Islam, state and society in Central Asia

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Introduction
The association of Islam in Western public opinion with terror and political radicalism has made it difficult for analysts to appraise its true position in society. This is especially true regarding Central Asia, and other parts of the CIS, for the regimes there have accepted and taken advantage of the general perception of Islam in order to present it as a force that undermines their authority and is at the root of the evils from which their populations have been suffering under their rule. This paper seeks to look at Central Asian Islam and evaluate its role in the developments of the decade or so since the states of the region achieved independence. In particular, it intends to determine whether it must jeopardise regional or local stability or whether, alternatively, it may comprise a stabilising factor.

The major nations of Central Asia, the titular peoples of the Soviet Union’s five successor states in the region, are all traditionally Muslim, as are most of the other, smaller indigenous ethnic groups. They belong to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, with the exception of the Pamiris, who are mostly Ismailis, and a few numerically insignificant Shi’ite pockets.

Yet Islam in Central Asia is not of one cloth. There are major differences in the practice of Islam between the region’s five countries and within each of them. The reasons for this are partly historical and partly cultural. The populations which were islamicized between the 17th and 19th centuries (most of the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz) do not have the same depth of Islamic tradition and are not so massively committed to their religion or such staunch Muslims as those that have been Muslim since the eighth and ninth centuries (the original populations of present-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan). The former, moreover, were largely nomadic and inhabited the Steppes, and these two circumstances regulated their lives. The latter, in contrast, have long been sedentary and for centuries provided some of the leading centers of Islamic learning and culture — the famed madrasas of Samarkand and Bukhara — and spawned renowned Sufi orders or brotherhoods, particularly the Naqshbandiyya, which were the focus of popular Islam. In addition to these time-honored disparities, the half century of Russian Imperial rule (1865-1917) and the seventy odd years of Soviet rule (1917-1991) added a new dimension, as the indigenous nationalities sprouted intelligentsias which sought to adopt the values and technology of the West — as represented by Russia — as prerequisites for the survival and prosperity of their respective nations. In this way, the population of the big cities, particularly the capitals of each republic, distanced itself from Islam as lived in rural areas and the smaller townships which had not been subjected to the same measure of modernization, higher education and social mobility, had not mostly undergone the tribulations of migration from one area and life style to another and were far less exposed to the brainwashing of the media and

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other propaganda.

The diversity within Islam was conducive at one and the same time to its debilitation and its resilience. On the one hand, differences of opinion within Islam enabled alien and hostile forces to exacerbate contradictions and confrontation between scholastic and ‘folk’ Islam or between forces of ‘reaction’ and of ‘progress.’ Even the local rulers who dominated the Central Asian khanates in the 19th century vacillated between the ulema and the Sufi orders as they selected their advisers and fostered Muslim institutions; and this became all the more salient with the Russian conquest. On the other hand, regime repression, especially when it was linked to the domination of a foreign power, made Islam, or the particular element within it that was the victim of repression at any given time, the focus of local or national opposition and gave it an aura which drew extensive popular support.

In the Soviet period Islam, like all religions, was persecuted. Mosques were closed down, religious education was banned, the waqf religious endowments were sequestered, men of religion became by definition ‘class enemies’ and were frequently imprisoned, exiled or even put to death. Yet, after a first period of what seemed ignominous defeat, Islam in many parts of Central Asia began to recover and to mobilize its forces. By the late 1970s the small nucleus that had, as it were, kept the fire burning and had maintained small clandestine schools of Islamic learning, was beginning to extend its sphere of influence. In Tajikistan and in the Fergana Valley in Uzbekistan, young people started acquiring knowledge of the faith and its sources. They also obtained the writings of radical Islamic thinkers of the 20th century and tapes of broadcasts from Khomeyni’s Iran (in parts of Central Asia these broadcasts could even be heard directly [broadcast from Iran]). Finally, in the 1980s, even before Gorbachev’s glasnost, these Muslim enthusiasts were influenced by the battle being conducted by the Afghan mujahedin against the Marxist-Leninist regime that took power in Kabul and the Soviet ‘contingent’ that had come to its aid.

Glasnost never really took root in Central Asia. The Soviet satraps there remained rigidly anti-Islamic. Gorbachev himself warned of the danger Islam posed to the Soviet Union in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution. It was as if the more liberal winds blowing in Moscow were not designed to affect the situation in this distant periphery, where it was hoped things might continue as they had been in the period of Brezhnev’s ‘stagnation’. The legitimization of the Russian Orthodox Church, as it celebrated its millennium in 1988, was not to be carried over to Islam, which presented an inherent security threat.

Yet the winds of change could not be totally kept at bay. The Muslim establishment which had served the Soviet regime, headed by the Tashkent-based Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) was compelled by public demand to change its leadership. Mosques began to crop up throughout Central Asia, after decades in which their number had been severely curtailed, and schools for religious education began to operate openly. In addition, Islam became a political issue. Some of the informal organizations that came into being in Central Asia in the last two to three years of the Soviet Union’s existence addressed the situation of Islam and one or two surfaced with overtly Islamic