

Islam in Soviet Central Asia: Renaissance or Revolution?

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In the five Soviet republics of traditionally Islamic Central Asia,¹ the year 1989 witnessed a dramatic *volte-face* in official policy toward religion. The 'militant atheism' which characterised the first seven decades of Soviet rule gave way to a new attitude that now goes beyond mere tolerance, to one more closely resembling veneration. Indeed, Islam has been elevated almost to the position of a state religion on this territory the size of the Indian subcontinent whose 40 million inhabitants belong mostly to demographically robust, historically Muslim indigenous groups. Yet the serenity of this Islamic rebirth is marred by the background of a region that is deeply troubled by economic misery and societal conflict.

Today, after many years of religious persecution and neglect, old mosques are being renovated and new ones built with public funds. In the spring of 1990, more than 300 registered mosques were said to be active in Uzbekistan with an uncounted, but probably still much larger, number of unregistered local mosques. In Tajikistan, whose population is only one-fourth the size of Uzbekistan's, the number of unregistered mosques was reported to be 1,500². (*Glasnost*' has brought new revelations about the extent of mosque closures and persecutions of clergy in the early Soviet period: between 1917 and 1930, five-sixths of the Soviet Union's 12,000 mosques were shut down, and 'some 90 to 97 per cent' of mullahs and muezzins were kept from performing their functions, mainly because they had been executed or sent to the Gulag³.)

¹ The five, in order of population, are Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kirgiziya, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. In Soviet usage, Kazakhstan is distinct from Central Asia, evidently because settlement by Russians and other European nationalities once made the position of the indigenous Kazakhs a tenuous one, threatening *de facto* annexation of their homeland to a greater Siberia. This threat has now abated, due to the relative demographic dynamism of the Kazakhs and the growing stream of European settlers leaving the republic.

² *Ozbekistan adabiati wa sanati*, 16 March 1990, p. 1.

³ *Nauka i religiya*, January 1990, p. 4.

At various locations in Central Asia, state funds are now being expended on refurbishing holy places that are objects of Islamic pilgrimage, such as the 'Mount of Suleiman' in Kirgiziya's Osh region. Religious schooling, not long ago viewed by the authorities as criminal activity, is now openly tolerated: in Kirgiziya, an official literary weekly began a series on religion entitled 'Lessons of the Faith'.⁴ Officialdom has promised that in future more Soviet Muslims will be able to make the *haj*, the ceremonial pilgrimage to Mecca which is expected of all believers who have the means and ability for it. In token of the new policy, the Soviet state airline Aeroflot promised help in delivering one million copies of the Koran donated to Central Asia and other Muslim areas of the Soviet Union by King Fahd of Saudi Arabia. (This may help to deflate the blackmarket price of the Koran, which was recently quoted as between 200 and 300 roubles.⁵) Since few Central Asians know Arabic, vernacular translations of the Koran are being published.

Muhammad Sadiq Muhammad Yusuf, who as Mufti of Tashkent heads the Religious Board for the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, and serves concurrently as a deputy from Uzbekistan to the USSR Supreme Soviet, has become a prominent public figure. The mufti, an Uzbek, received his advanced religious training at Al-Azhar University in Cairo. His beard and turban are now a familiar sight on television and in the press, and his homilies on Islam began to appear in 1990 in a Tashkent newspaper that two years earlier was castigating religion as 'poison for the working class'. In April 1990 the same newspaper carried a photo spread featuring Muslim crowds led in prayer by the mufti as they celebrated the feast of Eid-al-Fitr at the close of the holy month of Ramadan.⁶

The mufti's seat is the capital of Uzbekistan, the most populous of the Central Asian republics and heartland of the Soviet Union's 17 million Uzbeks. In addition to the Uzbeks, the Tashkent mufti holds nominal sway over believers among eight million Kazakhs, more than four million Tajiks, nearly three million Turkmens, two-and-a-half million Kirgiz, and almost a half-million Karakalpaks, the latter a Muslim people whose 'autonomous' republic is an enclave on the territory of Uzbekistan in an economically-depressed and environmentally-polluted region abutting the vanishing Aral Sea. Except for the Iranian Tajiks, native Central Asian Muslims are descended from various Turkic tribes which began in antiquity to migrate to the region from the steppes to the north and east, continuing through the Middle Ages. There are also substantial

⁴ *Qyrghyzystan madaniati*, cited in *Report on the USSR* (RL), 19 January 1990.

⁵ *Ozbekistan ädäbiäti wä sänäti*, 16 March 1990, p. 1.

⁶ *Ozbekistan ädäbiäti wä sänäti*, 27 April 1990, p. 8.

numbers of non-indigenous Muslims, among them Volga Tatar immigrants and remnants of the Crimean Tatars and Caucasian peoples who were deported to Central Asia by Stalin.

The present mufti was installed by a palace revolution in February 1989, when a crowd of a few hundred faithful demonstrated against his predecessor, Shamsuddin Baba Khan, a holdover from the Brezhnev era whom they accused of alcoholism and womanising. The former mufti had also been closely associated with support for the Soviet invasion of Muslim Afghanistan. Shamsuddin Baba Khan's response to the demonstration was to resign, ending the dynastic occupancy of the Muftiship by his family that had begun in 1943 when his grandfather was named to head the Religious Board, created in that year under Stalin, and had continued under his father.

Although the demonstration is shrouded in mystery, there was some evidence that it had the support of the secular authorities, if only because there was no attempt to prevent the traffic jam it created.⁷ If so, the new mufti was soon able to show his gratitude by flying, in June of the same year, in the company of the head of the Uzbek Communist Party and other officials from Moscow, where he was attending a session of the Soviet Congress, to help quell riots that were sweeping the Fergana Valley causing more than 100 deaths and much material damage. The Fergana unrest was the most serious to date of a number of incidents that since 1988 have affected all five Central Asian republics, often with loss of life and burning of public and private property. In Tajikistan, two members of the republican government were accused in March 1990 of trying to take advantage of rioting to seize power, and were dismissed from their positions. They had organised a 'Provisional Government.'⁸

Since the mufti's election to political office, other Muslim clergymen have entered the arena. Radio Liberty reported that in Turkmenistan an imam had won 92 per cent of his district's vote in local elections in January 1990, but that another imam had received less than the required 50 per cent and would have to run in a follow-up election.⁹

It appears that the new religious policy has removed obstacles to connections with Muslims in other countries. In an interview, the Mufti of Tashkent spoke with satisfaction of his ties with Islamic states abroad. In addition to Saudi Arabia, he named Jordan, Libya, Kuwait, Egypt, Turkey, Iraq, Algeria, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates. He indicated that foreign Islamic organisations were

⁷See Annette Bohr, 'Soviet Muslims Demonstrate in Tashkent,' *Report on the USSR* (RL), 24 February 1989, p. 22.

⁸TASS, 19 March 1990.

⁹*Report on the USSR* (RL), 15 January 1990.

supplying both material and spiritual aid to Soviet Muslims, disposable hypodermic needles (in critical short supply in the Soviet Union) as well as Korans.¹⁰

Change in the religious atmosphere is not, of course, a purely Central Asian phenomenon. At the All-Union level, it coincides closely in time with the positive shift marked by Mikhail Gorbachev's unprecedented meeting in April 1988 with Pimen, late Patriarch of Moscow. As the regime's old claims to legitimacy have collapsed under the searchlight of *glasnost*, the authorities have turned from the prevailing 'scientific atheism' to seek support from traditional religions as part of their desperate quest for a new legitimacy. The result has been a religious revolution from above.

The new deference to religion also pursues practical ends. As many Soviet writers have admitted, the country's spiritual void has brought on a social crisis. Now that communist ideology has effectively retreated from the scene, the values of private and public morality which its spokesmen professed to serve (however cynically) have lost their public advocates. At the same time, societal discipline has slackened. The result has been an upsurge of social ills, from narcotics addiction to crimes of violence. According to law-enforcement authorities, Central Asia in particular is suffering from a breakdown in law and order, much of it attributed to the forces of organised crime. Official readiness to rely on Islam where ideology has failed was implicit in an article by a writer in Uzbekistan who found that Islamic commandments correspond to 'communist morality.' He called for joint action between the state and Islam to deal with problems like alcoholism, drug addiction, prostitution, bribery, fraud and embezzlement, and proposed the creation of mixed state and religious commissions to work on this.¹¹

The Uzbek Communist Party was forthcoming toward religion in its December 1989 platform for the approaching local elections:

Repudiating past voluntaristic errors committed with respect to religion, the republican party organisation is actively in favour of *freedom of religion and the legal rights of believers* [italics in original], and for co-operation with religious organisations. Since the beginning of the year, approximately 90 new denominational buildings have been registered and 25 architectural monuments have been returned to believers and will be restored. Believers are entitled to all opportunities for participation in the public, political and cultural life of the republic, for conciliatory and charitable activity, and for the affirmation of

¹⁰ *Ozbekistan ädäbiati wä sänäti*, 16 March 1990, p. 2.

¹¹ N. Usmanov, 'Useful Points of Collaboration,' *Kommunist Uzbekistana*, No. 6 (1989), p. 22.

humanism, respect and good neighbourliness in inter-ethnic relations.¹²

In the same statement the party warned, however, that it would continue, using the methods of propaganda and persuasion, to develop an 'outlook of scientific materialism' among the workers, and to be outspoken in condemning any activity 'from a position of religious intolerance and fanaticism'.

The new tolerance of Islam has doubtless been well received by those many Central Asians, including party members, who until a short time ago were being made to suffer for the least public display of religious activity. In one six-month period of 1987, fifty-three members of the Uzbek party were expelled for 'organising religious rituals and taking part in them'. (Those reprisals occurred not long after Gorbachev, who had not yet taken his road to Damascus, made a speech in Tashkent condemning religiosity among party members.¹³) In the new climate, party members are no longer shunned for participating in Muslim funerals, weddings or circumcision rituals. Central Asians, including party members, now openly make the ritual gesture of the *fatiha*, the opening passage of the Koran, when sitting down to meals in public places. Gorbachev himself has spoken of Islam in more favourable tones, although he continues to be quick to blame 'Islamic fundamentalism' for unrest in the country's Muslim areas.

The entry of Islam into public life, while helping to eliminate one source of dissatisfaction among Muslims, underscores the deep spiritual, social and historical gap which separates the civilisation of Central Asia from the Christian world of Russia, adding to the centrifugal forces that are already sundering the Soviet Union. The mufti himself has been careful to be conciliatory toward other religions, especially Russian Orthodoxy, but the faith which he represents is one of the mainsprings of nationalism in Central Asia's Muslim republics. Despite the mufti's professions of openness, there have been complaints by others in the region, including native communists, that the new Gorbachev religious policy, which was introduced by a campaign to commemorate the Christian millennium and featured frequent appearances by Russian Orthodox priests on national television broadcasts seen in Muslim areas, makes the Russian Church 'more equal' than other religious bodies. This led a writer in an Uzbek party journal to ask plaintively, 'Isn't

¹² *Pravda vostoka*, 7 December 1989, p. 2.

¹³ See James Critchlow, 'Islam and Nationalism in Soviet Central Asia,' *Religion and Nationalism in Soviet and East European Politics* edited by Pedro Ramet, (2nd edition: Durham and London, 1989), pp. 196-97.

Marxist-Leninist science uniform in the way it treats different religions?'¹⁴

The Socio-economic Crisis

The charge that the Moscow leadership is favouring Russian Orthodoxy over Islam and other faiths adds to the long list of national grievances against the regime which is now being aired with impunity in the media of the Central Asian republics. The Uzbek *cahiers de doléances* range from economic exploitation and environmental devastation to various forms of persecution based on nationality.

At a meeting in March 1990 of the republic's Supreme Soviet, elected for the first time on a quasi-democratic basis, the new Prime Minister, whose predecessor had been deposed by the deputies, charged that Moscow's coercive development of the territory as a base for cotton and other raw materials production had impoverished the Uzbek people. He went on to declare Uzbekistan's 'economic independence,' vowing that henceforth only voluntary economic ties with the centre would be acceptable.

A statistic commonly quoted by Uzbek spokesmen is that their land's per capita income is only half the all-union average. To help overcome this disparity, the Uzbeks have begun on their own to seek trade agreements with foreign countries, in search both of hard-currency markets and the investment capital denied them by Moscow. They hope that new factories will create jobs for some of their rapidly-growing army of unemployed, now estimated at well over a million able-bodied (if unskilled) workers, with another quarter of a million joining the labour force each year.

It happens that many of the objects of Uzbekistan's negotiations to find trading partners are Islamic nations, among them Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Malaysia, and in China the Turkic Muslim kinsmen of Xinjiang province. There are also internal pressures to develop contacts with Turkey, which up to now has been politically off-limits, given Moscow's historic fear of pan-Turkism. Another logical trading partner would be the Islamic Republic of Iran, although the Uzbeks themselves, or at least their leaders, seem to be shrinking from opening that particular Pandora's box.

Environmental woes are also being laid at Moscow's door. The centre is blamed for having converted much of Central Asia into one gigantic cotton plantation whose output is taken away by the authorities at confiscatory prices. In the meantime, cotton has kept land and water from being used for local purposes such as food-growing.

¹⁴Usmanov, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-48.

Symbolic of the disaster wreaked by the 'cotton monoculture' is the ongoing desiccation of the Aral Sea. Once the world's fourth largest inland lake, the Aral has shrunk to a fraction of its former size due to diversion of its tributary rivers to irrigate cotton. Use of toxic agricultural chemicals which enter the irrigation system has poisoned the drinking-water supply in parts of Central Asia, causing such health consequences as a pronounced rise in infant mortality, and leading medical authorities to caution mothers in the affected areas against nursing their babies for fear of poisoning them. Disappearance of the Aral is creating a dry sea-bed from which sand-storms carry toxic salts not only over adjacent arable lands but to places as far distant as the Arctic Circle. Loss of the sea's moderating effect on climate has made winters colder and shortened the growing-season. Central Asians are also incensed by disclosures of radiation hazards brought about by the residue of nuclear tests in Kazakhstan and the dumping of industrial radioactive waste shipped in from Russia proper for disposal in the territory. Another environmental sore point is caused by the noxious effluents of raw material processing factories sited, on Moscow's orders, in Central Asian towns, whose output goes mainly to benefit other parts of the USSR.

In a backlash against decades of russification, the Central Asian republics have adopted laws making their own languages the official medium, although Russian is still recognised as the vehicle of 'inter-nationality' communication. The debate that preceded introduction of these laws provoked angry recriminations between native and Russian residents over whose language should have priority. Even before the laws took effect, university classes began to switch from Russian to the local tongue as the language of instruction, and newspapers have been publishing lists of words that should henceforth replace Russian borrowings. Many of these are derived from Arabic or Persian. To take examples from the latest Uzbek administrative terminology, *jumhuriya* is now used instead of *respublika* (republic), *wilayat* for *oblast'* (region), and *nahiya* for *raion* (district). Newspapers (now called *rosnama* instead of *gazeta*) and magazines have been carrying lessons in reading and writing the Arabic script, used before the revolution by all the Muslim peoples of the Russian Empire but banned until recently.

One of the most emotional ethnic issues is the alleged mistreatment of native recruits conscripted into the Soviet Army. An Uzbek journalist Karim Bariyer made a name for himself by charging in print that the largely Russian officer corps was countenancing murder and other forms of harassment of Uzbek youths while on active service. Bariyer has since been elected to the republic's Supreme Soviet. He reported that in one year (since the Afghan war) 430 Uzbek conscripts

had met with violent death. When military spokesmen attempted to refute his accusations, he retorted by publishing gory photographs of soldiers' bodies.¹⁵ At the March 1990 Supreme Soviet session in Tashkent, a bill was introduced to allow Uzbeks to perform military service only in their home region. One of the deputies later complained in a newspaper interview that 'weakness' had defeated the bill. The same deputy urged that the commandant of the Turkestan Military District, which encompasses Uzbekistan, should be subordinate to the president of that republic, and that appointment to the post should be subject to approval by the Uzbek Supreme Soviet.¹⁶

These problems are not unique to Central Asia, but they have caused political and social fireworks in a region that until recently had been noted for the loyalty of its party establishment and the docility of its peoples. Recent disturbances, of which the largest has been the Fergana valley riots, have brought reminders of the propensity of Central Asian crowds to resort to violence for conflict resolution. They have stirred memories of earlier outbreaks, like the 1916 Mardikar uprising when more than 2,000 Russian civilians were killed. In the intercensal period 1979-89, departures of Russian settlers goaded by fear for the future helped to produce a net out-migration from the Central Asian republics of 1.6 million, reversing a historic trend of European settlement into the region that began with the Russian conquest in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁷ In the Fergana district, one of the centres of unrest, it is reported that bookings of railway containers for shipment of personal effects are backed up for many months.¹⁸

Popular grievances appear to be concerned mainly with secular rather than religious issues, yet in the eyes of Muslim believers their sufferings have been caused by an infidel power aided by Islamic apostates. This is a situation ripe for religious leadership, if not demagoguery and fanaticism.

Noteworthy in all of this ferment is the passivity of the official Muslim clergy. In other Islamic countries, mullahs have been in the forefront of independence movements, particularly where non-Muslim colonial rulers were involved. In Soviet Central Asia, the mufti and his officially-registered mullahs evidently see their function — to judge from their public statements — as limited to officiating at ceremonies and interpreting the Koran and Islamic doctrine in innocuous personal and family contexts, while smoothing over societal conflicts. In contrast to members of the secular intelligentsia,

¹⁵ *Ozbekistan ädäbiati wä sänäti*, 9 March 1990, p. 8.

¹⁶ *Yash Leninchi*, 6 April 1990, p. 3.

¹⁷ See Ann Sheehy, '1989 Census Data on Internal Migration in the USSR,' *Report on the USSR* (RL), 10 November 1989, pp. 17-19.

¹⁸ *Zvezda vostoka*, January 1990, p. 20.

many of them communists, who have been vociferously, even stridently, active in articulating the sufferings and anxieties of the Muslim masses, the mufti has been largely silent.

The mufti's journalistic role in almost singlehandedly promoting Islamic teaching to replace the now discredited atheistic ideology should not be belittled, but his lack of dynamism on public issues leaves a political void. Understandably, he may be reluctant to jeopardise the new status of official Islam by intruding more directly into politics, or to pour oil on troubled waters, but his reticence has left the door open to less moderate religious leadership.

Professor Atkin has made the point that the official clergy headed by the mufti represent only a small part of the totality of Islam in Central Asia, where large numbers of 'unregistered' mullahs are known to be busy.¹⁹ Indeed, Islam — especially in its Sunni branch which prevails in the region — is relatively independent of the functioning of an organised clergy. The fact that anyone who knows a few prayers can become a leader encourages spontaneous religious activity and puts it beyond the control of any power, spiritual or temporal.

Roots of Islam

Islam has been solidly entrenched in *Mavera-an-Nahr* the 'land across the river' as the Arabs called the territory north of the Oxus (today's Amu-Darya), ever since the seventh century, the century of Muhammad. Not long after the Prophet's death, Arab armies, buoyed by the great expansionist tide of Islamic dynamism, crossed the Oxus and conquered the Central Asian oases. Their feat integrated the region into the new civilisation that extended from Spain and North Africa to the East Indies. Scholars in Central Asian cities like Bukhara and Khorezm received recognition throughout Islam for the excellence of their contributions. The ninth century philosopher and mathematician known as al-Khorezmi (after his homeland of Khorezm near present-day Khiva) is credited with developing the first principles of algebra, a word that is taken from the Arabic title of his book *Kitab al-mukhtasar fi hisab al-jabr wa'l mugabala*. The Persian poet Rudaki (died 940) was associated with the region during the Samanid dynasty, and is today claimed by the Central Asians as one of their own. (They also claim the later Omar Khayyam.) A lengthy medical treatise written around the turn of the eleventh century by Avicenna (Ibn-Sina), a native of Bukhara, was a standard

¹⁹Muriel Atkin, 'The Survival of Islam in Soviet Tajikistan,' *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 43 No. 4, (Autumn 1989), pp. 606-607.

text in both the Muslim world and (in Latin translation) medieval Europe.

This early civilisation was nearly obliterated by the Turco-Mongol conquest which devastated the region, but it rose again after the conquerors and their descendants had been converted to Islam. One of them, the fourteenth century Timur (Tamerlane) of Samarkand, held sway from Syria to northern India. Timur's great-grandson, the poet-warrior Zahiruddin Babur, led his armies to the Indian subcontinent in the sixteenth century and established there the Mogul (Mongol) Empire. Babur is remembered today by the Uzbeks and other Central Asian Turks as a founder of their early literary language, Chagatay, one that was able to compete with Arabic and Persian.

As the Islamic world was split by the schism between Sunni and Shi'a adherents, Central Asia stayed with the majority Sunnis, but this development helped to isolate the region politically and culturally from neighbouring Shi'ite Persia. Local religious life came increasingly to be influenced by Sufi mysticism. Major Sufi orders originated on Central Asian territory, including the Naqshbandiya, founded in Bukhara by Sheikh Muhammad Bahauddin Naqshband (1317-89).²⁰ It is perhaps significant in terms of the present political scene that Sufism in Central Asia is traditionally contemplative, lacking the reputation for militancy that it gained, for example, in the North Caucasus as the inspiration of the Naqshbandi Sheikh Shamil's desperate thirty-year armed struggle against Russian occupation.

The remarkable intellectual vigour of the Central Asian oases had been sustained by a prosperous economic life that depended on a strategic position athwart the Great Silk Route whose caravans linked East and West. European discovery of alternative sea travel to the Orient at the turn of the sixteenth century undermined the commercial viability of the region, isolating it from the outside world. There followed more than three centuries of stagnation under corrupt and retrograde local potentates whose instability and internecine warfare caused still further weakening. Yet despite this decline the 'holy' city of Bukhara (*'Bukhara-i-sherif'*) maintained its prestige in the Islamic world, precisely because its isolation had kept it from colonialist 'contamination' by Europe. Its *madrassahs* became a magnet for Muslims seeking a 'pure' Islam.

²⁰ Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Mystics and Commissars: Sufism in the Soviet Union*, (C. Hurst & Co.: London, 1985), pp. 7-12; *Islam-spravochnik*, edited by M. A. Usmanov, (Tashkent, 1987), *passim*.

The Russian Advent

Tsarist power, followed by Russian settlers, began to expand into Central Asia in the eighteenth century. When, by the second half of the nineteenth, the infidel armies completed their conquest by invading the oasis heartland, there was little effective resistance by the demoralised and disunited native population.

St Petersburg administered its new colony through two military governors-general, one in the steppeland to the north and the other in the southern province of 'Turkestan'. Russia's goals were mainly economic and military, in the latter case to secure the territory against the possibility of British expansion northward from India through neighbouring Afghanistan. The Russian administrators allowed the Emir of Bukhara and the Khan of Khorezm to remain on their thrones under a protectorate. In the remaining territory subject to direct Russian rule, they relied heavily on the native infrastructure with its religious courts operating according to Islamic law.

Despite this Russian forbearance, the region was profoundly affected by economic development, which spawned a new class of native entrepreneurs, and by technological advance, especially the railway and its accompanying telegraph wires. These gave the more affluent Central Asians the opportunity to travel and study abroad, and to receive a flood of information about the outside world, including that of Islam.

While the Russian authorities tended to favour the more conservative elements of the clergy as a guarantor of stability, Islamic reform movements came into being, inspired in part by parallel trends in other Islamic areas of the Empire, and in Turkey (the 'Young Turks') and Iran. The reforming *jadids* concentrated their efforts on modernising education, particularly through introduction of secular subjects like mathematics and science which would enable Muslims to compete with Europeans in the new world of technology.²¹

The *jadids* were for the most part moderates who worked within the system. Although there were sporadic acts of violence against Russian rule, like the 1898 Andizhan uprising led by a Sufi *ishan* whose followers attacked a Russian garrison, there was no organised indigenous revolutionary movement. Revolution, when it came in 1917, was largely a Russian importation; Central Asia's early Soviets practiced unbridled colonialism.²²

²¹ For an authoritative discussion of the reform movement in pre-revolutionary Central Asia, see Edward A. Allworth, *The Modern Uzbeks from the Fourteenth Century to the Present: A Cultural History* (Stanford: California, 1990), especially the chapters on education and religion/culture.

²² For a description of the unpopularity of early Soviet rule in Central Asia, see G. Safarov, *Kolonial'naya revolyutsiya*, (*Gosizdat*: Moscow, 1921).

To enhance the appeal of communism in Muslim areas of the former Empire, Lenin ordered a policy of *korenizatsiya* (nativisation) of the party and government apparatus. This opened the new regime to elements who were communist in name only, many of them devoted Muslims and nationalists who had belonged to the *jadid* movement. One consequence was that internal opposition caused an anti-religious campaign scheduled for implementation in 1923 to be put off until 1928, by which time Stalin had consolidated his power and many lukewarm followers had been purged from the ranks of Central Asian communists.²³ (The *jadids* were branded as 'Turkish spies'.) When the anti-religious campaign was finally launched, its impact was particularly brutal due to the fact that so much of Muslim daily life was rooted in religion. The campaign went beyond the closing of mosques and persecution of mullahs to the public unveiling of women, sometimes with violence and counter-violence, and the prohibition of daily prayer, of fasting and feasts, and of religious life-cycle rituals: weddings, funerals, circumcisions. The *waqfs*, religious properties supported by the institution of *zakat* alms-giving were confiscated, and the *haj* was effectively banned.

The Face of Islam Today

The anti-religious policy endured, with variations in intensity for sixty years, more than two generations. We now know that this systematic attack on believers failed in its goal of eradicating Islam as a mass phenomenon, and that underground observance was widespread at all levels of society. Even before *glasnost*, sociological studies conducted in the name of 'scientific atheism' showed an amazing survival of Islamic belief and practice among Central Asians. According to the data, the prevalence of religion remained considerably greater among Soviet Muslims than in Christian areas of the country. Moreover, Islam is less affected by stratification along age, sex and educational variables: if in Christian areas religion is skewed in favour of the elderly, women and the less-educated, as Soviet specialists have maintained, this is not so much the case among Muslims. For example, one survey showed that 'religiosity' was ten times more widespread among highly-educated members of traditionally Muslim nationalities than among inhabitants of the European USSR with comparable education. Similarly, men and youths were

²³Mannan Ramiz, *Khayaldan haqiqatqha* (Samarkand-Tashkent, 1928), pp. 31-33, 36-38. This source is described in Critchlow, 'Religious-Nationalist Dissent in the Turkestan Communist Party: An Old Document Surfaces,' *Report on the USSR* (RL), 19 January 1990, p. 19.

more drawn to religion than were their European counterparts.²⁴ Another aspect of Soviet Islam that used to vex those officials who were responsible for ideological 'purity' was its close relationship to ethnicity in the popular mind, which held that betrayal of Islam was equivalent to betrayal of one's own people.²⁵

If recent events have confirmed the strength of Islam at virtually all levels of the indigenous society, many questions remain unresolved about the character and direction of Islamic influence, and its relationship to the emerging nationalism of the different republics. That and social cleavages appear to limit its consolidating potential as a political and social force.

In tsarist days it was possible to regard the indigenous population of the region as a more or less homogeneous Muslim *'umma* with some ethnic and linguistic variations. Today, the decades-long institution-alisation of life under the Soviets, with its emphasis on separate 'nationalities', has created new differences. Ironically, in the darkest days of Soviet rule it was the emerging spirit of nationalism in the individual republics that helped to keep Islam strong by cherishing it as part of each republic's national heritage; nowadays, that same nationalism is complicating relations among believers. The primacy of ethnicity over religion has been underscored by outbreaks of violence between Muslim peoples, as in the June 1989 massacre of Meskhetian Turks by indigenous Central Asians in the Fergana valley.

Nationalism within the Muslim community has also played a role in religious politics. The Tashkent mufti's immediate geographic sphere was evidently truncated by the creation in early 1990 of a new Muslim religious board for Kazakhstan. That enormous republic is only slightly smaller in area than India, and more than double the size of the other four Central Asian republics which make up the mufti's remaining territory. The new religious board has its own mufti, Ratbek Nisanbay-uli. It is not clear whether he owes allegiance to Tashkent, but in any case it seems that this development came as the result of a Kazakh particularism that transcends the traditional fraternal ties of Muslims.²⁶

As in all of the 'classless' Soviet Union, the society of the Central Asian republics is highly stratified along socioeconomic lines, with educated professional, cultural and administrative elites at the pinnacle. Indigenous members of the elites have been trying to reconcile their interest in Islam with secular education. In this they are following in the footsteps of the turn-of-the-century *jadids*. There is

²⁴T. S. Saidbaev, *Islam i obshchestvo*, (Moscow, 1978), p. 200.

²⁵For greater detail on Soviet policy toward Islam and religious survivals, see Critchlow, in Ramet, *op. cit.*, pp. 196-219.

²⁶TASS, 13 January 1990.

among Central Asian intellectuals a rationalist school of 'Islamic modernism' which seeks to reconcile religion with modern ideas of social progress and casts Muhammad as a great reformer. As the *jadids* once did, proponents of this school may find themselves at odds with conservative and traditionalist elements in the Islamic community. The official clergy, headed by the mufti, appear to be trying to straddle the gap, but with obvious leanings toward the modernising strain. This leaves them somewhat isolated from the Muslim masses, whose spontaneous religious life is subject to the influence of an evidently large number of 'unregistered' mullahs, the latter closer to the people and now increasingly able to preach without constraint.

Generational differences have been responsible for at least one violent clash between Muslims of different ages. In fall of 1989, a Tajik newspaper reported rumours of a 'bloody battle between old and young believers' in the Kulab district which reportedly involved the younger group's espousal of the Wahhabi sect of Islam. Sent to investigate, the newspaper's correspondent was told by a local law-and-order official of a fight that had broken out along generational lines at a mosque during Friday prayers, followed by a demonstration that required police intervention, with some injuries and many arrests. It was suggested that outside agitators had stirred up the trouble.²⁷ In a newspaper interview, the chief of the KGB in Fergana Oblast charged that the Wahhabi sect had made attempts to penetrate 'the left wing' of the popular Uzbek informal movement *Birlik* and through it to establish relations with the masses. This had been a factor, he said, at an unauthorised meeting organised in Kokand by *Birlik* and the *Humanity and Mercy* informal group at which 'an atmosphere of hostility to party and state organs prevailed'.²⁸ Since Wahhabism originated in the Arabian peninsula and is today the official faith of the Saudi royal family, Russian observers have seen its spread on Soviet territory as evidence of subversion by foreign Muslim interests.²⁹

In an interview with *Literaturnaya gazeta*, the Tashkent mufti downplayed the foreign element in Soviet Wahhabism, while admitting the existence of religious disputes between old and young. He explained that because younger believers had been acting in a Wahhabi way, i.e. by rejecting superstition and elaborate rituals as the Wahhabis do, their elders had begun to call them Wahhabis, and that now they had begun to describe themselves with that term. In the

²⁷ *Tajikistani soveti*, 13 October 1989, cited in *Report on the USSR* (RL), 27 October 1989.

²⁸ *Sovet Ozbekistani*, 11 January 1990, p. 3.

²⁹ See, for instance Ksenia Myalo and Pyotr Goncharov, 'Flare-up in Fergana,' *New Times*, No. 37 (1989), p. 32.

interview, the mufti seemed more concerned about the influence of Iran's Islamic Revolution, and the disruptive writings of Western journalists and Sovietologists than about Wahhabism.³⁰

The general dispute over Wahhabism is attributable to the fact that the sect, which emphasises society over the individual and is opposed to superstition, is historically the enemy of Central Asia's traditional Sufism. The residual grip of Sufism on the masses is evident in the flourishing cult of pilgrimage to the graves of Muslim holy men and other places regarded as sacred, a phenomenon that has persisted through the decades despite efforts by officials to destroy the sites or place them off limits.³¹ Dervishism, another practice associated with Sufism whose *zikh* (prayer ritual) is accompanied by boisterous dancing, was the subject some years ago of a denunciatory *fetwa* (decree) by the present mufti's deposed predecessor, an act which may have helped to discredit him in the eyes of the faithful. However, Sufism, unlike Wahhabism, does not seem to be regarded as a major political threat by the authorities.

Whether or not there is a Wahhabi connection, officials have registered alarm over reported incursions onto Soviet territory by the Afghan mujahidin. Tajikistan, the republic which is closest ethnically and linguistically to Afghanistan, seems to have been a special target.³² Sensitivity to Afghan infiltration is heightened by reports that the mujahidin supplied arms used by Muslim rebels in a recent uprising across the Chinese border in Xinjiang Province. There is also the fact that Soviet Central Asians served both in the military and as civilian advisors in Afghanistan, where the closeness of their languages to local dialects gave them special access to the population, an exposure whose effect may have been bidirectional.

Conclusions

The continuing identification of the Islamic hierarchy with state institutions, however democratic these may become, poses further questions about the role of secular power in the religious life of Muslim believers, and of the registered clergy in the evolution of human rights. Will Islamic officials assist their secular counterparts,

³⁰ *Literaturnaya gazeta*, No. 37 (1989), pp. 2 and 11.

³¹ See Maria Eva Subtelny, 'The Cult of Holy Places: Religious Practices Among Soviet Muslims,' *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 43 No. 4, (Autumn 1989), pp. 593-604.

³² The Soviet Ambassador to Afghanistan charged on 18 February 1990, in a speech in Kabul, that the United States and Pakistan had helped to create a group known as 'The Union of Northern People' to smuggle arms and subversive literature into the southern Soviet republics. (See UPI, 19 February.) The head of the KGB in Tajikistan has reported on several occasions that Afghan *mujahidin* have entered the republic illegally.

as they did before *perestroika*, in policing political and religious dissidence? Will there be only a single interpretation of religious issues, the mufti's, and will civil power be available to enforce it? And is the rise of nationalism in Central Asia a threat to human rights, as it has been in other historical contexts where individuals have been expected to sacrifice personal interest to a national cause?

These questions presume a future of stable political evolution. Indeed, unrest caused by the appalling misery of the Central Asian masses, which is deepening with each year's demographic accretions, and the continuing inability of the system to find remedies, cast doubt on a peaceful outcome. All calculations of the future could be shattered by an explosion of popular desperation, one like last year's in the Fergana valley but on a new and more destructive scale — a situation that would be made to order for a new, more charismatic and radical Muslim leadership to enter the political picture.