

### *Pakistan*

The involvement of Pakistan seems to be largely mediated by Afghanistan and confined to monetary and logistic support for the Islamic groups in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

### **Concluding Remarks**

With the exception of Tajikistan, no Central Asian country has any registered Islamic political parties. This is not, however, an indication of a lack of Islamic political activity. In societies which have no tradition of political parties Islam manifests itself at official government level, at local community level, and within the secular opposition.

The majority of unofficial groups are of the Salafi rather than the Wahhabi type. It appears, moreover, that fundamentalist tendencies have so far been confined to individuals. With a certain degree of financial and logistical support from abroad these individuals may in the future lay the foundation for the emergence of more coherent and politically active Islamic groups. Their rise to prominence will, however, be determined by the domestic situation in each of the Central Asian states and the general stability of the region as a whole.

Taking all these factors into account, Uzbekistan and the predominantly Uzbek-populated Osh region of Kyrgyzstan should be evaluated as the most unstable of all the Central Asian regions (apart from Tajikistan), with Islam providing the organisational and ideological framework for the opposition. In Kazakhstan political Islam exists only nominally and presents no serious threat to the existing political system; only the southern regions provide some ground for the development of political Islam. Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan (with the exception of the Osh region) seem to be least prone to any religious social and political excesses.

### **Notes and References**

<sup>1</sup> Classical Islam divides the world into *dar al-Islam*, the domain of Islam, and *dar al-harb*, the domain of war. The waging of war within *dar al-harb* in order to ensure its islamisation

tion was one of the most praiseworthy religious activities. War within *dar al-Islam*, by contrast, was explicitly forbidden.

- <sup>2</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the development of different forms of political Islam see Yusef Choueiri, *Islamic Fundamentalism* (London and Washington, 1997).
- <sup>3</sup> Yaqob Ro'i, 'The secularization of Islam and the USSR's Muslim areas', in *idem* (ed.), *Muslim Eurasia: Conflicting Legacies* (Frank Cass, London, 1995), pp. 5–20, here p. 5.
- <sup>4</sup> Yaqob Ro'i gives examples of striking official fatwas issued by the state-sponsored Muslim leadership prohibiting such key Muslim rituals as paying *zakat*, on the grounds that it was obsolete in the socialist environment, and fasting during Ramadan, which was declared unnecessary since Soviet Muslims were conducting 'warfare for the future of communism' and should not have to jeopardise their health by this exhausting practice. See Ro'i, *op. cit.*, pp. 10–11.
- <sup>5</sup> For further information on *ahl al-Quran* and the 'pure Islam' communes see Aleksei Malashenko, *Islamskoye vozrozhdeniye v sovremennoi Rossii* (Moscow Carnegie Center, Moscow, 1998).
- <sup>6</sup> For a fascinating description of the Soviet policy of national delimitation and the emergence of the new Central Asian republics see Donald S. Carlisle, 'Geopolitics and ethnic problems of Uzbekistan and its neighbours', in Ro'i (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 71–105.
- <sup>7</sup> Quoted from Carlisle, *op. cit.*, p. 77.
- <sup>8</sup> On this incident see Malashenko, *op. cit.*, p. 64.
- <sup>9</sup> On the IRP see Malashenko, *op. cit.*, ch. 3.
- <sup>10</sup> The chairman of the party was Abdulla Uta, and the cochairman Abdurahim Pulatov, who was also cochairman of Birlik, the secular nationalist party.
- <sup>11</sup> Thus in the wake of the murders of policemen in Namagan in 1996, which were attributed to members of Adolat, the government closed most 'new mosques'. It also began putting administrative pressure on the 'old mosques' – those dominated by mullahs appointed by the official muftiate – and as a result large numbers of these failed the registration procedure and were closed.
- <sup>12</sup> Malashenko, *op. cit.*, p. 76.
- <sup>13</sup> The Kazakhs and Kyrgyz were artificially separated by the Soviet authorities in the 1920s on the basis of differences in the local dialect but with the real aim of hampering their unification to produce a larger and stronger nation.
- <sup>14</sup> Turkmen society comprises nine tribes, of which two, the Iomud and the Tekke, together represent 90 per cent of the total population and have traditionally dominated political life in the republic. Niyazov, who formally belongs to the Tekke clan, has been distanced from it by his childhood upbringing in a state orphanage. He is therefore seen as being outside any clan division. The Tekke dominate the administration, but members of the Iomud clan hold key positions in the economy: the minister for oil and gas is a Iomud.

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