

RELIGION IN SOCIETY

**THE ISLAMIC FACTOR
IN CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES'
DOMESTIC STABILITY**

Oleg SIDOROV

*Ph.D. (Political Science),
analyst at the Central Asian Foundation
for the Development of Democracy
(Almaty, Kazakhstan)*

We have to admit that the counterterrorist strategy the world has accepted as the dominant one turned out to be counterproductive in at least two respects: it relies too much on the use of force and mars relations with the Islamic world: The clash of civilizations that so far remains a much discussed theoretical issue may turn into an unwelcome reality. This fully applies to the Central Asian countries, which, after the Soviet Union's demise, have been living through a renaissance of certain religious teachings. All sorts of public associations are exhibiting an obvious bias toward religion and the spiritual factor to the extent that the neighboring Soviet successor states and the West developed a deep concern over the spread of so-called Islamic fundamentalism commonly believed to be generated by the Islamic world, which, according to

a widespread Western opinion, regards Central Asia as part of its religious territory to be drawn closer and engulfed.

Early in the 1990s, the newly independent states experienced an upsurge of national self-awareness inevitably accompanied by a similarly active religious factor. The region was acquiring new mosques and madrasahs at a fast pace and accommodated a flow of Muslim clerics from abroad. This objective process brought the latent threat of Islamic fundamentalism augmented by the closeness of Afghanistan and Iran, as well as by Wahhabi emissaries and organizations that operated on Saudi money.¹ The domestic situation, a product of two newly developed prob-

¹ See: V. Panfilova, "Islamskie fundamentalisty gotoviat proryv v Tsentral'noy Azii," *NG-Religii*, No. 7, 2005, p. 4.

lems—the absence of an official ideology and the inefficient efforts of religious organizations to restore stability in the region or, at least, in some countries—was far from simple.

During the years of independence, many of the local countries have accomplished much in this sphere: local people en masse are embracing their traditional religions, which is simplifying regional integration.

The wave of religious activities in the first years of sovereignty not only added to tension among religious confessions, it also consolidated believers around one of them. This created the semblance of domestic stability in the Central Asian countries and turned them, by the same token, into a testing ground on which Islam acquired certain socially important norms and political hues.

This happened because the statehoods and nations were not yet fully developed, while numerous economic, social, and political problems typical of the transition period called for attention. Many of the local countries are still coping with the same problems.

First, national and religious (Islamic) identities cannot be separated in countries where state and national development is still going on. Second, economic changes, which will obviously take many years to come to fruition, will inevitably cause social tension. The radical Islamic opposition is only too willing to exploit the resulting popular discontent in an effort to replace the secular regimes with Islamic ones. Third, the politics vs. religion dispute is limited to the heads of secular states and those who speak in the name of political Islam. Fourth, the secular leaders have done nothing to strengthen democracy and the rule of law, a failure which the Islamic opposition is exploiting in its interests.²

The post-socialist ideological vacuum gradually filled with religious ideas; Islamic religious organizations became very active in the Central Asian, predominantly Islamic, republics. Religious organizations emerged out of the shadow to

² See: A.K. Zeifert, I.D. Zviagel'skaia, "Primirenie Evropy i islama v Evrazii," *Vostok. Afro-aziatskie obshchestva: istoria i sovremennost'*, No. 5, 2004, p. 77.

become a social and political force to be reckoned with.

As a religious teaching, Islam helped settle ethnic relations in multi-national states, as well as regulate social relations in republics with one dominating ethnoses. The pattern was more or less the same everywhere: first came economic decline followed by an ideological vacuum; domestic tension began to build, especially because the rights of the most vulnerable groups were infringed upon, while the authorities suppressed all grassroots initiatives.

At a later stage, Islam was used in the Central Asian states to address domestic political issues related to the distribution of cabinet posts and achievement of power. As a rule, Islamic clerics became involved in elite and clan squabbles, which could either be peaceful or develop into a civil war (as in Tajikistan). In Uzbekistan too, the clerics' involvement in domestic disagreements resulted in armed clashes and rising social tension. In Kyrgyzstan, members of religious organizations have already gained official posts (especially in the south).

In all the Central Asian countries, the shared religion ignited an interest in local national and ethnic roots. Today, national self-identity is on the rise—this can be seen in all the Central Asian republics; in the predominantly Islamic region, the Islamic factor has moved to the fore in the social life of many local republics and developed into an effective instrument of the power struggle. Islamic revival was hailed everywhere in Central Asia: hajj became popular among the common people and in the political class alike. As a result, pilgrimage, respected by all believers and performed only for religious purposes, has recently opened the door to high posts. Any Central Asian politician who neglected this risked losing his post and forfeited his chances of promotion.

At that time, state power and religion became fused, while Islam rapidly developed into a political factor. In some countries, clerics turned to politics and became visible on the domestic political scene.

In the absence of guarded borders between the CIS members and other non-CIS neighbors, religious literature of educational and Islamist

nature began arriving in huge amounts. Books and pamphlets promoted the idea of an independent Islamic state in what are now the territories of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

The flow that came from the Middle East ignited an interest in religious issues, which the local mullahs and imams proved unable to satisfy. The results were fairly unpleasant. The situation worsened when officials began appointing members of certain clans or influence groups as imams and muftis. Not respected by professional clerics, they were not popular among the common people either.

Ignorant clerics could not attract new believers; nor were they able to keep the old flock—interest in religion subsided. At that stage, it was not yet obvious that a few discredited clerics could create more problems than scores of radical-minded missionaries.

Mosques mushrooming under the benevolent eye of the official structures in all the countries created a shortage of clerics. Those who worked were not knowledgeable enough to discuss religious problems in a language the people could understand. For this reason, the most inquisitive turned to those who knew Arabic and were able to explain the Koranic and other texts.

The interest in Islam was fanned by the gradually widening systemic crisis in all the Central Asian countries caused by economic problems and the widening gap between the rich and the poor. Disillusioned people started looking for an alternative, which added a political dimension to Islam. Foreign Islamic emissaries provided a solution: they found a common language with the local people and helped them by word and deed.

The result could not remain latent for long; political Islam moved to the fore, where it pushed aside many of the secular politicians, thus causing armed clashes in many countries, which could potentially develop into a civil war and regional tension.

Radical and militant Islam in the Central Asian countries and their neighbors is fraught with disrupted balance and structural problems. Today there is an alarming tendency to dismiss Islam as

an extremist religion because it prompts certain social groups (mostly young people) to form protest movements and encourages them to raise social tension. There is another extreme: religion can be used to justify terrorism.

We should bear in mind that anti-Islamic propaganda and oversimplification of the religious and political situation in Central Asia resulted in wrong decisions. This is confirmed by the growing number of deportations of foreign citizens engaged in trade, tighter passport and visa conditions, as well as restricted trips throughout the region, etc. At the same time, the present level of economic development of the Central Asian republics is not conducive to social and economic stability; this increases ethnic and social tension, which may result in direct clashes. This means that latent conflicts may develop into open confrontation in the near future.

This is confirmed by the civil war in Tajikistan, the poorest among its Central Asian neighbors, the government of which has not yet regained control over the entire territory. Having left behind the period of Islamic revival largely encouraged by secular power, many of the local countries tried to limit Islamic impact on the domestic situation. As soon as they became aware of the power and might of Islam, the power-related structures tried to uproot its radical manifestations. They seem to be unaware, however, that social and political tension in all the countries and legal nihilism of the state organizations provide fertile soil for protest sentiments and opposition to the regime.³

For this reason, the government is concentrating on limiting the role of Islam to the normative-legal framework to keep it away from politics. The Islamic threat has recently developed into a much-discussed issue of the special services and international conferences, as well as the media.

The events in Namangan and Batken, widely covered by the media and which occupied the front pages for a long time, demonstrated that the Islamic threat is very real. We can predict with a great degree of certainty that the coming spring

³ See: V. Panfilova, *op. cit.*

and summer will bring tension to Central Asia. This fully applies not only to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, but also to Kazakhstan.

The Islamic factor proved itself to be a serious destabilizing force during the civil war in Tajikistan (1991-1992); the Batken events in Kyrgyzstan; IMU fighter inroads into Uzbekistan; in the late 1990s when the Taliban ruled in Afghanistan, and during the Andijan events in Uzbekistan (2005).

On the whole, however, the threats related to Islam were mostly of a domestic nature, which means that other Islamic states were not responsible for them. They were caused by domestic disharmony and the social and economic difficulties typical of all the Central Asian countries.

The following domestic political and economic factors contributed, to different degrees, to proliferation of the ideas of Islamic fundamentalism: political crisis; economic problems; the power struggle among clans and groups; unemployment; social stratification into the very rich and the very poor; high population density; the absence of ideological education that the state should provide; increasing corruption; the low educational level of the local clerics compared with the missionaries who come from other countries to disseminate their ideas, etc.

It is more or less commonly expected that a better economic climate will reduce ethnic and religious tension; we should bear in mind, howev-

er, that no changes for the better in any of the local states can be expected unless the social and economic situation improves. So far, the prospects of radical improvement in the region are dim.

Some of the republics suffer from high unemployment among young people, which means that the number of jobless will continue rising. After a while, this social category will acquire a new image and become a fighter for its unrealized rights. This has already happened in Kyrgyzstan where young people moved against the government.

Continued economic decline will have a negative effect on the social situation. Taken together, the two processes are fraught with separatism, which might become even more active than it is today. There are many disagreements among the local states over trade rules, customs dues, borders, water and energy distribution, as well as old debts. This will obviously add to the protest potential.

The water used by the republics for irrigation is developing into another issue fraught with potential conflict. In the post-Soviet years, the irrigation and water distribution systems fell into disrepair; their complete failure will lead to even fiercer regional conflicts.

Drug trafficking is one of the worst headaches: the number of people involved in drug production, transportation, and drug pushing is immense, which is especially obvious in the Fergana Valley, the main transit territory.

Influence Groups

Foreign factors played an important role in disseminating religious ideas across the region; this is especially true of some of the Arab states actively involved in Islamic propaganda in Central Asia.

Today, the number of states seeking influence in Central Asia is on the rise; the struggle over the region's future has already attracted several countries, which could be divided into two groups: the first group would prefer an Islamic future for all the countries, while the second, made up of states and interstate structures, would like them to remain secular states in which Islam would be limited to the cultural sphere and totally excluded from politics and economics.

The first group comprises some of the Islamic states, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan, as well as other OIC members (there are over 52 of them).

The second group consists of several European states, the U.S., Russia, China, India, and Israel. India and China, with separatist movements of their own (Punjab and Kashmir in India and the Xinjiang-Uighur Region in China) are even more concerned than the others.

They, as well as other states, know that a stronger Islamic bias will change the Central Asian republics' political and economic course and increase regional tension. Much has been said about the Central Asian neighbors, but some of the Islamic states able to alter the regional context remain in the shadow.

I have in mind those Islamic states that have stepped up their involvement in the Central Asian republics in the religious and secular spheres. The region's more or less recently assessed natural wealth (this is especially true of Kazakhstan) attracted even greater interest from the Islamic countries, which would not mind using the local riches for their own aims.

They are exploiting the Islamic revival as an ideological smokescreen to camouflage their desire to gain access to the local energy sources, their production and transportation. The Middle Eastern countries are fully aware of the fact that lost control over Kazakhstan will turn the latter into another rival on the oil and petroleum products market, which will inevitably undermine their own position. This means that all the OPEC members will profit from instability on the Caspian's shores, which would suspend oil production.

Iran. Its moderate policies in Central Asia are baffling since lately Tehran has been accused of exporting the Islamic revolution. In the case of Central Asia, however, Iran showed its influence in the early 1990s in Tajikistan. Iran has been concentrating on the Caspian region, where its national interests are obvious: first, it wants closer cooperation with the littoral countries (Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan in particular) to put forward its own interests in the area and, second, it tries to reveal Kazakhstan's weak points (its inadequate military presence in the region being one of them).

Iran is an Islamic state, which, however, should not be regarded as a negative factor, but it mars Iran's image in the West. At the same time, the Iranian leaders' growing popularity with other leaders of the Islamic world might affect some of the Central Asian republics ethnically and religiously close to Iran.

Turkey is another country with interests of its own in Central Asia. During the period under review, Ankara has been playing a dual role: as a NATO member, it has been involved in Western strategies; as a Turkic state, it has been involved in local policies, its presence being especially prominent in the early 1990s.

It should be said that the only difference in the Islamic world with respect to Central Asia's future is limited to the choice between a secular (Turkey) or a theocratic state (Saudi Arabia).

Ankara's involvement in the region has become even more obvious recently: for several years in a row, the republics have been receiving financial and other aid from Turkey designed to promote all kinds of, including religious, projects.

Afghanistan is another state whose direct influence on Central Asia is strongly felt, while the Central Asian countries, in turn, are part of its political expanse. Their interdependence in the security sphere is obvious to the extent that the local states can never be sure of their security.

It should be said that the Islamic factor lost its importance in Central Asian geopolitics for a very short, post-Taliban period.⁴ Afghanistan's territorial proximity to Pakistan and Iran, as well as Islam's very possible victory in Turkey (which will turn the country into a vehicle of so-called Islamic geopolitics) add weight to the Afghan factor.

⁴ Since late 2001 when the Taliban regime fell, Afghanistan has gradually developed into the largest drug producer responsible, according to different sources, for 70 to 80 percent of the world's production.

In recent times, the idea that the defeat of the Taliban did not remove the Taliban issue from the agenda and did not bury its members (whom many of the foreign media pushed into oblivion for no reason) has been gaining popularity in different circles.

The Taliban changed its tactics and moved slightly away from the terrorism it was practicing inside and outside the country toward a political struggle. This has already brought some of its members to the parliament; we can expect Taliban members among the ministers.

The changed tactics and stepped up activities suggest that the Taliban acquired an analytical center of its own that prefers to play within the law and push its members to the top. The Taliban resumed radio broadcasts (begun in April 2005) that cover five southern provinces, which is more confirmation of readjusted tactics. Today, the local people prefer three radio stations broadcasting in the local languages of Pushtu and Dari (the government station, the BBC, and Voice of America) mainly engaged in planting the idea of Western-style democracy, which is alien to the local mentality. In this context, the Taliban may count on restoring its audience within a very short period and gaining even more listeners.⁵

Activities revived with renewed enthusiasm in 2005 say that the Taliban used the lull not only to regroup, but also to revise the tactics of struggle for political domination in Afghanistan and Central Asia as a whole.

The leaders, however, never ignored their traditional forms of struggle: their raids are growing more regular even though they remain limited. The Karzai government, nevertheless, is very much concerned with the fighters' resumed activities and Pakistan's continued support of them.

The fighters changed their tactics: those who did not move to far away areas to wait for an opportune moment blended into the local social environment. The hour may soon strike. The Taliban ideas have already captured the minds of members of certain social groups in Central Asia, which suggests that in future the Taliban will work hard to disseminate its religious ideas there and to organize locals into armed units to fight on its side when the time comes.

* * *

Central Asia is not free from ethnic conflicts; the region is a potential seat of religious extremism that has already had a taste of civil war, political instability, and social and economic hardships. Geopolitically, Central Asian security is a complex structure in which all sorts of external forces are involved. It has several levels and sublevels created by the involvement of the regional states in various regional organizations and their contacts in the security sphere with several centers of power. It seems that Central Asian strategic stability, which is extremely important for geopolitical, economic, and energy reasons related to many external forces, should be preserved, while social and ideological conflicts should be stemmed to prevent their development into political antagonism. The West should obviously revise its ideas about Islam within its own political context. To achieve this it should start treating Islam and the Islamic political movement in the Western countries' Asian security sphere as an inalienable element of the local landscape. Muslims will embrace common national interests only when they become convinced that the religious and sociopolitical structures in their countries and in Eurasia are well protected. The West should make friends with the Islamists in its own countries rather than let them conclude that their values can be protected with outside extremist interference alone.

⁵ Information supplied by the Regnum Agency, available at [www.regnum.ru].

At the same time, the Central Asian geopolitical context, the result of the aggravated domestic political situation in Afghanistan (the public remained ignorant about the results of the election to the parliament, while every day brings more news about the Taliban's activities), Uzbekistan (the Andijan events may trigger a crisis in the Ferghana Valley), Kyrgyzstan (where domestic policies may develop into a civil war), the relatively shaky stability in Tajikistan, as well as potential threats to the security of Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries (China and Russia) suggest that military-political potential should be strengthened and the social and economic situation in each of the republics improved.

An analysis of the situation that has developed in the region confirmed that in the mid-term, extremism and terrorism will come to the fore as the greatest and gravest threat to the local states. International terrorism, religious extremism, organized crime, poverty, and drug trafficking combined are a mine under Central Asian stability. Economic backwardness, overpopulation, and the water shortages acutely felt during the irrigation periods are threats that may disrupt the precarious Central Asian balance.

Most of the local states are demonstrating a widening gap in their economic and political development.

The armed conflicts of 1999-2001 in the south of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, as well as the spring 2005 domestic political developments in Kyrgyzstan, are all signs of domestic political weakness of the newly independent states and their moving away from one another. Most of the countries that belong to any of the influence groups mentioned above do not want the region to become another hot spot with religious extremism as the main igniting factor.

The influence groups will remain in Central Asia to continue their struggle with varying success, while many of them will extend their aid (economic, financial, or even in the form of membership in interstate structures and international organizations that presupposes considerable support in dealing with all sorts of problems) to the region's states. This suggests a choice that might create even more tension than the struggle against religious extremism in which both groups are currently involved.

The future is easily predictable: we have to admit that Islamic radicalism looks at Central Asia as its reserve with a considerable protest potential. We cannot ignore the fact that in the past an independent Islamic state existed in Central Asia; the idea of its revival has been inspiring many religious figures for a long time.

When discussing the spiritual factor and its role in the Central Asian republics, we should never equate Islam with a religion and political Islam with an instrument of the power struggle. We should bear in mind that political Islam flourishes in those countries where the gap between popular expectations and realities is too wide to be accepted.

Under these conditions, political Islam will offer, in full conformity with its traditions, a different and fairly efficient answer. If ignored, that possibility may send local tension up and push the Central Asian states into the ranks of those who support political Islam. Central Asia is a territory of potential spread in terrorism and religious extremism, the level of which may easily reach its peak to attract the attention of the leading countries once more. As an area in which the world's leading states clash in pursuit of their interests, it will turn into a ground on which new political techniques and fresh approaches to neutralizing public organizations that either promote or put radical religious ideas into practice are tested.