

Islamic Extremism in Central Asia; an Assessment

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Abstract:

The article is a brief summary of what was once the “land of a thousand cities” and home to some of world’s most renowned scientists, poets, and philosophers, today is seen mostly as a harsh backwater. The Central Asian region one of the most important centres of Islam during its advent, is now at the crossroads of balancing religious extremism and economical developments. This paper gives a concise account of the journey of Islam in the Central Asian region. In order to provide an encompassing picture, it is essential to delve into the past of this culturally rich and diverse region.

Key Words:

Central Asian, Extremism, Islam, cultural, Scientists, Poets and Philosophers

Introduction:

Islam is the most extensively practiced religion in Central Asia. Islam came to Central Asia in the early part of the 8th century as part of the Muslim conquest of the region and completely converted in to Islam in 13th century. Many well-known Islamic scientists and philosophers came from Central Asia, and several major Muslim empires, including the Timurid Empire and the Mughal Empire, originated in Central Asia. At this time, cities such as Bukhara and Samarkand began to appear as centres of government and culture. Under the Islamic rule, Central Asia grew as an important centre of culture and trade for centuries. Bukhara became one of the leading centres of learning, culture and art in the Muslim world, and its magnificence rivalling contemporaneous cultural centres such as Baghdad, Cairo and Cordoba. (Javad Haghnaavaz 2014). Central Asia’s location have always had great geo strategic importance, its location made the spread of Islam more convenient the eastern world came to know about Islam through central Asia only and trade routes too passed form here. It is the geography of the region which was the cause of wildfire spread of Islam in the era of caliph Omar, before this it was Persia through which east met the west.

Islam under Soviet in Central Asia

In 1650 the Russians annexed Siberia and reached the Pacific Ocean. In the next two centuries Russia moved to conquer the Caucasus and Central Asia. Peter the Great invaded the Kazakh steppe in 1715 and

thus Central Asia came under the Russian Empire. As a way of controlling the region, the Russians began resettling Central Asia with the ethnic Russians and Cossacks and turning the rest of the land over to cotton production. New industries manned by Russian workers were also introduced and the Central Asia was linked with Russia through a railway network that for the first time brought the Russian empire up to the borders of Afghanistan, Iran, China and British India. But when the Russian revolution broke out in 1917, Central Asia had no desire to become part of the new Soviet Union. Central Asians resisted Sovietisation more fiercely than most other regions, with the Muslims Basmachis (“Bandits”), as the Bolsheviks termed them, leading a struggle. By 1929, however, when the Basmachis were finally defeated, the map of Central Asia had been forcibly redrawn into five Soviet Republics and the centuries of wars for control of the region seemed to have come to an end. (Rashid 2002)

Central Asian Islam became less dynamic under the Tsars not because Central Asia’s new Russian leadership tried to interfere with the Islamic clergy, law or practices but because they wooed them with modern advances: industry, education, technology. The Russian also supported the ultra-conservative ulema (‘scholars of Muslim religious law’, 1680’s, from Arabic), whilst at the same time settling millions of ethnic Russians in the region to try and make good Russian empire during its rule over Central Asia from mid-1860s to 1917, the advent of Soviet rule following the Russian revolutions of 1917 and the subsequent civil war brought with its Marxist opposition to religion. During the first few years of Bolshevik rule in the early 1920s, Soviet officials took a pragmatic approach by prioritizing other goals (attempting to modernise culture, building schools, improving the positions of women) in order to solidify their hold on Central Asia. During this time, the Bolsheviks cooperated with the Jadids (Muslims working towards social and cultural reforms such as improved education) to accomplish their goals. In the process, the Bolsheviks created new political elite favourable towards Marxist ideology by using propaganda and appointing officials favourable towards their policies during the division of Central Asia into separate republics along ethnic lines in the 1920s and 1930s. The Muslims who joined the communist party after 1917 played a critical role in helping build indigenous communist parties in Central Asia, but it did them little good. The soviets termed the Muslims bourgeois reformers and banned their literature. When Stalin came to power he began a steady purge of Muslims; the last Muslims were eliminated in the massacres of 1937. (Jabeen 2011)

After Bolshevik revolution, the soviets launched punitive campaigns to eliminate the practice of Islam in Central Asia. The communist party considered all religious observance “bourgeois decadence” and had already clamped down on all religions in the new communist Russia. However, Islam was particularly targeted because it was considered backward and reactionary, and because the Soviets feared it, having seen during the Basmachi revolt that it had the potential to create a nationalist and religious resistance to

communist rule. They depicted Islam as a reactionary, mullah led force supported by British imperialists that was trying to undermine the revolution and prevent progress and education (Rashid 2002).

Mosques were shut down and converted into workshops, Muslim worship and ceremonies were banned, women were forbidden to wear the veil, and children were not allowed to read the Koran. Even the collectivization programs had a strong anti-Islam content. Whereas in 1917 there had been some twenty thousand mosques in the Russian Empire, by 1929 less than four thousand were operative, and 1935 only sixty registered mosques remained in Uzbekistan, four in Turkmenistan, and twenty in Kazakhstan. Millions of people had no local mosques to attend, whilst Madrasahs were banned all together (Rashid 2002).

Since World War II, the repression against Islam continued. Even before war's end, in May 1944, the government had created the council for affairs of religious cults by special decree, which later became the leading Soviet state organ dealing with Islam and Muslims. By its means, the soviets had reduced Islam to the legal status of a cult. As Moscow launched a powerful campaign to eliminate all vestiges of Islamic culture and practice even more mosques were closed down. Although there was a brief period of liberalization between 1955 and 1958 under Nikita Khrushchev as part of his campaign to liberalize some of Stalin's harsh policies, another crackdown soon followed (US Library of Congress 2002).

By the 1960's, the Soviets started to take a new track regarding Islam; because for the support from wider Muslim world, Soviet had to show that it tolerated Islam in its own country, and in Central Asian region. A policy that came to be known by its critiques as 'official Islam' was developed, and the government opened two 'official Madrasahs¹', in Tashkent and Bukhara, in which Mullahs would train both Islamic and Soviet studies. These states approved Mullahs would then be appointed to a registered mosque. Some of the students were allowed to go abroad. Few Muslims were not allowed to perform 'Hajj' and visit other Muslim shrines in the middle-east. The soviets invited foreign Muslim dignitaries to Tashkent to see how compatible Islam was with socialism (Rashid 2002).

Anti-Islamic crusade was launched by Mikhail Gorbachev under this 'liberalising' program of Perestroika (a movement for political reformation), in which Islam was perceived as the enemy of modernisation and westernisation and a rallying point for anti-Russian feelings amongst Central Asia's ethnic groups like Kazakhs, Tajiks and Uzbeks. Gorbachev's own anti Muslim views were reinforced by the Central Asian leaders who feared that any Islamic revival amongst the population would lead to demands for a greater democracy and freedom, posing a threat to their grip on power. These did not include lifting restrictions against religious practices, but people all across Russia interpreted this differently, and there was an immediate

¹ It is the Arabic word for any type of educational institution, whether secular or religious (of any religion)

revival in all the religions. Thousands of mosques were built, Quran and Islamic literature were brought in from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan and distributed free amongst the population and itinerant Mullahs became public prayer leaders overnight in collective farms and villages. The main reason for this explosion was of course that Islam had never disappeared, not even during the worst repression of the Soviet era. The more the Soviets tried to stamp it out, the more it spread throughout Central Asia as an act of ethnic and regional as well as religious resistance.

It is impossible to understand the evolution of radical Islam in contemporary Central Asia, without knowing something about the way that it developed in the 1970's and 80's. External factors like global politics also played an important role in spreading Islam in the region. In the 1980's thousands of Central Asians were drafted in to the Red Army to fight the Afghan Mujahedeen, who were still resisting the 1979 invasion of their country by the Soviet Union. Central Asian Muslims were thus reintroduced to the wider umma (Muslim world) through a war against their coreligionists, and many were deeply affected by the Islamic dedication of their opponents. Central Asian soldiers who were taken prisoner often joined the Mujahedeen. Between 1982 and 1992, thirty five thousand Muslim radicals from forty-three Islamic countries fought for the Mujahedeen, tens of thousands more studied in the thousands of new government funded madrassahs in Pakistan (Rashid 2002).

Eventually more than a hundred thousand Muslim radicals from around the world had direct contact with Pakistan and Afghanistan. But soon these Muslims began to envision a fight beyond Afghanistan. During the late 1980's leading Deobandi² madrassahs in Pakistan began to reserve places specifically for Central Asian radicals, who received a free education and living allowance. The sect in whom they were training, Deobandism, was a Sunni Islamic revivalist sect that had been established in British India in the nineteenth century. The other major Sunni Islamic sect that began to find a foothold in Central Asia as a result of the Afghan war and the later collapse of the Soviet Union was Wahhabism. Saudi funds flowed to Wahhabism leaders of the Afghan Mujahedeen and later of Central Asia, Wahhabism began to play an increasingly influential role in these regions. And these factors led to a disturbing new trend in Central Asia Islam, one that is still dominant- rise of Islamic militancy (Munster 2013). Gorbachev's attempts to open up the Soviet system had exposed Central Asians to new political ideas and new religious trends. Amongst the ideas taking hold were Western style democracy, Pan-Turkism, free-market capitalism and Islamic fundamentalism which sought to impose Sharia.

Present Scenario

When independence came to the five formerly Soviet Republics of Central Asia in 1991, most Muslims possessed only a rudimentary knowledge of Islamic teachings. "[Most Kazakhs had little knowledge of Islam at independence" (Olcott 2002:211). An early post-Soviet traveller in the region described the people of Bukhara, the former centre of

²It is a revivalist movement within Sunni (primarily Hanafi) Islam. It is centred in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh, has recently spread to the United Kingdom, and has a presence in South Africa.

Islamic learning of Central Asia, as having forgotten religion (Thubron 1994:75- 76). According to a Kyrgyz scholar, the clergy are generally uneducated and only a few have a command of Arabic or understand the *hadith* (Tabyshalieva 2000:30). In Turkmenistan, teachers and imams had been "hobbled" by Soviet control, and at the arrival of independence, knowledge of Islam was somewhere between weak and non-existent (Safronov 2000:84-85). "[T]he vast majority of Central Asians, especially those below the age of sixty, often lack thorough knowledge and w even the most basic tenets of Muslim belief and practice" (Shaharani 1995:279). According to Ahmed Rashid, when "independence finally came, in 1991, the Central Asians, ideologically speaking, were still back in the 1920s. The crisis in Central Asia today is directly related to this stunted political and ideological growth, which the Communists ensured by their actions in 1923 and afterwards (Rashid 2001:35). However though Soviet Union had made several efforts to curb the religious practices and culture but they could not take away the identity from the masses. Islam as an identity was still prominent, Being a 'Muslim' is widely understood as constituting an integral part of the identity of the majority of Central Asia's population.

And after the collapse of the USSR, Islam had essentially undergone a revival among Central Asian societies. Although all of the newly independent political entities remained secular in form, they all admitted the importance and prominence of Islam as a dominant religion. However, the growing influence of the religion in the region has been accompanied by the emergence of fundamentalisms, which Central Asian governments have sought to suppress using tough measures.

The Central Asian governments have fought insurgencies against armed Islamic groups in the past, which history is doubtless colouring their view of the current situation. For example, a group of Central Asian militants from the predominantly Uzbek faction Katibat al-Imam Bukhari have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) group and its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The group maintains presence on the Internet and on social networks, and releases frequent videos showing its militants in Syria, including footage of a training camp run by the group in Aleppo province of Syria. The video, titled "Join the Ranks" and dated Oct 29, 2014 shows addresses from two Uzbek militants, named as Abu Hafs al-Uzbeki and Abu Sa'adalUzbeki. The militants explain that they come from "the land of Mawarannahr", or "Transoxiana", an ancient Arabic term meaning the "land beyond the Oxus River" and referring to the part of Central Asia roughly corresponding to modern Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, southwest Kazakhstan, and southern Kyrgyzstan. The release of the video showing the Uzbek-led faction joining IS comes amid growing concerns in Central Asia about the threat posed by the extremist group and its radical Islamist ideology. (Tripathi 2014)

The problem of religious extremism and terrorism in the Central Asian region and has been associated with activities of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Hizbut-Tahrir (HUT), and a number of less well-known radical Islamic movements, such as Akramiya, Hizb an-Nusra, and Tablighi Jamaat among others. (Omelicheva 2010, 170-172)

According to The New York Times, in September there were more than 2,000 Europeans and 100 Americans among IS' foreign fighters. Tunisia has sent 2,400-3,000 foreign fighters to the Islamic State, more than any other nation. According to media reports, there are about “250 Kazakh citizens, 100 Kyrgyz, 190 Tajiks, 500 Uzbeks, and about 360 Turkmen fighting alongside IS extremists”, with Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan being the most vulnerable to IS influence, especially via Fergana Valley. However, these numbers are difficult to confirm. (Tripathi 2014)

Hizbut-Tahrir (or HUT) selected more than 1,000 individuals in the mid-2000s in Kazakhstan, and reports of its exercises in southern Kazakhstan showed up around this time too. There, onlookers evaluate the development's enrolment to be in the low hundreds. Yet late reports of the Kazakh security administration assert exceptional development in the activities of other radical Islamic groups. In 2003, Kazakh police seized more than 1,000 pamphlets with radical Islamic calls. By 2004, the quantity of seized pamphlets had expanded to 11,000, and a cell of the Jamaat Mujahedin of Central Asia, with alleged ties to al-Qaeda, was destroyed that year in Kazakhstan. In October 2013, a YouTube video was posted showing 150 Kazakhs brandishing weapons and claiming that they arrived in Syria to fight for jihad. Kazakhstan's National Security Committee (KNC) denied that the video could have been made by Kazakhstanis; while the Ministry for Foreign Affairs stated that it was impossible to determine whether fighters were indeed Kazakhstani nationals. The KNC stated that together with other relevant agencies it was working on returning Kazakhstani nationals home and also preventing new recruits from joining the fight in Syria. The current head of the Agency on Religious Affairs of Kazakhstan, Marat Azykhonov, blamed external forces for luring and engaging Kazakhstani citizens into radical Islamic movements, mostly via the Internet. By November 2013, the alleged number of Kazakhstani fighters reached 250 people; apparently they travel to Syria via Turkey, with whom Kazakhstan has a 30-day visa-free regime. (Baizakova 2014)

With the increase in the rate of radical activities, the region received prohibitive religious approaches and measures trying to control. Various bans on unregistered Islamic associations and mistreatment of many Muslim drove radicalists to go underground, making their enrolment numbers and prevalence hard to gauge. The oust of the Taliban administration and the pulverization of al-Qaeda fortifications in Afghanistan seriously debilitated the outfits. The remainders of this activist outfit have started making various fragment gatherings. For example, the Islamic Movement of Turkistan (the last term alluding to the range including all Central Asian nations) and the Islamic Jihad Union are now associated to the IMU though not controlled by it. The previous IMU contenders keep on enlisting and preparing volunteers in parts of Central Asia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan; however the quantities of aggressor Islamists are most likely much littler than the figures announced by the legislatures of Central Asian states. (Omelicheva 2010, 178-180)

The present day Islamic community in the region can be broadly classified in to three categories:

- a) The older generation, who took on religious ideas and practice as children, sincerely regard themselves as Muslims and follow Muslim rituals;
- b) Elderly and middle-aged people, and a few young ones as well, who do not strictly follow religious rules and whose ideas of religion are typically vague and fragmentary.
- c) Recently there has been an increase in number of young people showing an interest in Islamic doctrine and engaging in systematic religious education and practice. This group is getting numerous.(R.M 2013)

One troubling phenomenon in the region relates to the spread of religious extremism in the country's prisons. As efforts to combat the spread of Salafism often result in the confinement of the movement's adherents, many Salafis have used the state prisons as a platform for preaching the radical Islamic ideologies. In 2011, different state government authorities responded to this grave situation by closing all mosques, churches and other places of worship in its prisons and sentencing some prisoners to solitary confinement for praying in their cells. Likewise, al-Jihadi al-Islami, an offshoot of the al-Qaeda affiliated Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), is known to be active in the region. It preaches anti-Western ideology and, like the IMU, opposes secular rule in Uzbekistan and aims to establish a government there based upon Islamic law. National Security Committee of Kazakhstan (KNB), an internal security service has alleged that the group- like its parent organization- has ties to al-Qaeda, has cells in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Russia and has been involved in attacks in Uzbekistan. (American Foreign Policy Council 2013)

Conclusion

The Islamic radicalism in Central Asian region became profound because of the stringent counter measures against a group of people following a particular religion. The historical aspects have shown us how the Central Asian countries kept to the disciplines of their religion without harming the external world. But the harsh policies adopted by the atheistic Communist regime and the current political heads helped the spread of radical ideas in the minds of the people. Majority of the Central Asian population have kept themselves away from any sort of political connotations by keeping themselves to the traditional Islamic practices. But if the Islamic groups are well-organised and too much committed to their goals, this may exert a disproportionate influence in the region. Another major issue being the absence of a political opposition in the countries of Central Asian region. This thereby leads to the Islamists being treated as a de facto political opposition. Also there are chances of a rivalry between the different Islamic factions themselves when they are ill-treated and labelled as terrorisers. We should also consider the volatile political and economic climate throughout the globe wherein the Islamists are facing stringent security measures thereby leading to a discontented population. The crackdown on the radical Islamic

factions by different countries and world organisations to date has proven ineffective or has turned out to be only a temporary solution, with a threat looming on the horizon.

The Muslims of the region think of Islam as being a part of their social identity in a way similar to how they conceive of their ethnicity, family, and mother tongue. But what Islam itself means is nevertheless prone to education, interpretation, and propaganda. Thus, this deeply rooted Islamic identity is like a vessel whose content remains to be filled³.

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³ In some ways the situation in Central Asia resembles Albania, as described by a spokesman for the Islamic Relief Agency, who suggested that the population of that land was "ignorant of their faith, aware that they were Muslims but not knowing what this actually meant. The country's Muslims, he said, were like a dry sponge, ready to soak up anything given to them" (ICG 2001 b: 4)

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