

Editorial

In the wake of 11 September there has been a realignment of alliances affecting the countries of the former Soviet Union. President Putin is a friend of the USA, and US planes are now to be seen on airfields in Uzbekistan. Meanwhile in Uzbekistan, as elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, radical Islamic movements are active. A leaflet distributed by the international radical Islamic party Hizb-ut Tahrir has called Uzbek president Karimov 'Satan and Jew, who hates Islam with his whole body and soul and who is the enemy of the Quran and Muhammed ...' This issue of *RSS* comprises a monograph by Igor' Rotar' on Islamic radicalism in the former Soviet Union today; it is the fruit of his own extensive fieldwork in the area. He examines the phenomenon in all its variety.

In her article 'Islam and security in the new states of Central Asia: how genuine is the Islamic threat?' (*RSS*, vol. 27 nos 3–4, 1999) Anna Zelkina writes that

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.

It is clear that Zelkina is right about Wahhabism. Usefully, she places Wahhabism in its correct historical (eighteenth-century) context, contrasting it with 'Islamic Reformation' (nineteenth century) and the Salafi movement (twentieth century).

Igor' Rotar' agrees that the word 'Wahhabi' is of very little use in describing any of the participants in the current ferment. He does, however, make use of the word 'fundamentalism', which he defines as 'an attempt to revive the original values of Islam established at the time of the prophet Muhammed, and to purge the faith of later innovations and additions'. Such 'innovations and additions' will include the modifications introduced into Islam by local customs and also those introduced during the Soviet period. To the extent that the Islamic radicals in the former USSR are 'fundamentalists' in this sense (and not all of them are, particularly in the Northern Caucasus and Tajikistan), a tension arises between a desire amongst the multiple nationalities in the postcommunist CIS to reassert their distinctive identity and the aspiration that Islam should seek to unite all Muslims regardless of the nation to which they belong. This tension is one of the main themes which Rotar' investigates.

A central question raised by Rotar' is whether the activities of Islamic radicals in the former Soviet Union are likely to increase in intensity. He notes that the response of the authorities to radical activity is repression, but that this policy tends to create radicals out of moderates and that polarisation between the authorities and society then increases too. In August 2001 Mikhail Ardzinov, the chairman of an unregistered independent society for human rights in Uzbekistan, told a representative of Keston Institute that 'Today there

are 1600 so-called Wahhabis held in Uzbekistan's prisons. Their only fault is that they are devout Muslims and observe all the religious rituals.'

In her 1999 article Zelkina looked at two distinct aspects of the Islamic revival in Central Asia: the social and the political. The first consisted of efforts to return to Islam as a way of life. The second had the general goal of establishing an 'Islamic state' and was subdivided into several types: '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.'

Speculating at that time on whether radical Islamic political activity in Central Asia would be likely to increase in intensity, she wrote as follows:

It appears ... 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.

Three years later, Rotar' finds that 'Islamist ideology is used by a whole variety of movements, some of which are at odds with each other', and that 'It is in fact Islamist doctrine that has turned out to be the most acceptable ideology to those opposing the present authorities in the Muslim republics of the CIS.' On these grounds, and given the fact that social disruption and economic decline in the area are going to continue, he predicts that 'In the coming years the influence of Islam on the political situation in the Muslim areas of the former USSR is going to increase rather than decrease.'

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Notes on Contributors

Igor' Rotar' graduated from the Geography Faculty at Moscow State University in 1988. His specialist field of interest is ethnic and confessional conflicts in the former Soviet Union and other parts of the world. He worked as a journalist in various conflict zones of the USSR at the time of its collapse, and has also made professional trips to Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, Albania, Romania, Rwanda, Zaire, Uganda, Iran, Pakistan, Korea and China. He is the author of over 400 articles in the Russian press, articles in *Prism* (the Jamestown Foundation), *Perspectives* (Boston University) and *War Report*, and the books *Islam i voina* (AIRO-XX, Moscow, 1999), *Pod zelenym znamenem islama: islamskiye radikaly v Rossii i SNG* (AIRO-XX, Moscow, 2001) and *Pylayushchiye oblomki imperii: zametki voyennogo korrespondenta* (Novoye literaturnoye obozreniye, Moscow, 2001). In 1999 he delivered a series of lectures on Islamic radicalism in the CIS at universities in the USA and Canada. In 2001 he became Keston Institute's Central Asia correspondent, based in Bishkek.