

RELIGION IN SOCIETY

**A EURASIAN ISLAM?
(A vision on the position and
evolution of Islam and Islamism
in former Soviet Central Asia and
the Caspian)**

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Scenarios of “balkanization,” “talibanization” and “revolutionary contamination from Iran” of the southern Soviet rim were popular in the early 1990s. These concerns were understandable since they came at times when the world was simultaneously confronted with nationalist wars in the Balkans, the appearance of several newly independent states with Muslim majorities in the former Soviet space and the outbreak of a number of armed conflicts in this

part of the world (Tajikistan, Nagorno-Karabakh), the first Gulf war as well as Islamist movements turning seriously wrong in Afghanistan and Algeria. Reality turned out to be more complex. The purpose of this article is to tackle a number of conventional truths about Islam in the region and to point out certain sociological factors which, in my opinion, will determine the evolution of Islam and Islamism in former Soviet Central Asia and the Caspian.

**A “Disconnected” Part of
the Ummah ... Or Not?**

In this analysis, I define the region as a space with six states that emerged from the U.S.S.R. and where the majority of the population is, at least nominally or traditionally, of the Islamic faith: Ka-

zakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and, on the other side of the Caspian, Azerbaijan. In average, in 2004, 80 percent of the population in this region was or is at least considered to be Muslim.¹ The large majority of the 52.3 million Muslims in the region, historically known as Turkistan, are of Hanafi Sunni tradition.² Certain micro-regions and communities are of Chafii Sunni tradition (in some parts of Tajikistan and Azerbaijan notably) while there are Twelver Shi'ites (a two-thirds majority in Azerbaijan, a substantial minority in Uzbekistan) as well as Ismaili Shi'ites (in the eastern part of Tajikistan).³

The earlier use of the expression "nominally or traditionally of the Islamic faith" is not at random. This is a part of the Islamic world where the position and practice of Islam developed along different lines than those in "classical" Islamic countries. So what are the main characteristics of Islam in this space?

- First, for several decades, the region was cut off from the Islamic world, the main currents there as well as its intellectual centers by means of a geopolitical and administrative frontier. This, as well as the anti-religious policies and Russification attempts that were part of Soviet Communism, resulted in a rather rudimentary religious conscience and a very local and tribal practice of the Islamic faith. The fact that if not clear majorities then at least substantial portions of the region's inhabitants identify themselves as Muslims is not matched by a strong practice or observation of the main precepts of Islam nor by the presence of a significant faith-based civil society. Depending on the source and the community examined, an average of 20 percent of the former Soviet Muslims practice their religion regularly in one or another way.⁴ Since secularization is not a one-way process, the limited level of religious practice and observance does not exclude that parts of the non-observant majority will become religiously more active in one way or another in the future.⁵
- Second, the region which is examined here is the theater of the most recent wave of decolonization since the U.S.S.R. was structurally a form of Russian colonial empire or, at least, the continuation of a colonial system whose foundations were laid by imperial Russia. In

¹ This is an average calculated on figures ranging from 47 percent of Muslims in Kazakhstan to 93,4 percent in Azerbaijan.

² Turkistan ("land of the Turks" in Farsi) and Mawara'un Nahr ("land between the rivers" in Arabic) are two historical names for Central Asia. Nowadays, the whole region is situated in the periphery of the Islamic world yet it was not always so. The Persian Samanid Emirate, for example, used to be a major cultural and economic center in the tenth century, just like the Turkic Ghaznavid Sultanate between 975 and 1187. On the other bank of the Caspian, Derbent, which is situated north of Azerbaijan, also used to be a regional religious center between the eighth and tenth centuries.

³ The former Soviet Ummah is not limited to the 52.3 million Muslims in Central Asia and the Caspian but also includes about 16 million people of Muslim background in Russia (the Northern Caucasus, Moscow and other urban centers and the Volga-Ural region). The number of Muslims in Russia differs according to the source and census criteria and varies from 9 to 20 million (see: J. Radvani, "Neskolko otvetov na nepostavlennii vopros: islam i perepis naseleniia 2002 goda v Rossii," *Kazanskii Federalist*, KIF-IFEAC, No. 1 (13), Winter 2005, pp. 82-90). Islam and the Muslim communities in Russia are also in a flux, for part of the Muslims are assimilated into mainstream Russian culture. Moreover, Islam in Russia is no longer a matter among the country's traditionally Muslim ethnic groups (Tatars, Bashkirs and North Caucasians in particular) but also of the hundreds of thousands of migrant workers from Central Asia and the Caspian.

⁴ According to previous research, this ranges from 8 to 10 percent in Kazakhstan to 34 percent in Uzbekistan. For more data on the religious practice among former Soviet Muslims see: S. Kushkumbaev, "Islam v Kazakhstane i etnicheskaia identichnost," *Kazanskii Federalist*, KIF-IFEAC, No. 1 (13), Winter 2005, p. 99 for Muslims in Kazakhstan; T. Dadabaev, "How does Transition Work in Central Asia? Coping with Ideological, Economic and Value System Changes in Central Asia," *Central Asian Survey*, No. 26 (3), September 2007, p. 414 for Uzbekistan; T. Faradov, "Religiosity and Civic Culture in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: A Sociological Perspective," in: A.B. Sajoo, *Civil Society in the Muslim World: Contemporary Perspectives*, Institute for Ismaili Studies and IB Tauris, London, 2002, pp. 194-214 for Azerbaijan; and J. Radvani, op. cit. (cf. note 3), p. 89, for data on the Tatars in Russia.

⁵ For a discussion of some characteristics of the "ex-Soviet Ummah," see: G. Yemelianova, "The Rise of Islam in Muslim Eurasia: Internal Determinants and Potential Consequences," *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2007, pp. 75-76 as well as M. Laruelle, S. Peyrouse, "Globalnie protsessy transformatsii identichnosti i religioznosti: posts-ovietkii islam," *Kazanskii Federalist*, KIF-IFEAC, No. 1 (13), Winter 2005, pp. 7-27.

the region's post-colonial reality we have, on the one hand, a number of secular power elites who mostly come from the Soviet compradore class and who are naturally uneasy with religion and Islam in particular. On the other hand, there are a population and certain socially mobile groups who are confronted with stark social changes since the demise of the U.S.S.R. To varying extents and in different ways, they see Islam as a source of identity and social cohesion.

Between the two is a field of tension in which the secular power elites try to varying extents and in different ways to recuperate certain aspects and interpretations of Islam for their national ideologies.⁶ The argument that the secular regimes in the region at least prevent the mixture of religion and politics is of limited validity, for they are the first to mix both themselves with, first, governmental Islam and, second, the use of the "Islamist threat" for purposes of legitimacy.⁷ In fact, the presence of a real and perceived Islamist threat is convenient for some of the region's regimes as well as for the great powers who vie for influence in the region (Russia, China and the Anglo-American axis), to respectively justify repression of all opposition and the expansion of political-military presence in the region.⁸

Expression of Social Mobility?

Since the end of the U.S.S.R. and the opening of its southern frontier with the "classical" Islamic world, a renewed interest for Islam in Central Asia and the Caspian went through several phases and turns, fed by internal as well as global factors. A relatively strong and visible (or at least well-mediated) surge of interest for Islam among people during the perestroika years in the late 1980s and just after independence in the early 1990s lost momentum after that until into the second half of the 1990s. Causes include the natural wane of curiosity and enthusiasm among people, state repression (in Uzbekistan, for example), as well as the psychological impact of armed conflicts associated with radical Islamism in Tajikistan, Chechnia and Afghanistan.

Since then, however, there is renewed and increasing interest for Islam among former Soviet Muslims be it more systematically, less stark and much of it more in the shadows than before. Despite relatively low levels of religious observation, personal conversations as well as research

⁶ Despite the official atheism and the anti-religious campaigns in the U.S.S.R., religion including Islam was co-opted by the state in the 1940s in the form of so-called Spiritual Directorates. These were founded to coopt potentially restive Soviet Muslims and for internal as well as international propaganda purposes (see: O. Roy, *La nouvelle Asie centrale ou la fabrication des nations*, Seuil, Paris, 1997, pp. 96-97). Most states in the region have taken over the Soviet system of "governmental Islam" in the form of a *muftiate* or a religious affairs bureau in order to keep maximum control over Islam and the clergy. In certain cases, a "tamed," politically correct Islam and state clergy have become outright channels for the regime's ideology (Uzbekistan, to a lesser extent Tajikistan) or for the personal glorification and even outright canonization of the president (Turkmenistan under Saparmurad Niyazov). Note that "governmental Islam" is not a Soviet invention but was a concept inspired by republican Turkey.

⁷ An example of the use of Islam to legitimate a secular power elite were billboards with quotes from the Tajik president Emomali Rakhmon that I saw right near the entrance of the mausoleum of Zain-Ul-Abdin in Jilikul when I was there in late 2006.

⁸ The regular appearance of the transnational Hizb-ut-Tahrir movement, which is said to be present everywhere in the region except Turkmenistan but of which no one knows the real strength and capacity, is one example of such instrumentalization. Other examples include: the shady role of the Russian expeditionary Border Guards in Tajikistan during the incursions of guerrilla fighters of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in Batken and Uzbekistan in 1999 and 2000; several blasts and violent incidents in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan between 2002 and 2007 which were never claimed or elucidated and showed to be of nonpolitical criminal nature, yet quickly attributed to "Islamic radicals" and in many cases followed-up by official restrictive measures against Islam.

results show that solid majorities among the former Soviet Muslims considers themselves to believe and attach different levels of importance to religion in the social field. Let us take a look at a number of attitudes toward religion (Islam in this case) in Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan as compared to Turkey.⁹

	Uzbekistan	Azerbaijan	Turkey
Religion is very important at the individual and social level (strong believers)	35	6,4	65
Religion is rather or somewhat important at the individual and social level (believers)	46	62.7	23
Religion is a private-individual affair and must stay separate from government and politics*	55	91	73
Islam should play a larger role in political and social life**	44.5	—	42
Religion is a necessary condition for morality and social responsibility	74	60.3	84
* Data for December 2002.			
** Data for May 2004.			

Even if the above compiled data are indicative, it is interesting to see how the large majority of respondents in both former Soviet republics studies considers themselves to be either strong believers who attach much importance to religion (a small group in Azerbaijan, a substantial group in Uzbekistan) or believers attaching a certain importance to religion (about two-thirds in Azerbaijan, nearly half in Uzbekistan). In the coming years, certain segments within the latter category, which is basically a grey zone in motion, will, depending on local and global circumstances, likely increase or decrease their religious activity and identification. This creates a space for several developments and dynamics within Islam in the region also since strong majorities in both former Soviet republics consider religion to be a necessary condition for morality and social responsibility.

In my opinion, some analysts and opinion leaders misperceived a couple of factors when they assessed the position and the developments of Islam in Central Asia and the Caspian. In a way, this reflects the tense and emotional global climate during the early 1990s and immediately after 2001. Yet they continue to influence the perception of Islam in this part of the world up to this day at several levels. A first misperception is to think that a renewed interest for Islam among certain segments of

⁹ For Uzbekistan and Turkey, see: The Pew Global Attitudes Project, Views of a Changing World. How Global Publics View the War in Iraq, Democracy, Islam and Governance, and Globalization, and Project No. 44 Final Topline Results, The Pew Research Center, June 2003, available at [www.people-press.org], pp. 39 and 115. From the same project, Among Wealthy Nations, the *US Stands Alone in its Embrace of Religion*, The Pew Research Center, Washington DC, December 2002, available at [www.people-press.org] and Global Gender Gaps, May 2004, The Pew Research Center, available at [www.pewglobal.org]. For Azerbaijan, see: T. Faradov, op. cit. (cf. note 4), pp. 194-214.

society is equal to “Islamic radicalization” or an “extremist-fundamentalist wave.” It is not or, at least, not necessarily. If a Muslim becomes more observant and finds an identity and a certain dignity in Islam, it does not mean that this individual wants to live in a Sharia state led by a religious class like Saudi Arabia, Iran or Afghanistan under the Taliban.¹⁰ In fact, the chance that one or more Central Asian and Caspian countries become an Islamic state of some sort or that their populations even become receptive for it are marginal at best. It is important to make that distinction, especially since in some of the region’s countries, “extremism” has become a stigma to repress every thought or movement (even secular) that is not submissive to the incumbent power elite.

A second misperception is to think that the interest for religion is by definition the result of poverty and of the economic situation in much of the region. Although these do play a role, they cannot be an all-round explanation. Communities who live in high to extreme poverty do not think about questions of identity and social cohesion but about primal survival. The interest for religion among certain communities and segments of society is not so much a matter of poverty nor an expression of a wish to return to the pre-colonial era, but a reaction to social change and mobility caused by the unraveling and demise of Soviet society.¹¹ More specifically, the latter pushed communities and individuals to economically adjust in the face of change of profession and social status, rural-urban migration, seasonal labor migration to Russia, border trade and so on.¹²

These social and economic changes as well as the impact of modern media and communication (especially the wide availability of parabolic antennas and DVD players, for example) and, in some parts of the region, the lingering impact of armed conflict during the 1990s all led to a certain erosion of Soviet as well as traditional ethnic identities in the region. Even if ethnic and micro-regional identities continue to be important among the population, their relevance will certainly decrease among certain socially mobile groups in the future. This will leave a void that will have to be filled by new forms of identity, of which different forms of Islam will certainly be part. In this sense, Islam in Central Asia is no longer a matter of conservative provincials in Namangan in Uzbekistan or in the valleys around Garm in Tajikistan, both traditionally considered to be centers of Islam and Islamic activity in the region.

There are also signs of a fledgling process of change in the situation where Islam is predominantly seen as merely a component of one’s ethnic and micro-regional identity—i.e. one is a Muslim because one is Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Tatar or Uighur—rather than as an identity framework by itself. A recent research on Islam and ethnicity in Kyrgyzstan, for example, pointed out that even if a large majority of the respondents identify themselves in function of their ethnicity first and then only in function of faith, one quarter identified themselves as Muslims first. The bulk of respondents in this category are of the 25-35 age group and entrepreneurs or people with a nonreligious education. Likewise, a study published in *Central Asian Survey* in late 2007 suggests the existence of a similar phenomenon in Uzbekistan where one-fifth of the respondents see themselves first as Muslims and only then as members of an ethnic group.¹³ In Azerbaijan, there is a certain rise in interest for different

¹⁰ In mid-2006, an ethnic Kyrgyz policeman from the area of Tokmaq, where there is a Dungan community, told me: “Our Dungan neighbors are more Muslim than we Kyrgyz. Look what happens. They drink less, work better and we have less problems with narcotics with their youth than with ours. That’s why they live better than us.”

¹¹ For theoretic approaches in this regard, see, amongst others: O. Roy, *L’Islam mondialisé*, Seuil, Paris, 2002, pp. 68-71; P. Beyer, *Religion and Globalization*, Sage Publications, London, 1994, pp. 71-73.

¹² At the individual level, increasing horizontal mobility certainly influences the perception of Islam and its place in society. A Tajik Muslim and labor migrant from Kofarnigan told me, for example, that it was much easier for him to find diverse literature about Islam in Kazan, the Russian city where he works part of the year, than in Tajikistan itself. Likewise, others who travel outside of the former Soviet space see, for instance, that Islam in Turkey is something totally different than what happens in Afghanistan and conclude that Islam and modernity can coexist despite of what the conventional wisdoms and propaganda in their country of origin say.

¹³ E. Usabaliev, *Etnicheskaia kharakteristika i osobennosti identifikatsii musulman Kyrgyzstana*, ISAP, Bishkek, available at [tazar.kg], 9 February, 2008, pp. 4-5; T. Dadabaev, *op. cit.* (cf. note 4), pp. 413-415.

forms of “alternative Islam” among certain groups of youth with a higher education who often come from nonreligious families.¹⁴

Another factor that has certainly created a space for religion is the failure of secular, “imported” ideologies like Soviet Communism and nationalism, as well as the discredit of what is seen as Western liberal democracy in the region.¹⁵ It should not be underestimated that many at the grassroots level strongly associate the latter with impoverishment and the disintegration of the social tissue during the 1990s; with crime and corruption; with the dislocation of the economy following the neoliberal remedies imposed by the international financial institutions; with a civil society that does not represent society at all but is merely a subcontractor for Western donors; and with the hypocrisy of dealing with authoritarian regimes for economic interests despite the democracy and human rights discourse.¹⁶

A New “Zone of Islam”?

Confronted with a late decolonization, social mobility as well as with different influences that are as contradictory as they are controversial due to the geopolitical position of Central Asia and the Caspian, the question of identity remains acute. Certain socially mobile categories of people—small and medium entrepreneurs or certain parts of the labour migrants for example—look or will search for ways to affirm themselves. One of the ways to do this is or will be through one or another form of religious identification. It is that which explains the Islamophobia of certain secular elites in the region: that Islam becomes a binding agent for socially mobile groups and individuals who will sooner or later try to obtain a place and share in society and, as such, challenge the incumbent elites.¹⁷

In everyday reality, the vast majority of the region’s population wants a decent life and a minimum of social security and social justice for themselves and their families. Yet, as Samuel Huntington says, acting in function of that self-interest supposes that one knows that self and, hence, supposes an identity. If we analyze the present-day identities in former Soviet Central Asia and the Caspian, one distinguishes two key elements. First, a continuing Russian influence due to the Soviet-colonial experience, continuing economic ties not only in the energy sector but also in the field of labor migration, and the status of Russian as the regional lingua franca and major media language. Second, despite the fact that former

¹⁴ International Crisis Group, *Azerbaijan: Independent Islam and the State*, ICG Europe Report No. 191, 25 March, 2008, pp. 2, 10; B. Bakir, L. Fuller, “Azerbaijan: ‘Alternative Islam’ Takes Several Forms,” *Eurasianet*, available at [eurasianet.org], 16 August, 2007.

¹⁵ Attempts by several of the region’s governments to create national ideologies or identities around certain myths—the cult of Timur in Uzbekistan and Manas in Kyrgyzstan, the Rukhnama in Turkmenistan and the pre-Islamic Persian-Aryan civilization in Tajikistan—and a folkloristic practice of what is presented as “national traditions” are, in my opinion, set to fail. The reason is that they are artificial, neo-Soviet (a cult of “national heroes” that is a carbon copy of the Lenin cult) and very *top down* concepts that are to minimize the role of Islam in people’s identities, but that touch little wood in society at large. Islam, by contrast, is historically present in the region even if it is in a flux and if observance is limited. It is also a part of a wider global cultural sphere in full motion.

¹⁶ The relevance of the discredit of “Western democracy” in the Islamic renewal process is also pointed out by Igor Rotar (“Zigzagi postsovetovskogo islamizma. Musulmanskii renessans v stranakh SNG prinimaet protivorechivye formy,” *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 5 March, 2008). Ironically, several presidential parties in countries with authoritarian regimes bear the term “democracy” in their names (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan).

¹⁷ Some doubt this by pointing to the emergence of a politically indifferent and passive middle class in countries like Kazakhstan or Azerbaijan (e.g. R. Weitz, “Kazakhstan: The Emerging Middle Class Thinks Money, not Democracy,” *Eurasianet*, available at [eurasianet.org], 11 March, 2008). I have two remarks in that respect. First, what some analysts and observers consider to be the middle class are people whose material and outward lifestyle indeed much resembles that of the American and European middle classes, but who are sociologically not a middle class (see also: A. Rasizade, “Azerbaijan Descending into the Third World after a Decade of Independence,” *Journal of Third World Studies*, No. 21 (1), Spring 2004, pp. 191-219 in this regard). Rather, they are part of the bureaucratic-economic elite and its entourage. Second, this is not to deny the appearance of proto-middle classes, primarily in the capitals and certain economic centers like Almaty, who are, at present, primarily focused on material and financial gain. Nevertheless, this does not mean that they will stay politically passive in the future.

Soviet Central Asia and the Caspian were long situated in the periphery of the Islamic world and were cut off from the latter in the U.S.S.R., much of the cultural heritage is undeniably marked by Islam. These two elements seem contradictory and incompatible but are not necessarily so.

When we speak about Islam in a Russian-dominated Eurasia, is there something like a “Eurasian Islam”? The idea of such a concept came up after reading an article by Hakan Yavuz which was published in the *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* in 2004.¹⁸ The article’s main thesis is that even if the origins of the Islamic religion are Arabic, even if the centers of Islam are situated in the Arab world and even if Arabic is the liturgical lingua franca of Islam, due to different social geographies, patterns of colonization and the influence of pre-Islamic religions, there are different “zones of Islam” within the Islamic world which can and do overlap and interact but do have distinct features. The author distinguishes seven such zones: the Arab core; the Turkish zone; the Iranian-Shi‘ite zone; Subcontinental Indian; Malay-Indonesian; the non-Arab African zone; and finally the Muslim immigrant communities in the West and more specifically in Europe among whom could emerge a “Euro-Islam.”

Could we add an eighth zone to those: that of Eurasian Islam among the former Soviet Muslims? And if so, what are or could be its characteristics? Personally I distinguish three characteristics. First, it is or will be a Russian-speaking Islam if not officially then at least in practice. What former Soviet Muslims have in common regardless of their ethnic background and micro-regional origin, is that they went through the Soviet-colonial experience or its aftermath and legacies and that their lingua franca is Russian. Much Islamic literature from the Arab world and Turkey is translated into Russian by different structures and organizations and becomes, as such, accessible for former Soviet Muslims regardless of their origins. The fact that hundreds of thousands of former Soviet Muslims pass at least part of the year as migrant workers in Russia will certainly strengthen the process.¹⁹

Second, a Eurasian Islam is an Islam which tries to define itself in the wake of the slow but certain erosion of the influence and credibility of forms of Islamic practice that have long been dominating, namely governmental Islam and so-called folk Sufism. In several cases, an impotent and disconnected governmental Islam shows to have no real hold among the population and finds itself heavily discredited because of its close association and subjugation to the regime in question. And even if folk Sufism, for its part, will remain an important form of Islamic practice throughout the region, its influence will decrease for several reasons. Being generally of very micro-regional and local, rural and conservative nature, its position will deteriorate along with that of local identities and traditions following migration and the impact of globalization.²⁰ Moreover, being often coopted and folklorized by national and local power elites for sake of legitimacy or promoted as an antidote to “imported extremism,” folk Sufism runs the risk of being discredited once the said power elites are.

The fact that much more than is the case with other zones of Islam, Eurasian Islam is an Islam that is still in a process of defining itself, creates a space for religious knowledge and resources from outside Central Asia and the Caspian. The importance of that is strengthened by globalization and by the fact that there are little independent and homegrown media, civil society organizations, educated cadres and charismatic intellectuals of Islamic inspiration in the region, who can offer a voice and contemporary interpretations of Islam or give form to it.²¹ As the graphic below shows, vectors for

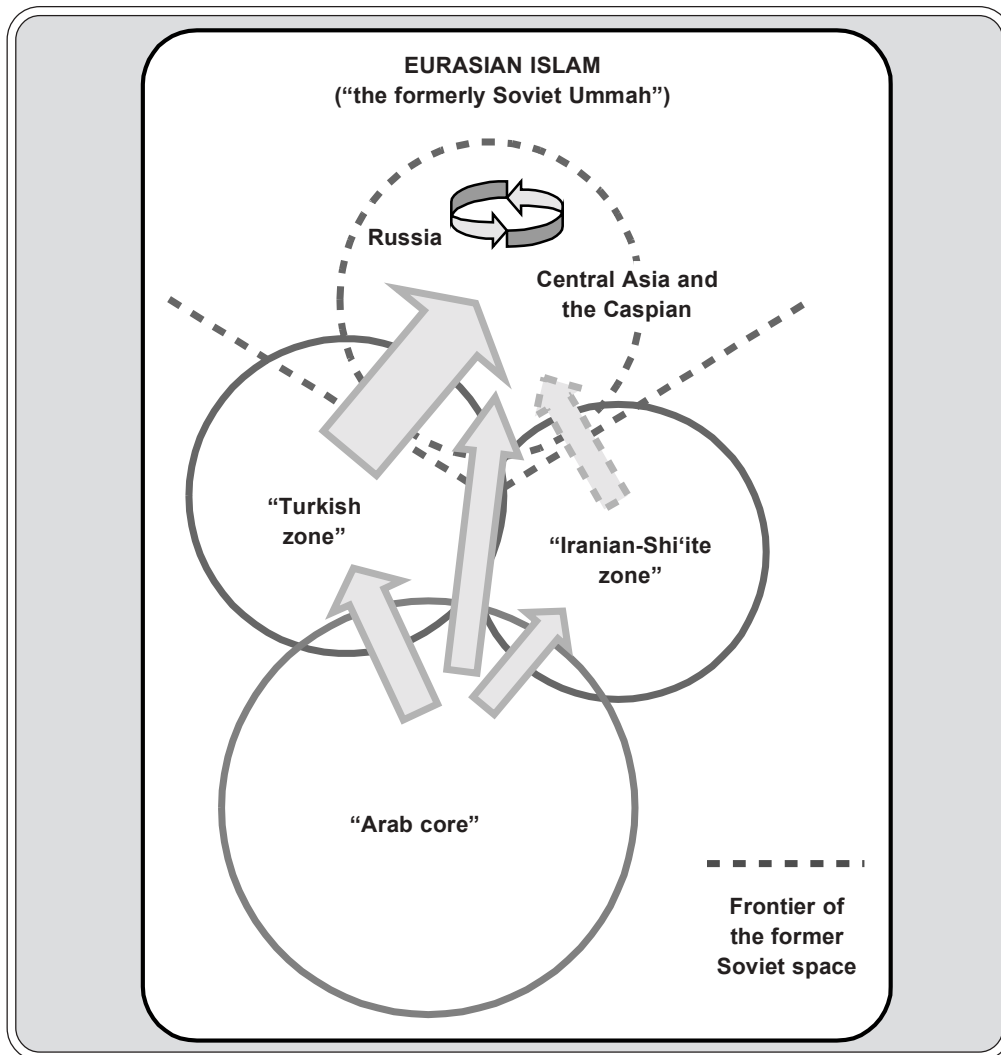
¹⁸ H. Yavuz, “Is there a Turkish Islam?” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2004, pp. 213-232.

¹⁹ For more detail on the coming into existence of a russophone Islam, see: S. Gradirovskii, “Kulturnoe pograniche: russkii islam,” *Kazanskii Federalist*, KIF-IFEAC, No. 1 (13), Winter 2005, pp. 47-51; R. Muhametchin, “V poiskah religioznoi identichnosti,” *Kazanskii Federalist*, KIF-IFEAC, No. 1 (13), Winter 2005, pp. 77-80; A. Malashenko, “Islam, the Way We See It,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, No. 4, October-December 2006.

²⁰ There is a similar process in other parts of the Islamic world, like Pakistan for instance.

²¹ This being said, even if there are no homegrown regional equivalents of a Fetulla Gülen (though his movement is active in the region), Tariq Ramadan or Heydar Jemal, nor a tradition of faith-based social work and philanthropy like in Turkey, younger, independent and educated religious opinion leaders do appear in the region. Examples include Elgar Ibragimoglu and Azer Ramizoglu in Azerbaijan. Another example, though more ambiguous, is Mohammad Sadiq Yusuf, the former mufti of Uzbekistan who was in exile between 1993 and 2000, and amnestied after that. He maintains a certain authority and independence vis-à-vis the Tashkent regime and communicates amongst others through his portal site islam.uz.

religious knowledge and resources are or will be of Arabic origin and translated into Russian, and distributed by former Soviet Muslims or made available by global communication technology (DVD, parabolic antennas, the Internet); faith-based civil society from Turkey; as well as Muslims and Islamic organizations from Russia.²² I doubt whether the historical Sufi institutions in the region, even though they are still important at the micro-regional level and an important religious reference for many individual Soviet Muslims, can and will play an active role in Islamic renewal in the region. The reason is that they are often fragmentized, isolated and conservative to the extent of being associated with incumbent power elites.²³ Since Sufi practices are often anchored in ethnic and micro-regional identities, their importance will decrease when these ethnic and micro-regional identities deteriorate.



²² Graphic created by the author.

²³ See: I. Rotar, op. cit. (cf. note 16); A. Papas, “The Sufi and the President in post-Soviet Uzbekistan,” *ISIM Review*, 16, Fall 2005, pp. 38-39. A Tajik political scientist who works on religious issues told me the following in this regard: “Su-

A third characteristic, one as important as it is paradoxical, is that Eurasian Islam is not anchored in a desire for “arabization” nor in pan-Turkism or idealized nostalgia for the pre-colonial situation, but in a desire among many Soviet Muslims to link up through the Islamic religion with the better aspects and values of Soviet Communism which got obliterated or marginalized by the rapacious capitalism that succeeded it. I am speaking about a certain social security and cohesion, absence of criminality and corruption at least compared to the present situation, and resistance against social degeneration including rampant alcoholism and narcotics. I want to stress that the Eurasian Islam as it is characterized here is virtual and not an ideology nor a common conscience or identity among former Soviet Muslims. It is not meant to be that. It is a category of Islam that is marked by the context and the social and historical circumstances in which it is situated and in which it evolves.

One element at the geopolitical level that could contribute to the emergence of a “Eurasian Islam” or at least determine its direction is the extent to which the Russian establishment is willing and able to recuperate certain dynamics within the former Soviet Ummah. Certain influential intellectuals in Russia, where Muslims now form the second largest component of society, not only back Russian membership of the Organization of the Islamic Conference but also plead for Russia taking the lead in backing what they consider to be “good Islam:” traditional Sufism and Shi‘ism.²⁴ The purpose of such a move is, first of all, to cement Russia’s position in strategically and energetically important parts of the Islamic world (the Northern Caucasus, Central Asia and the Caspian, Iran, Turkey as well as some Arab countries).²⁵ Second, it is to counter the influence of “bad Islam:” that is, Sunni extremism from the Gulf (Wahhabism and Salafism) that is not only perceived as “alien” to “good Islam” but also an instrument of anti-Russian destabilization by the Anglo-American axis.²⁶

Which Jihad in Turkistan?

One question remains: what are the possibilities of politization and radicalization of Islam in former Soviet Central Asia and the Caspian? I previously said that the economic growth in countries like Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan and the stagnation of the regime and society in Uzbekistan create expectations, ambitions and frustrations which will sooner or later feed several forms of political mobilization. Certain social mechanisms that led to discontent and eventually the overthrow of the pro-Western monarchy in Iran and the expansion of Islamism in several Arab countries in the 1980s

fism is indeed a historical given in this region. But nowadays, it especially tends to be idealized by certain sympathetic audiences in the West and in Russia. They tend to overestimate its importance. It is not a change factor, on the contrary. Much has degraded. Sufism here is by far not the dynamic movement that it is in Turkey or among Muslim immigrants in Europe, for example.” Besides that, among the hundreds of young clerics who got religious training outside of the former Soviet space, many have religious knowledges that are far more solid and contemporary than those of local Sufi sheikhs.

²⁴ See: M. Laruelle, “Russo-Turkish Rapprochement through the Idea of Eurasia,” *The Jamestown Foundation, Occasional Paper*, April 2008, p. 4, T. Ataev, “Religionznoe obramlenie geopoliticheskoi borbi,” *Islam v Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 13 May 2008.

²⁵ See: I.K. Korostelev, “Povorot na Vostok,” *Islam v sovremennom mire: vnutrigosudarstvennii i mezhdunarodno-politicheskii aspekti*, No. 3-4 (9-10), 2007, available at [www.islamrf.ru/islammodern]; idem, “‘Islamskii vektor’ vo vneshnei politike sovremennoi Rossii: tekhnologiya proriva,” *Islam v sovremennom mire: vnutrigosudarstvennii i mezhdunarodno-politicheskii aspekti*, No. 2 (8), 2007; D.B. Malysheva, “Rossiya v poiskah novogo partnerstva na musulmanskom Blizhnem Vostoke,” *Islam v sovremennom mire: vnutrigosudarstvennii i mezhdunarodno-politicheskii aspekti*, No. 1 (7), 2007.

²⁶ This perception is fed by memories on the financial and military support given by the U.S. and, especially, by the intelligence services of U.S. allies like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to extremist Sunni guerillas against the Soviet occupation force and the Communist regime in Afghanistan during the 1980s. Of more recent date but along the same lines is the popular idea that the Salafist guerrillas in Chechnia and other parts of the Northern Caucasus receive various forms of support from Anglo-American intelligence services (see, for example: S. Yuriev, “Neft v obmen na detei: terroristy vypolniaiut zakaz tekhn, komu nuzhen ukhod Rossii s Kavkaza,” *Komsomolskaia pravda*, 3 September, 2004; M. Alexandrov, “Rossiiu vydavlivaiut iz Zakavkaziia,” *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 6 September, 2004).

and 1990s are nowadays present in Central Asia and the Caspian as well. This, however, does not mean that political mobilization of discontent and ambitions will go along Islamic lines in the region. It is only one of the options among other channels like various social and environmental movements and, in some countries, anti-Chinese nationalism, for example.

In these circumstances, do radicalized forms of Islam, inspired and supported by movements from the “classical,” non-Soviet Islamic world, pose no threat at all then? It does, but not to the extent that it can continue to serve as an alibi for all-round oppression by regimes like that in Uzbekistan or for international support of such regimes (it must be said that certain regimes form a bigger threat for pious Muslim than vice-versa). In terms of nongovernmental politization of Islam in the region, one has to make a distinction between nonviolent and violent forms. My personal estimation of political Islam’s potential in the region comes to the following. If a nonviolent Islamist party of the kind of the Turkish Justice and Development Party could participate in free and fair elections, I estimate that it could obtain between 5 and 15 percent of the votes depending on the area, social group and local as well as global circumstances.

Violent expressions of Islamism do will reappear. If I said before that this threat tends to be inflated and instrumentalized for political purposes, it does not mean that it is entirely absent or based on mere myths. I am more concretely thinking about fractions issued from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan like the Islamic Jihad Union or about homegrown local groups like Bayat in Tajikistan. The question is though, what their military capacity and popular support base in the region are. These look quite limited, especially if we remember the incapability of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan to do anything sustainable, hold any territory or even inspire a popular revolt in Uzbekistan after the group’s surprise guerrilla offensive at its zenith in 1999.

Ironically, the presence of a low-intensity threat of violent Islamism arranges several of those who pretend to combat it. “Islamist terrorism” in formerly Soviet Central Asia and the Caspian will probably adopt the proportions of revolutionary Marxist cells that existed in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, like the Baader-Meinhof Group and Action directe. Strongly mediatized and sensationalized and politically instrumentalized by some, they proved to have no popular base among the working classes whose interests they pretended to represent. They could not destabilize the situation. If changes in the power system lead to an eruption of wider violence—a scenario which is not unthinkable of in Uzbekistan—this will not be due to one or another international Islamist scheme but rather to local power struggles and cropped-up frustrations. From its side, the question remains to what extent the international Jihadi movement, including its elements who are originally from the southern U.S.S.R., remains interested in the “liberation” of the region in times when there are other, much more symbolic frontlines like Iraq and Afghanistan where jihadis fight Anglo-American occupiers.²⁷

With a traditional association with Islam and an Islamic practice and conscience in flux and mutation, confronted with a late decolonization and social mobility, as well as with different influences that are as contradictory as they are controversial due to the geopolitical position of Central Asia and the Caspian, the challenge for the former Soviet Muslims is not to have to choose between status quo and stagnation, blind westernization or what is seen as it, and “Islamic extremism.” It is most and for all to find their place in today’s global reality. The role that Islam will play in this process or in the way it is being expressed should not be underestimated. This is the real Jihad in Turkistan.

²⁷ The evolution of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and its leader Tahir Yuldosh since 2001 and 2002 is most interesting in this regard. Heavily reduced and based in the Pakistani tribal areas of Waziristan now, it seems that they no longer have a real agenda and strategy for Uzbekistan but that they were absorbed into a larger Taliban and al-Qa’eda nexus that fights the Anglo-American and governmental forces in Afghanistan.