

**OFFICIAL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION
IN TAJIKISTAN.
IMAM E AZAM ABU HANIFA
ISLAMIC INSTITUTE OF TAJIKISTAN:
PAST AND PRESENT**

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ABSTRACT

The author tells us how the Islamic Institute of Tajikistan (until 2007, the Tajik Islamic University) was set up and is developing; he follows the far-from-easy road the official religious education system has covered as part of the process of Islamic revival that began as soon as the

country became independent. He also looks at the moving forces and stages of the development of the official higher religious education system in Tajikistan, the key figures involved, and the problems caused by the remnants of the Soviet anti-religious past.

He identifies the main problems—lack of qualified teachers and textbooks—as well as the main obstacle, viz. defects of management and organization of the teaching process and funding, as well as clashes between the traditional and modern principles and methods for teaching religious disciplines. Much attention is paid to the role of the state

in developing official religious education as part of Tajikistan's education system.

The author traces the stages that finally brought the Islamic Institute of Tajikistan under the patronage of the state, a process that transformed the non-state religious educational establishment into a state educational institution.

KEYWORDS: *Islam, Tajikistan, religious education, madrassah, methods for teaching religious disciplines.*

Introduction

In Tajikistan, aggressive atheism of the Soviet period did not completely suppress the religious feelings of the people, among whom Islam survived as the predominant religion. The most active local Muslims carefully preserved the Muslim theological traditions and spoke about the norms of the Shari'a at religious ceremonies, in mosques, during religious rituals, etc. Islam survived thanks to the clandestine and highly ramified network of private religious education that used theological literature Tajiks secretly brought into the country from Muslim countries they managed to visit under different pretexts.

Perestroika which began in the Soviet Union in 1986 started an Islamic revival; in 1987-1990 mosques were built in large numbers; people flocked to attend Persian graphics (based on the Arabic) and the Arabic language classes. The schools and madrassahs in Tashkent and Bukhara could not satisfy the growing need for religious education.

In 1991, the Soviet Union fell apart into independent states. Shortly before that, the Tajik department of the Kaziat of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SAMCAK) was set up to administer the country's religious life under the general guidance of the government.¹

In 1989, the SAMCAK opened a religious school at the republic's Kaziat with no official status. Nor did it have a curriculum to be endorsed by the Committee for Religious Affairs under the Government of Tajikistan or the Ministry of Education, an established lesson schedule, specified duration of study time, or generally accepted examination system. However, the school did determine the compulsory subjects to be studied, established a study schedule, and hired teaching staff.

The Tajik civil war, which began in May 1992, disrupted the teaching process. However, in 1995, half of the former teachers and students joined forces to revive the school, and the madrassah began functioning again.

After three years of civil war, the school found it hard to catch up with the demands of the times: it remained devoted to the outdated style of the Bukhara madrassah in terms of study form and content.² This explains why the heads of the Committee for Religious Affairs started thinking about a religious educational institution better adjusted to reality.

¹ Until 1993, the Kaziat of Tajikistan was part of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan with its center in Tashkent. In February 1993, the muftiat of Tajikistan was set up at the first conference of the republic's Muslims.

² In the Soviet Union, higher religious education was limited to the Mir-i Arab madrassah in Bukhara.

State-Patronized Madrassah Set Up

In 1995, the Committee for Religious Affairs announced that it intended to set up a state-patronized madrassah: it gathered together 200 to 250 former students and 12 to 15 teachers from the religious school that had been functioning at the Kaziat.

The new madrassah was set up under the government; the Religious Center under the RT Government appointed a man absolutely ignorant of the structure and functioning of similar schools and higher educational establishments as its head.

Sayidnuriddin Shakhobiddinov,³ a leading research associate at the Institute of Oriental Studies and Written Heritage of the RT Academy of Sciences, was also involved in upgrading the quality of teaching at the newly established madrassah. Later, he shouldered the much heavier burden of deputy principal responsible for drawing up the curriculum. He outlined a program of activity and a set of subjects to be taught at the madrassah, as well as their schedule and the structure of different types of lessons.

In 1995-1996, the students studied the Koran, Hadiths, the fundamentals of Islam, and Arabic grammar. The Committee for Religious Affairs allowed Sayidnuriddin Shakhobiddinov to invite highly-qualified teachers from Tajik universities; at that time I, adviser to the deputy principal for curriculum at the Tajik National University, was invited along with others.

I started working with Shakhobiddinov in January 1996; he had his own ideas about the aims, tasks, and prospects for religious Islamic education on which he relied in restructuring the madrassah and readjusting its methods.

At first, we organized several seminars on teaching methods; then we brought the following suggestions to the attention of Chairman of the Committee for Religious Affairs S. Akhmadov:

- (1) to considerably expand the curriculum by including social and other disciplines;
- (2) to spread the regulations, rules, and demands applied to other higher educational establishments to the madrassah in order to make it a higher religious educational establishment.

Chairman Akhmadov agreed with our suggestions and instructed his subordinates to elaborate a new Statute of the Islamic University of Tajikistan complete with relevant instructions, plans, etc.

In keeping with the dictates of the times, we decided that three faculties would be enough: Koranic reading and Koranic studies (or the fundamentals of Islam); the Shari'a and the history of Islam; and the Koran and Tawhid. The Hadiths, the fundamentals of Islam, the history of Islam, Arabic grammar, and social subjects were part of the curriculum in all the faculties.

In view of the fact that the first students lacked the necessary knowledge normally taught at secondary schools, we decided that the students of all the faculties should be taught according to the same curriculum so that they could master the basics of Arabic grammar and graphics, the Tajik language and Tajik literature, the fundamentals of the Shari'a, etc. Then, after they passed the exams, they could move on to higher classes.

It should be said that this was not easy: as soon as the young students learned how to read the Koran and memorized a couple of the *ayats*, their happy parents imagined that their children had mastered all the subtleties of Islamic science and become *domullo* (teacher of the faith). The parents preferred to ignore the fact that half-baked *domullo* knew next to nothing about the fundamentals of Islam and *fiqh*, or about the rich and diverse history of their country and the traditional literature of their ancestors.

³ Sayidnuriddin Shakhobiddinov, prominent expert in the Arabic language and history and specialist in text analysis translated *al-Qānūn fī al-Ṭibb* (The Canon of Medicine) by Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) from Arabic into Tajik.

We had to cope with problems caused by the shortcomings in organization and teaching methods. Until 1997, students had student identification cards but no report books for registering their achievements; the results of tests and exams were registered on sheets of paper. The students sat exams on the Arabic grammar used in the Koran; there were no clear cut rules about which subjects required exams and which could be passed in the form of tests. In some cases, regular attendance was enough to pass.

The shortage of teaching equipment, which went as far as not enough blackboards in the classrooms, was another problem; teaching organization left much to be desired; not infrequently, teachers forgot to write down information about classes and attendance.

In most cases, teachers relied on traditional methods: the students listened to the teacher or read new material together with their teachers; translated it or even retold it, did homework, etc. There was no sign of more modern teaching methods.

The Imam at-Tirmidhi Tajik Islamic University Opened

The Statute of the Tajik Islamic University and its curricula were ready by the summer of 1997; faculties were set up; the number of courses was determined, types of student report books and other documents were drafted, etc.

The Committee for Religious Affairs conferred this educational establishment with the status of a university and gave it a new name: the Imam at-Tirmidhi Tajik Islamic University; it was officially opened soon after the decision was passed. The new university was entrusted to the Committee for Religious Affairs, but it officially belonged to the Tajik Islamic Center because the university continued using its buildings.

The university status forced us to address serious tasks, including the level and quality of education and better conditions for studies. Classrooms were renovated and well-equipped; the examination system was regulated; the registering documents were improved, etc. We invited many prominent lecturers working at secular higher educational establishments.

In an effort to upgrade the teachers' professional skills and raise the level of teaching, we turned to the teaching experience of the Muslim countries. The Committee for Religious Affairs helped us to restore contact with the embassies of Turkey and Iran, as well as with the Cultural Center of Iran in Dushanbe and some of the Arab countries (Saudi Arabia and Egypt).

In the summer of 1997, several teachers came from Saudi Arabia with preliminary permission from the Committee for Religious Affairs to teach at a 20-day seminar organized for our lecturers. At first our foreign colleagues were disappointed with the level of knowledge of religious subjects of our teaching staff and even referred it to the lowest level of spiritual education. After a while, however, they discovered they were wrong: our lecturers were as competent as Saudi theologians, although their knowledge of the fundamentals of the Koran, fiqh, and Arabic grammar was mostly theoretical because of lack of practice.

The seminars were useful in two respects. First, after establishing contact with the theological communities of the Islamic countries, the Imam at-Tirmidhi Tajik Islamic University put itself on the map of the Islamic world. Second, it finally destroyed the delusion that Soviet power had killed Islamic thought in Central Asia; the very fact that there was an Islamic university in Tajikistan destroyed the myth of a negative attitude toward Islam in the country.

In June 1997, the Committee for Religious Affairs appointed, without preliminary consultations with the Ministry of Education, young domullo A. Aliev as principal of the university. The ministry,

on the other hand, showed no interest in the study structure and the problems of the university supervised by the Committee for Religious Affairs and the Islamic Center. The wages were much lower than what lecturers of secular universities received for their teaching activities, but no one complained.

In June 1997, as soon as the Imam at-Tirmidhi Tajik Islamic University was officially established, the *Jumhuryat* newspaper informed its readers about the conditions for enrolling in the first year and published a list of documents to be sent to the admission commission: a certificate of secondary education or a diploma of a secondary specialized school/college; passport, medical certificate, residence certificate, photos, etc.

The commission was staffed by university lecturers, members of the Islamic Center, and Committee officials. We compiled 50 examination question-papers (three questions in each) for each of the subjects for the oral entrance exams (reading, Tawhid, fiqh, Arabic grammar) and a written exam in the Tajik language and made a special effort not to reveal the questions before the exams. The Committee helped us a lot at the preliminary stage.

We set 10 August (when all other universities would have completed their entrance exams) as the date of our first exam for the simple reason that if the number of those willing to join our university proved smaller than the needed 150 we would be able to draw on those who had failed the entrance exams elsewhere.

Our fears proved groundless; the number of willing was twice as high as the number of places, which gave us a chance to select the best.

The exams carried out in full accordance with the decision of the Ministry of Education were also attended by officials of the Committee for Religious Affairs and other religious organizations of the Republic of Tajikistan.

Tajiks and Uzbeks, all of them citizens of the RT, comprised the majority of entrants; the knowledge of Tajik, the language of instruction, was one of the basic requirements. Some of the new students were imam-khatibs, others were journalists, teachers, or even officials of local departments for religious affairs.

The Islamic University in 2005-2007

The contribution of the University's administration and teaching staff to its development can hardly be overestimated. At first it had two faculties—the methodology in religious studies and the Shari'a.

It should be said that our teachers could not expect academic promotion, but concerned about the future of the university and religious education as a whole, they did their best to interest the students in academic activity, who were invited to write tests and diplomas, discuss theological subjects, etc.

At the first stage, the university had no deputy principal for academic work and no post-graduate course. In 1996-2007, the university produced between 150 and 200 graduates every year; a third of them were accomplished *domullos* armed with good knowledge of the Shari'a and with answers to practically all possible questions related to Islam.

At that time, it was still unclear whether the university would be patronized by the Ministry of Culture or the Ministry of Education; all other religious institutions were in a similar situation. Despite its vague status, we drafted a Statute of the Higher Religious School of the Future, which we

presented to the Ministry of Education; the curriculum of the future school was compiled with the great and inestimable help of the heads of our Faculty of Tajik Philology.

A large number of patriots from among the lecturers at the republic's higher educational establishments and research fellows of the republic's Academy of Sciences deemed it necessary to start teaching at the Tajik Islamic University.

After a while, it became clear that jobs for university graduates were few and far between: they were rejected by state structures, organizations, and schools. No one was interested in the quality of their education; they were reproached for having selected a non-state university. This triggered heated discussions about how to define the profession of our graduates.

In 2004-2005, the University, supported by the Committee for Religious Affairs, asked the government to make it a state educational institution.

This looked like the only remedy for the numerous and fairly painful problems; indeed, since 90% of the republic's population were Muslims, the state should train experts in religious enlightenment and religious education.

Methods for Teaching Religious Disciplines

From the very beginning, there was no consensus about the methods for teaching religious disciplines, the disagreements becoming even more vehement when lecturers from secular institutes joined our staff. The teachers of religious disciplines knew next to nothing about teaching methods, even if their knowledge of religious subjects was impeccable. We had to invite teachers from national universities or Egyptians to teach Arabic to our students; the same applied to social disciplines.

After a while it became absolutely clear that we should revise the methods for teaching religious disciplines, something the traditional domullos could not understand or accept. Together with M. Toirov and other literary critics, we helped our teachers compile teaching plans and individual lesson plans, select subjects for written papers and diplomas; formulate the methods of lectures, seminars, educational programs, meetings, and scientific conferences. This helped us identify the gaps in the methods for teaching religious disciplines; much has been done in this respect and much remains to be done.

So far we know next to nothing about the teaching methods of the Orient, including the Tajik-Persian methods. Great Ibn Sina, who had his own ideas about science, education, and teaching wrote a lot about these problems; he pointed out that the age of the students was extremely important in the teaching process because thinking developed by stages. He paid particular attention to the creative and constructive thinking of students. Today, his experience and his ideas remain practically neglected.

The great pantheist poet Movlane Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī organized circles very similar to the classes in our schools and practiced diverse teaching methods, such as lessons, groups of pupils arranged by ages, intervals between lessons, holidays, exams, etc.

Abd ar-Rahmān Jāmī, Sufi Sheikh, theologian, and philosopher, wrote a textbook for his children that can still be used to teach Arabic grammar.

Examples of this sort are numerous.

The Muslim teachers of faith remain devoted to the reproductive method of teaching, which presupposes active perception and memorizing of information supplied by the teacher or any other

source; teachers offer facts, arguments, and concepts as ready-made; they do not discuss them, nor do they offer different opinions or hypotheses. This method, widely popular before the revolution, cannot be applied today.

This is confirmed by the methods used to teach calligraphy. In the Bukhara madrassahs, calligraphy was taught through imitation; no other teaching equipment (blackboards) were used; this explains why in the 18th-19th centuries calligraphy was no longer developing.

For many reasons (bans on teaching activity, lack of textbooks, pressure of the authorities, etc.), the domullos of the Soviet period could not fully use the old methods, to say nothing of mastering new ones.

In his book *K istorii Bukharskoy revoliutsii* (Materials Pertaining to the History of the Bukhara Revolution), Ustod Sadridin Ayni pointed out that in 1916-1920 schools appeared in Bukhara that used new methods and where students learned to read and write in 3 to 4 months. The author admitted that it was inconceivable: "At that time I thought that at least two years were needed to master calligraphy."⁴

I regret to say that the madrassahs in Tajikistan have not yet completely mastered the modern teaching methods: calligraphy is taught either by old methods or the methods elaborated by Prof. Kh. Karimov and Prof. M. Kosimova, which are not free from serious shortcomings.

Teaching begins with the letters, which have two or four forms; only seven letters have one form, others (with the exception of "ayn," "ghayn," and "ha-i hawwaz") have two forms—either isolated or ligature. In the Persian alphabet based on Arabic graphics, there are 7 letters with two (=14) and 25 letters with four forms (=100), which means that there are 114 forms. It is not easy to master them all.

On the other hand, if we take 7 letters with one, 22 letters with two, and 3 letters with four forms, we get 63 forms, the number being equal to the number of printed and handwritten forms of the contemporary Tajik alphabet. Some of the letters differ only by the placement of dots. All of this makes teaching much easier.

It should be said that each of the religious disciplines has its own highly specific teaching method that does not suit any other. The Koran reading (*qiroat*) and recitation (*tajweed*) use the same methods, while teaching grammar (*Nahw*) relies on absolutely different methods. They, however, have common features: visual aids, various methods of questioning, techniques of formulating questions and dialectical approaches—moving from the simple to the complex and from specific to abstract.

These methods have been practically forgotten; today students cannot describe the learned material in their own words and find it hard to draw conclusions; this shows the low level of their creative thinking.

The textbooks have not yet been logically structured to lead the student from the simple to the complex.

Let us take *Mabdaul-qiroat* as an example. This is a very complicated composition that requires a lot of learning by heart, at least at the initial stages; its content has nothing to do with any curriculum; there are no teaching plans or teaching programs (that is, regulatory documents) related to it.

Teachers of Islamic subjects in Turkey, Iran, India, and Pakistan, as well as in the Arab countries, rely on the latest teaching methods, equipment, and teaching materials; the textbooks they use fully correspond to the teaching programs.

⁴ S. Ayni, *K istorii Bukharskoy revoliutsii*, Dushanbe, 1987, p. 47.

In Central Asia, Afghanistan, and the Caucasus, teachers, instead of being guided by teaching plans, rely on books written many centuries ago, dealing with purely religious issues and having nothing in common with the changing reality.

These books are not adjusted to the different ages of those who study them: they are not textbooks, but rather sources of knowledge.

This means that we need textbooks on religious matters based on the latest achievements of pedagogical science. Our domullos cannot accomplish this: they know next to nothing about the modern teaching methods, teaching plans, and curricula used in advanced Islamic educational establishments. We should entrust the task of writing religious textbooks fully adjusted to the demands of the times to respected and knowledgeable domullos who should cooperate with the Ministry of Education, Scientific-Research Institute of Pedagogical Sciences, and the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences.

Religious Education as Part of the State Education System

No matter what, by 2007 the university had scored many victories and acquired many problems. On 24 May, 2007, when speaking at a meeting with the public, President Emomali Rakhmon said that the university should be supported. Several months later, on 30 October, he signed the Decree on Setting up the Tajik State Islamic Institute based on the Imam at-Tirmidhi Tajik Islamic University⁵; in 2009, it was named after Imam e Azam Abu Hanifa. In this way, our educational establishment finally acquired a state status and adequate funding.

The curriculum compiled by the republic's Ministry of Education included religious subjects and also the history of the Tajik people, Tajik and foreign languages, IT, ecology, fundamentals of contemporary natural science, etc.

In 2008, the curriculum consisted of the following subjects:

- (1) Koranic sciences (al-ulumul quran);
- (2) Arabic philology;
- (3) history of Islam and religion;
- (4) theology and Islamic philosophy;
- (5) Islamic sciences.

In 2010, the Islamic Institute was transferred from the Ministry of Education (now the Ministry of Education and Science of the RT) to the Committee for Religious Affairs under the republic's government. Today, it offers education to over 1,500 students, including more than 200 girls.

There is no shortage of trained teachers, the worst headache of the early years. Its teaching staff consists of the best graduates of the institute and graduates of religious educational establishments of Tashkent, Kazan, Jordan, and Egypt; specialists in Arabic and academics from the National University and the Academy of Sciences are also among our lecturers.

In recent years, the university has created textbooks and teaching aids printed at the institute's print shop.

⁵ See: M. Khasanova, "V RT sozdan islamskiy institut s izucheniem gumanitarnykh nauk," *Asia Plus*, 16 November, 2007, available at [<http://www.news.tj/ru/news>], 16 September, 2009.

By Way of a Conclusion

The time has come to develop religious enlightenment and education in every possible way to raise the next generation of well-qualified domullos. We should remain devoted to our traditions and be bold enough to face the contemporary world; we should study and develop the latest methods for teaching religious disciplines. I should say that development of Islamic thought, theology, and philosophy is a time- and money-consuming process.

If we can manage to educate religious intellectuals armed with the latest knowledge, we can rest assured that the time and money were well spent.
