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Political Islam in Kyrgyzstan

The situation in Kyrgyzstan has changed considerably as a result of the events of 11 September 2001. Due to these, a tiny landlocked country became involved in the international fight against religious terrorism in Afghanistan. At the Manas airport located near the capital and serving as a base for the coalition, there are American and French military cargo aircraft as well as soldiers and officers from eleven countries stationed.
This following article offers a brief examination of the current religious situation and the challenges of political Islam in Kyrgyzstan.

Background

The post-Soviet Central Asian countries are facing a crisis of religious coexistence which they are not well equipped to deal with. During the Soviet era, Islam was deintellectualized and survived mainly in its ritual and traditional forms. The Soviet system prevented Islam from being modernized, as most of the progressive Islamic leaders were silenced or annihilated. The region was isolated from the rest of the Muslim world and remained behind in progressive Islamic thought. Although Central Asian Muslims are far from being politicized and are not struggling for a theocratic state, there is nevertheless an obvious need to modernize Islam if it is to be feasible in the post-Soviet republics. Under the Soviets, the military and centrally controlled administrative machinery enforced mass atheism, thus helping to suppress religious conflicts. However, with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, these forces vanished, and for the first time, Central Asia became an arena for competition among dozens of religious groups. Whereas during the Soviet state, Muslims were always a minority in a huge empire, since the end of the "Russian period" in Central Asia, they have become a majority.[1]
At present, over 85 per cent of the five million inhabitants of Kyrgyzstan are Muslims: the Kyrgyz, the Uzbeks, the Tatars, the Tajiks, the Kazakhs, the Uigurs, the Dungans (Chinese Muslims) and others. Due to the emigration of many Russians and the immigration of refugees from Tajikistan, as well as the high birth rate of the Muslim population, the ratio of Muslims will continue to grow gradually. Re-Islamization in Kyrgyzstan has become particularly noticeable through the rapid increase in the number of its mosques. According to official data from the governmental Commission on Religious Affairs at the beginning of January 2002, there are now 1,388 Muslim mosques,

1 Cf. Anara Tabyshalieva. Central Asia: Polarization of Religious Communities. The Center for Political and Strategic Studies, at: http://www.cpss.org/casianw/perca0697.txt.

22 madrasas (religious schools and institutions of higher learning), and eight Islam institutes in Kyrgyzstan. Hundreds of young Kyrgyz citizens study Islam in foreign institutes and universities. The changes in rural areas have been particularly impressive: Every settlement wants to have its own mosque, former party activists have given up their positions in favour of mullahs and those who demonstrated their religiousness and returned from *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca). Since the collapse of militant atheism, Muslims visit the holy places, keep the fast, openly observe Islamic rituals and get married in civil registry offices as well as in *nikah* religious ceremonies - all these trends appear to be a return to normalcy.

The religiosity of Muslims in Kyrgyzstan is often intentionally or unintentionally exaggerated by certain local and foreign journalists, politicians and officials. In comparison to other regions of Kyrgyzstan, the Muslims of the south (part of the Ferghana Valley) are traditionally more religious. But even in the Ferghana Valley, there is only a small number of Muslims who are still able to read in Arabic. However, because prayers are in Arabic most of the people cannot understand them and read Uzbek or Kyrgyz translations of the Koran. According to a survey by the Institute for Regional Studies (1998)[2], over half of the respondents in south Kyrgyzstan had the Koran in their homes. But this criterion does not necessarily correlate with levels of religiousness. Attendance at mosques is more revealing: 23 per cent of the respondents from the south attend mosque at least once a month, among these, there are twice as many Uzbeks as Kyrgyz. Another criterion for religiousness is the attitude towards religious holidays and fasting: about 70 per cent of the respondents in the south keep the Ramadan fast (*Orozo*). Among these, again, there are more Uzbeks, 86 per cent compared to 62.1 per cent Kyrgyz. A difference in religiosity between former nomadic (Kyrgyz) and settled (Uzbek) peoples can be explained by a number of historical and cultural factors. Moreover, in some places there is a trend towards separating mosques and madrasas on the basis of ethnicity. This can aggravate ethnic tension caused by competition as to who are the "better Muslims".

Ritualistic forms of Islam mixed with deep-rooted local cults seen as Muslim have particular meaning for the locals. This factor partly explains the failure of all imposed ideologies and foreign missionary efforts, including communism, the newly "imported" Wahhabism, *Hizb ut-Tahrir's* concepts or other ideas. On the whole, all attempts of missionaries from Muslim countries to introduce their own model of Islam and deny the local traditions in Kyrgyzstan have had very little success. The population increasingly observes its own traditional Islam, an essential component of which is worship at holy places. For many centuries, holy shrines and places (*mazars)* have played a significant role in the life of local believers, mostly women. The most important is the Throne of Suleiman (*Takht-i Suleiman*) in Osh, which is popu-

2 This Survey was conducted by the Institute for Regional Studies (Kyrgyzstan) for the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities in 1998.

lar among Central Asians, especially during Muslim festivals.[3] The network of numerous *mazars* in Central Asia ignores the new borders of post-Soviet countries. The Ferghana Valley, with the highest concentration of Muslim believers and holy places in all of Central Asia, is divided between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Here, there are a significant number of *mazars* located in the immediate vicinity of the borders of three states. The populations of the three parts of the valley have visited these holy shrines regardless of borders for hundreds of years. Because today several of these *mazars*, which are holy to all Muslims of Central Asia, are located in different states and moreover people's freedom of movement is being increasingly restricted under the pretext of the fight against religious terrorism, numerous pilgrims have been forced to give up their traditional visits to the shrines. Thus, the problem of managing holy places along international borders will in all likelihood be on the future agenda of regional inter-state relations and irredentist movements.

Radical Islamic Movements

Hizb ut-Tahrir

Both the *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (Party of Islamic Liberation) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) are radical Islamic organizations and market "a just society in accordance with Islamic traditions".[4] The religious-political party *Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami* was organized in Jerusalem in 1953 after *Jamiat al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin* had split apart. Its principal goal is to establish a single Islamic state, a "Caliphate", by conducting ideological work to create awareness. The work with proselytes proceeds in two stages: (*a*) general instruction and (*b*) political education. Party members take an oath to join the *jihad* ("holy war"). The party operates in strict secrecy in groups of three to ten people. They translate the 23 books by the party founders, which expound the main ideas, objectives and methods of achieving them and describe the future state system, into the languages of the peoples of Central Asia. Quotations from the Koran and *hadiths* (sayings handed down by the Prophet) are selected tendentiously, the history of the Caliphate and the Muslim world is presented unscientifically and without adhering to historicity. The party does not accept ideas of national statehood nor democracy, and as regards foreign policy, it sharply condemns co-operation between Muslim leaders and the West, especially Israel.[5]

3 In 1959, the Mufti in Tashkent had to adopt a *fatwa* against pilgrimages to Suleiman mountain's *mazar*. It was closed in 1963 and the mausoleum of Suleiman was destroyed. However, today pilgrims have started visiting it again.

4 See the website of Hizb ut-Tahrir at: http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/english/english.html.

5 Cf. Ashirbek Muminov, Traditional and Modern Religious-Theological Schools in Central Asia, at: http://www.ca-c.org/dataeng/09.muminov.shtml.

The ambitious plans of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* include the creation of a common Islamic state encompassing all Central Asian republics of the CIS as well as the Muslim regions of Russia and even the North Caucasus. Its clandestine groups are active in almost all Central Asian states. Analysis of leaflets printed in Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Russian languages and disseminated among locals indicates that despite their boring contents and a naïve call to create a new ideal Islamic state, criticism of governments might have some resonance as in some places, especially in Uzbekistan, there is no other channel to articulate social and economic discontent. Anti-Semitic leaflets of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* repeatedly distributed by the extremist party show that there is little understanding of local characteristics of the Central Asian region, where people traditionally have been friendly towards local Jews as well as those who immigrated during the Second World War.
Despite well-organized underground work, there are only an insignificant number of followers of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* in Karasu province near the city of Osh and the Jalalabad region. The majority of the members of and those sympathizing with *Hizb ut-Tahrir* are ethnic Uzbeks living along the border with Uzbekistan and interested in cross-border movements and trade. Further repression against the mainly ethnic Uzbek members of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* by Kyrgyz law-enforcement agencies might lead to inter-ethnic tensions despite calls by radicals for the unification of all Muslims. Another alarming trend in this movement is that its members boycott elections and any political participation in public life. On the whole, the small group of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* members has not been able to seriously change the real religious situation in the south, but rather it seems to use its membership to channel social and political protest. Governmental repression and imprisonment of about a hundred members, however, has merely added to the popularity of a movement, which had dared to criticize the weaknesses of the current leadership.

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)

The IMU is more a regional anti-government political movement rather than an ideological religious association. Members of the IMU have a very vague strategy on the creation of an Islamic state and have become united due to repression against them and their deportation from Uzbekistan.
The religious-political groups *Islom Lashkari* (Soldiers of Islam) and *Tovba* (Repentance) first appeared nearby the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border in the city of Namangan (Uzbek part of the Ferghana Valley) after the collapse of the Soviet Union hoping to structure society according to Sharia law as well as replacing the state militia. After the prohibition of religious parties and the repression of religious political groups in March/April 1992, the members of this group who had fled from Uzbekistan joined the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) and then later founded the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU),

which has a training camp for Uzbek militants in Tajikistan.[6] In accordance with the "General Agreement" signed in 1997 by the government of Tajikistan and the UTO, the latter announced its disarmament and its transformation from a military organization into a political organization. All armed elements were to give up their weapons by 24 August 1999 and either to integrate immediately into civil society or to join the national military forces. Several hundred militants, unwilling to obey the order and wishing to find a new operational base, left Tajikistan and, in the summer and autumn of 1999 and 2000, they infiltrated two mountainous gorges of Batken province in Kyrgyzstan. These insurgents proclaimed their aim to overthrow the ruling power in Uzbekistan and create an Islamic Caliphate in the territory of the Ferghana Valley under the leadership of a self-proclaimed Emir, Tohir Yoldosh, one of the leading members of the IMU. One reason for the IMU raids was the publicity gained therefrom which it had not been able to obtain in Uzbekistan. Thanks to the free press in Kyrgyzstan, world news agencies reported every step of these young militants, whereas in Uzbekistan, the media was suppressed and unable to acquire any information regarding IMU attacks and their claims.

Before the US attacks in 2001, there were at least four camps belonging to the IMU in the Afghan provinces of Kunduz, Balkh and Samangan. Tohir Yoldosh maintained liaisons with the camps and co-ordinated the supply system for the fighters and their families living in the camps. The Taliban government did not have any serious reasons for suppressing the movement; and the IMU also had the support of *Al-Qaida*. Only one unit in the movement, headed by Juma Namangani, joined the Taliban and fought against the Northern Alliance. The Taliban leadership had appointed him to its command in northern Afghanistan where he led a group of 10,000 soldiers operating in Taloqan, the administrative centre of Takhar Province, located 60 kilometres from the Tajik-Afghan border.[7]

In 2000, the United States added the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan to its list of international terrorist organizations. Thanks to the US-led anti-terrorist operation, IMU units were destroyed and some leaders probably killed.

Foreign Missionary Endeavours

It appears that the majority of the foreign missionaries from Muslim and Christian countries have no interest in maintaining the local interpretation of Islam, but rather, their activities and generosity are devoted to disseminating

6 Cf. Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Reporting Central Asia, No. 37, 24 January 2001

7 Cf.. AVN Military News Agency, Uzbek Islamic group's training camps to remain in Afghanistan, Report at the Russian AVN Military News Agency web site in English, at: AVN Military News Agency website, Moscow, in English 0801 gmt 26 Dec 01./BBC Monitoring/BBC.

their own model and understanding of religion. Up to now, this kind of importing of fundamentalism and extremism has been afforded very little study. There are also tensions among the various Islamic groups in the Ferghana Valley: Some of the "new Muslims", who have been subsidized by foreign Muslim organizations, see themselves as observing true Islam, which is free from heathen cults and customs and thus superior to more traditional practices. The most alarming trend among some Muslims is their denial of Islamic diversity and the fact that they recognize only one version of Islam as true and absolute. It is a paradox that although scientific atheism has been removed from the curricula of higher educational institutions - but not replaced by an adequate education on the history of religions - young people are being taught less and less about the diversity and nature of religions, including Islam and Christianity.

In the literature, it is often mentioned that some groups in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia finance the activity of missionaries and radical Islamic groups. Shireen Hunter indicates that it is not clear whether Saudi Arabia is behind this financing or whether the money comes from private sources.[8] Saudi sources use numerous charitable funds, international Islamic organizations, and cultural centres to channel aid. One of the most influential Saudi-supported structures is a branch of the international Islamic organization *Al-Igasa* (headquartered in Jidda), which is a member of the World Islamic League that was created in Mecca in 1962. Numerous missionaries from this organization have been proselytizing Wahhabism and are calling for the creation of an Islamic state in the North Caucasus.[9] The *Jamaat-e-Islami* has maintained close links with Central Asia. The *Jamaat's* network of madrasas, particularly its principal madrasa and Islamic University at Mansoora in Lahore, educates dozens of Uzbeks, Tajiks, Caucasian Muslims, and Uigurs from China's Xinjiang province every year. The majority of these students are illegal, arriving without documents, but then receiving them in Pakistan through the *Jamaat's* extensive contacts within the Pakistan government.[10] The Pakistani government has continually promised the Central Asian republics that it will cut off the links and contacts between Pakistani Islamic parties and militants in Central Asia and prohibit the latter from studying illegally in Pakistani madrasas, but Islamabad has repeatedly failed to implement these measures.[11] The Bishkek government is planning to put Kyrgyz students studying abroad under surveillance after reports that some of them have joined radical Islamic groups. The Kyrgyz National Security Service has

8 Cf. Shireen T. Hunter, Iran, Central Asia and the Opening of the Islamic Iron Curtain, in: Roald Sagdeev/Susan Eisenhower (Eds.), Islam and Central Asia. An Enduring Legacy or an Evolving Threat? The Center for Political and Strategic Studies, Washington, D.C., 2000, p. 175.

9 Cf. Victor Panin, Russia, Islam and the North Caucasus, in: Sagdeev/Eisenhower (Eds.), cited above (Note 8), p. 137.

10 Cf. Ahmed Rashid, Islam in Central Asia: Afghanistan and Pakistan, in: Sagdeev/Eisenhower (Eds.), cited above (Note 8), p. 231.

11 Cf. ibid.

stated it holds files on 300 Kyrgyz nationals studying in Pakistan, only 25 of whom are there legally. Some, according to a security service official, are known to have joined the Taliban. About 30 are members of the IMU. According to official statistics, some 300 Kyrgyz nationals have been lawfully admitted to foreign Islamic schools in recent years. More than half go to school in Egypt. Both the Kyrgyz government and clerical leaders here have a particularly high opinion of the *Al-Azhar* Islamic University in Cairo.[12]

In its endeavours to restrain the potential influence of Islamic radicals on Central Asia, the West welcomed Turkish activism there. However, it overlooked the fact that due to militant atheism, the new countries were more secular than Turkey. The Foundation of Turkish Religious Affairs, *Türk Diyanet Vakfi* (TDV), an official state-run foundation, has been at the forefront in exporting a "soft and nationalized Turkish Islam" to Central Asia. Turkey has been very active in Central Asia. Before the "soft coup" in Turkey in February 1997, the Directorate was the most powerful institution in the region.[13] Contrary to most predictions of Western politicians, the impact of Iran on political Islam was very modest compared to other countries.

One success story is worthwhile mentioning: the Ismaili spiritual leader, Karim Aga Khan, and his foundation are doing important work on the development of the Gorno-Badakhshan region (in the eastern part of Tajikistan) and combating drug trafficking there. Due to the generously funded Central Asian University in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, excellent Western and secular standards in higher education will be introduced in the region.

Veiled women have begun to appear on the streets of the cities and villages of the Kyrgyz Republic mainly in the south. Most of these women are young and have been strongly influenced by missionaries from the Middle East and Pakistan. While the restoration of pre-Soviet Islam may be seen as an affirmation of ethnic identity, the forms of Islam that are taught by the foreign missionaries tend to be extremely patriarchal and in contradiction to the Soviet understanding of gender equality. Some women, who in their search for a religious identity have found only a male-dominated form of Islam, have converted to Protestantism, Bahaism, Jehovah's Witnesses and other religions that lack a traditional foundation in the region. In the male-dominated Muslim environment, this inevitably, leads to conflict.[14]

Today the process of Christianization in the northern part of Kyrgyzstan competes with the Islamization in its southern part. This is further compli-

12 Cf. Sultan Jumagulov, Bishkek security agencies look set to tighten the screws on Kyrgyz nationals studying Islam abroad, in: Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Reporting Central Asia, No. 89, 30 November 2001.

13 Cf. M. Hakan Yavuz, Turkish Identity Politics and Central Asia, in: Sagdeev/Eisenhower (Eds.), cited above (Note 8), p. 208.

14 Cf. Anara Tabyshalieva, Revival of Traditions in Post-Soviet Central Asia, in: Marnia Lazreg (Ed.), Making the Transition Work for Women in Europe and Central Asia, World Bank Discussion Paper No. 411, Europe and Central Asia Gender and Development Series, The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, The World Bank, Washington, D.C., 2000, p. 55.

cated by ethnic divisions that are often parallel to the delimitations of religious groupings. After declarations of religious freedom and the exodus of ethnic Germans from Kyrgyzstan, a new process of evangelization of the local population has begun. Thanks to generous endowments from Western churches, favourable conditions for missionary activity have developed in all areas where the influence of the Muslim clergy is relatively weak. As a rule, new Christians of Kyrgyz origin turn to Protestantism. Now there are many Western missions proselytizing throughout the region. Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses have had great success among both urban and rural people. Today one can be reasonably certain that thousands of Kyrgyz have converted to Protestantism. This new phenomenon is colliding with the common belief that all indigenous people must be Muslims. Newly imported Christian and Muslim groups have mushroomed and there are also isolated incidences of religious extremism. For instance, now in Kyrgyzstan, several discordant cases have arisen over how to bury Kyrgyz Protestants as some local communities are against burying them with their ancestors and relatives. Thus, there is an urgent need to develop a new model for coexistence among religious groups in Central Asia.[15]

Conclusions

The IMU and *Hizb ut-Tahrir* are acting separately; each of them intends to create its own ideal Caliphate in Central Asia. The *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, the IMU and the communist parties have been marketing utopia with the goal of creating one unified super-state. Some utopian and egalitarian ideas are still alive in post-Soviet Central Asia, among these is also the belief that current hardships could be overcome by the creation of a new state and one "good ruler". At the same time, some political leaders, who have been looking for suitable ideals in their medieval past and who praise wartime heroes, avoid any open dialogue with home-grown Islamists. Some young people in search of new ways to social justice and egalitarian ideals have joined the religious extremist movement deliberately to protest against the old values of the Soviet generation, current economic hardship and regional disintegration. Religious radical slogans are already used in Central Asia and especially in the Ferghana Valley as a political tool and give young unemployed people an outlet for the expression of social and political dissatisfaction as well as probably being an expression of de-Russification (or anti-colonialism). The powerlessness of the position of the official Muslim clergy during the years of Soviet rule - which, due to the government policy, remains in existence today - has led to the fact that the younger generation is not immune to religious extremism.

15 Cf. Anara Tabyshalieva, Polarization of Religious Communities, The Center for Political and Strategic Studies (USA), at: http://www.cpss.org/casianw/perca0697.txt

Although Islamic extremism has not yet made serious inroads in the country, it could in future have a greater influence in the Ferghana Valley, especially in the Kyrgyz part. This is due to many factors including the further deterioration of living standards, the lack of political participation of the people, the repression of Muslims in neighbouring Uzbekistan and in Kyrgyzstan itself, the weakness of official clergy as well as the return of hundreds of students educated in the Middle East and Pakistan. More religious freedom in Kyrgyzstan makes it natural for the youth to express their radical ideas openly and with less fear than in neighbouring Uzbekistan. The lack of political will by the three states sharing the Ferghana Valley to resolve the numerous problems in their backyard, the most densely populated area of the region, have greatly contributed to the radicalization of Islamic groupings there. The recent restrictions of Uzbekistan's government on the people's freedom of movement throughout the region and the increasing corruption in law-enforcement bodies and custom offices have exacerbated the economic hardships of the locals, making the pan-Islamic slogans of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* or the IMU more attractive for traders and merchants in cross-border areas as well as the unemployed. The ill effects of the dictatorships in the region extend beyond Central Asia's own borders. The repression of the Muslims in Uzbekistan under the pretext of combating religious terrorism may prove to be a dangerous policy which could destabilize the entire region. The leadership of Uzbekistan has flagrantly violated the rights of Muslims and *Hizb ut-Tahrir* activists so that some of them have been forced to flee to neighbouring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Simultaneously Uzbek law-enforcement officers have several times abducted ethnic Uzbeks who were Kyrgyz citizens on Kyrgyz territory and then jailed them in Uzbekistan. Moreover, under the pretext of fighting religious terrorism the lands along the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border (some of them disputed) have been mined causing one death and several injures among the locals, who were Kyrgyz citizens, as well as the killing of numerous domestic animals.

A deeper understanding of the role of Islam in the regional context is necessary. The current debate tends to be narrow and is focused on extremism and religious terrorism, which has generated a phobia of Islam. Political Islam in Central Asia and Kyrgyzstan should be considered against the background of the numerous problems at the international, regional, national and local level. Interstate tensions over water/energy distribution, borders and land, the struggle between the territorial elites within a country over power and resources, disputes among various groups of local Muslim clergy - all exploit the threat of political Islam. For a number of reasons, by mixing religious fundamentalism with extremism, politicians have been successful in shaping the "enemy image - religious terrorists". This exaggeration of the impact that political Islam has on society diverts attention from the mass disappointment in economic policy, increasing poverty, corruption and violations of human rights in the Central Asian region. Successful economic reforms and further

democratization of society will be vital factors in the prevention of home-grown religious extremism. The OSCE and other international organizations should deal more systematically with the regional dimension of political Islam in Central Asia and at the same time foster economic and political transformations.