REGIONAL POLITICS

INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM AND CENTRAL ASIA: PREMATURE ASSESSMENTS

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In the months leading up to, and the first few years after, the Soviet Union collapsed numerous articles and books were published that claimed Islamic "fundamentalism" was likely to emerge in Central Asia. These fears were predicated on numerous scenarios, the most important being the ongoing political and military crisis in Afghanistan and Iranian attempts to increase its influence in the region. I will argue, however, that these concerns were premature and that the real threat to the stability and security of Central Asia, and the potential threat of Islamic radicalism, is more likely to be during the next transitional phase when the current repressive regimes are replaced by new leaders, what I refer to as the "post-transition transition."[1] I do not believe that Islamists and their actions are the threat, rather that the rhetoric coupled with actions will be used to discredit subsequent leaders and that internal, factional political rivalries will embrace whatever means necessary to eliminate opposition. In this scenario, the power of Islamic rhetoric and propaganda will influence and alter the political evolution in Central Asia and its devolution from authoritarian structures toward liberal democracies. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to posit an argument that early assessments were "premature" and rather alarmist based upon real and perceived weaknesses in Central Asia rather than a better comprehension of the strength and vitality exercised by the transitional regimes. At the conclusion, I have four (although more can be posed) questions designed to augment our "assessments" of the current social, economic, and political transition that is occurring in the region.

[1] Determining exactly when the "transition" ends is difficult, but for the purpose of this paper the criteria is either the "transition" from immediate post-Soviet leaders (such as Niyazov or Akaev) to "new" leaders or, less definitive, the establishment of economic, political, and social independence from Soviet era structures. Thus, for example, Kazakhstan's economic environment might be fully emancipated from centralized control, but the political situation remains hindered by Soviet legacies.

As we examine regime transitions in Central Asia, the hope that democratic principles will prevail quickly evaporates. In the two cases where regimes have fallen, both occurred due to violence or massive public protests. Tajikistan's civil war resulted in thousands killed and even more displaced; whereas, in Kyrgyzstan, the regime fell not because of the ballot box but because of widespread protests that erupted throughout the republic and the fear of violent upheaval, which forced President Akaev to flee the country.[2] The global reach of militant Islam has caused widespread concern that the former Soviet Central Asian republics are most vulnerable to its consequences and ramifications. Weak state and social structures, political leadership that has turned more and more repressive, and porous borders suggest that at the very least the region could become a sanctuary and as well as an incubator for Islamic extremism, terrorist activity, and anti-state insurgency. The likelihood seems real enough still, but did the early predictions fail to analyze fully the strength and tenacity by which the post-Soviet regimes maintained power in each respective republic?

In the early 1990s, numerous scholars addressed the possibility, indeed the probability, of the emergence and rise of what was commonly called "Islamic fundamentalism" in Central Asia. The general consensus was that Central Asia, which lacked the fundamental security structures, included pockets of ethnic and national cleavages, social, cultural, economic, and political deficiencies making it highly vulnerable to what can be more accurately classified as militant or radical Islam. The panacea to this susceptibility was rapid and sustainable economic and political liberalization, a transformation from authoritarian, centralized control exercised during the Soviet era. That has not happened, despite the region's regimes' efforts to demonstrate otherwise. Consequently, groups espousing Islamic agendas for the region have emerged, but the regimes' abilities to repress these groups have meant they have thus far avoided the serious violence most often associated with Islamic terrorism. This is not to suggest that the potential has evaporated or that the tactics and strategies employed by the regimes will successfully continue to stave off terrorist activities and threats. It suggests, however, that after more than fifteen years of economic decline, social instability, and political repression, coupled with real and imagined cultural resurrection, it might make the region more vulnerable to Islamist rhetoric and conflict in the second or third decade of independence rather than the first.[3]

After the initial flurry of articles and books appeared devoted to the threat of Islamic terrorism, there was a lull in scholarly attention. Since 2001, however, there has been a noticeable increase in works being published that reassess the threat, yet few seem to note that similar concerns were readily expressed in the early 1990s that failed to materialize in any manifest way. Did scholars focus too intensely on the perceived and real weaknesses in Central Asia and fail to understand subsequent sociocultural and political strengths?

Clearly, after the collapse of the U.S.S.R. the newly empowered political leaders in each of the Central Asian republics were inclined toward single party rule; indeed, referring to the structure as "party" might be a misnomer as each president achieved power without the party structures that might normally be associated with electoral politics. The one exception was Askar Akaev in Kyrgyzstan, although that in all likelihood had more to do with the process by which he won election to office than a reflection of his supporters' aims. Once in power, Akaev began a slow, but steady, decline toward power consolidation.

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[2] The Kyrgyz example is troubling because it has established an unhealthy and, I believe, unproductive mechanism and precedent. Whenever enough mass can be set against the regime, for whatever reason, the expectation might be that it should somehow remove itself. If it does not, will the anger and frustration degenerate into violent efforts to oust a truculent regime?

[3] This assertion is easy to make simply because few serious Islamic extremist tendencies emerged in the region during the first decade; however, in ten years from now some might be able to argue that this paper was also a "premature" assessment.

In the months following the Soviet disintegration, there was, to varying degrees, an emphasis on historical, national glories, traditions, culture, and languages.[4] Islam is inextricably linked to the Central Asian past, the region's traditions and culture. Thus, Central Asian leaders quickly rejected the common Soviet underlying ingredients with its Slavic culture and traditions and embraced reinterpreted history and mythology to fill the vacuum created by the discredited Soviet ideological composition. The secular oriented governments sought to eliminate political rivals that threatened their regime. Often, the regimes clashed with nationalist and culturalist demands that seemingly threatened the sociopolitical agendas established by the regimes to ensure stability and perpetuate their power. Islam did not, however, figure for long in the cultural revival expressed by political leaders.

The extent of support for Islamists in Central Asia remains controversial and difficult to discern. Its operations are complicated, lacking recognizable leadership and fully articulated objectives. Determining the level and intensity of support is unclear and often misevaluated by the regional governments in order to justify repressive tactics employed against political rivals that also reject Islamist demands, but are, nonetheless, perceived as a serious menace to stability. Some scholars have identified internal economic factors as the basic element fueling the growth of Islamic tendencies and terrorism in the region; however, this appears to underestimate other internal and external pressures exerted on the regimes and the populations since 1991. What seems to be evident is that armed militants opposing the regimes have primarily local complaints but utilize the rhetoric of radical Islam in order to discredit the governments in question. Were scholars too eager to embrace the fear of extremist Islam rather than its cultural but not spiritual influences?

Some scholars have argued that the Islamic revival has been based from the start on the sedentary or nomadic past. The Islamic revival, according to this argument, is more potent among traditionally settled populations, the Uzbeks and Tajiks, than among the nomadic Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen. Another contributing factor has been the relative weakness of the embryonic democratic civil institutions and the ethnic composition of each republic. Thus, this argument posits that the relatively less repressive regime in Kazakhstan, with its multi-national demographic features and its nomadic heritage, make it less prone to radical Islamic propaganda and pressures. The opposite, therefore, seems to hold for Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (can it be called the Ferghana factor?).

One reason scholars expressed concern about Islam's revival in Central Asia was that the regional leaders embraced references to Islam and the region's history in order to legitimize the new political institutions; thus, new national doctrines and identities were adopted using Islamic symbols. This revival, however, was largely rhetorical. During the Soviet era Islam remained chiefly ritualistic and traditional rather than intellectual, spiritual, or ideological. Therefore, it is important to understand this point about political institution building in post-Soviet Central Asia—all political institutions and actors lacked the legitimacy that the Communist Party provided during the Soviet era. There was no national or political ideology—indeed, it appeared that these new states were merely accidents of Soviet social and political experimentation without real histories except those that were expressed in ideological forms—which a leader could comfortably embrace as the source of one's power and authority. Islam provided that legitimacy as an enduring form of identity among the majority of the population, justifying claims to statehood in an international environment that only acknowledges recognized political boundaries. Were these concerns valid?

Militant Islam in Central Asia has been generally, if not brutally, held at bay. In the early 1990s numerous works appeared that traced the phenomenon of radical Islam's potential to spread throughout the region. Debates over the Islamic threat to the stability in the region have rarely been examined in its comparative relativity to the region, with only a few exceptions, particularly in the context of

[4] Indeed, even before the Soviet Union collapsed, each republic had passed language laws that made each titular language the official language of the republic. Russian remained semi-official, but, in general, the emphasis on national languages became a political and cultural issue.

Islamist movements elsewhere in the Muslim world.[5] While an interesting and useful exercise, it is beyond the scope of this paper today.

Of course, the terms *jihad* and *jihadist* continue to vex scholars and commentators, but they can be used here, as well as by Islamic groups, to describe militant Islamic groups that regard the conflict as one between Islam and infidels, which they believe is a menace to their religion and Muslims worldwide. Moreover, these groups do not confine jihad to merely a war against infidels but states and rulers who violate the principles of Islam. Thus, they agitate and commit themselves to deposing these regimes and resort to violent behavior in order to achieve their goals.

The roots of the conflict between Islamists and the states in Central Asia are complex. Some scholars trace it to the initial penetration of the religion in the region and others, such as Vitaly Naumkin, believe that it is a more modern phenomenon, but still argue that antecedents can be identified in the pre-Soviet period.[6] One such source is the still controversial *Basmachi* movement that resisted Soviet rule throughout the 1920s. These early "sources" seem, however, more a scholarly exercise than a reflection of the contemporary threat and phenomenon. Indeed, the suggestion itself seemingly asserts that this conflict is inevitable and neglects other mitigating circumstances, including economic and political forces and anxieties. This "rediscovery" of the past was uncertain, but tailored to suit the political interests of the new regimes' vision of the present and future that lacked legitimacy and consensus. Islam is a unifying element that suited the initial need to reject the failed Soviet experiment and fulfill the ideological and sociopolitical vacuum.

The reason that so many scholars and outside observers believed that the Islamic revival in Central Asia was potentially subject to hostile and radical influences was because the religion had been isolated, but never eliminated, during the Soviet era. Many scholars identified the "unofficial| Islamic practices, particularly among the traditionally sedentary populations, that continued despite Soviet efforts to suppress it.

There are many reasons for the potential emergence of militant Islam in Central Asia, but they are chiefly economic, political, and/or ideological. These are not mutually exclusive and often overlap as the probable cause. The first two are, however, the most important in the Central Asian context and augment the adoption of common rhetoric used by other Islamist movements. Economic motivations stress the importance of socioeconomic factors, based upon Islam's strong emphasis on social justice, identifying economic deprivation and declining living standards as one of the reasons for Islam's revival. Social injustice has particularly strong appeal for Muslims and engenders the "feeling of injustice constantly feeding all radical Islamic movements."[7]

The future prospects for Islamist movements to take more violent action and expand their influence in Central Asia, as this article argues, is the political frustration created by the various regimes' decision to exclude all opposition from the political arena. This frustration and discontent is, as Graham Fuller observes, for many reasons why in the Muslim world "political Islam still remains the only realistic major alternative to most of today's authoritarian regimes."[8]

The ideological explanation does not seem to work in Central Asia, at least not as a root cause, but it can certainly explain the evolutionary emergence when movements in Central Asia fail to elicit mass support among the population in general.

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[5] The major exceptions are the works by a French scholar and a Pakistani journalist (see: O. Roy, *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations,* I.B. Tauris, London, 2000; A. Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia,* Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 2002). More recently a Russian scholar has produced a work that examines more fully the phenomenon (see: V. Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Between Pen and Rifle,* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, New York, 2005).

[6] See: V. Naumkin, op. cit., p. 9.

[7] J. Burke, "Al-Qa'eda Today and the Real Roots of Terrorism," *Terrorism Monitor,* 12 February, 2004, p. 2.

[8] G. Fuller, *The Future of Political Islam,* Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2003, p. 15.

Thus, I would like to turn to early assessments of Islam's potential in Central Asia. This review is not an exhaustive analysis of all sources, but some representation is necessary. Thus, the works of a few scholars provide that sufficiently to permit some conclusions.

According to Shireen Hunter in 1996, one of the motivating factors behind Saudi Arabia and other Arab states' interest to establish firm relations with the Central Asian republics was the desire to prevent radical Islamic threats from emerging in the region.[9] Yet, other scholars claimed that Iran was the most active Islamic state in the region, motivated by its "traditional competition with Turkey." Nonetheless, Iran has not significantly influenced Islam's revival "not so much by the opposition of local regimes as by the limited resources and general cautious attitude of the Sunnite population of Central Asia to Shi'ite Islam."[10] The population was, however, more receptive to Islamist rhetoric, particularly in rural areas, because it is "groaning under the pressure of a demographic explosion and increase in small landowners [and] it looks to the Islamic tradition for language to express and formulate its needs and demands."[11]

The early references to "fundamentalist" Islamic influences in Central Asia meant, according to James Critchlow, for the region's Muslim population a "radical form of Islam, which would intrude on their social freedom by becoming an arbiter in civil matters."[12] Critchlow dismisses the prospects of Iranian influences reaching deeply into the social or spiritual life of the people, in particular the Uzbeks, chiefly because of the variance between the Sunni tradition in Central Asia and Iranian Shi'ite beliefs. Indeed, he argues that Afghanistan is the more likely source of destabilizing influences in Central Asia, but that the "present chaotic state of Afghanistan would seem to weaken the ability of such forces to intervene effectively in Central Asia."[13] In this sense, Critchlow missed the more important feature of the Afghan conflict, and that is the increased flow and corruption associated with the illegal drug trade that emanates from Afghanistan and the vested interests some groups, including militant Islamists and corrupt border officials, have in maintaining it unabated. Other scholars consistently noted the potential for Afghanistan's civil war disturbing the political evolution in Central Asia. In 1995 Ralph Magnus and Eden Naby's article, "Afghanistan and Central Asia: Mirrors and Models," suggested that Afghanistan "functions as a warning to their own [the Central Asian leaders] of the dangers of following a particular model of political change."[14] They further argued that "with the emergence of Central Asian opposition movements (armed in the case of Tajikistan), including both democratic nationalist and Islamist elements, the situations of Afghanistan and Central Asia are increasingly mirrors of internal instability."[15]

The West was alarmed by Central Asian independence, not in defense of the sovereignty of the Soviet system, but rather fearing that international security might somehow be threatened if Kazakhstan, for example, an unknown state with an unfamiliar leader, could be swayed to share its nuclear capabilities.[16] Further reports that Tajikistan was selling uranium intensified concerns that Islamic

[9] Sh.T. Hunter, *Central Asia since Independence,* Praeger, Westport, CT, 1996, pp. 142-143.

[10] Yu. Kulchik, A. Fadin, V. Sergeev, *Central Asia after the Empire,* Pluto Press, London and Chicago, 1996, p. 54. These authors further claim that the "Islam professed by the Central Asian masses at present is largely an uncivilized, crude version of Islam."

[11] Ibid., p. 6.

[12] J. Critchlow, "Nationalism and Islamic Resurgence in Uzbekistan," in: *Central Asia: Its Strategic Importance and Future Prospects,* ed. by H. Malik, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1994, p. 237.

[13] Ibid., pp. 238-247. Critchlow suggests that Russia posed a greater threat to Central Asia's independence than the threat of Islamic fundamentalism if nationalists in Moscow exploited the economic decline and weakened Central Asian leaders to the extent that the former Soviet empire could be reconstituted. He writes: "One should not let today's fascination with Islamic fundamentalism cause blindness to the possibility of a reconstitution of a new Russian-led imperialism, with the acquiescence of embattled leaders in the new Central Asian republics."

[14] R.H. Magnus, E. Naby, "Afghanistan and Central Asian: Mirrors and Models," *Asian Survey,* Vol. 35, 1995, p. 614.

[15] Ibidem. The authors note, too, that the Islamic opposition in Tajikistan was "scarcely revolutionary," and that it willingly cooperated with secularists and former communists; it was the civil war that "radicalized" the movement.

[16] According to Ahmed Rashid, "Rumors abounded in the Western press that Kazakhstan had sold an SS-18 to Iran and that it was about to provide Tehran with uranium. None of the reports was ever proved but they kept Western intelli-

militants would have access to fissile material, although it does not appear that these illicit sales ever occurred.[17] Nonetheless, not all observers expressed concern that Islam's revival would translate into a radical or militant form.

One such effusive appraisal of Islam's revival in the early years of independence is Ahmed Rashid's comment that the "Islamic revival has been quite extraordinary, an unprecedented phenomenon in the history of the Islamic world and a clear rejection of the Soviet system. Nowhere in the world has religious feeling been suppressed for so long and with such brutality and yet revived with such enthusiasm."[18] Rashid acknowledges that Islam catapulted to the fore more as a rejection of the Soviet experience than an eager adoption of the spiritual, or even radical, tenets of faith. It should not have been assumed, as Rashid and others seemed to, that the revival of Islam was anything more than an embrace of cultural freedom that had been banned for seventy years. Rashid does, however, argue that major obstacles would prevent Islamic radicalism from spreading into Central Asia, but writing so soon after the Soviet collapse he could not have foreseen the course of events in Afghanistan, the severe repression of all political opposition, the tenuous political outcome of the Tajik civil war, the overthrow of Akaev's government in Kyrgyzstan, and many other episodes that will make militant Islam a viable alternative during the eventual post-transition transition to new rulers. The evidence that most scholars cite for "such enthusiasm" was the fact that mosques and madrassahs were being built in large numbers and young people were therefore especially susceptible to radical, militant Islamic preaching.

Not all scholars writing shortly after the Soviet Union collapsed opined based on an Islamic threat. According to Anthony Hyman, writing in 1993, stability in Central Asia was dependent upon Uzbekistan remaining "peaceful" toward its neighbors.[19] Hyman also suggested that Niyazov, with his republic's "enhanced free-market gas prices for exports" could make economic transformation "quite conceivable" as well as possessing the best opportunity for "staying power in the region."[20] One out of two is not bad, but could anyone have predicted Turkmenistan's current state of affairs?

Hyman also notes that political repression in Uzbekistan, especially of the Islamic Revival Party, which seemed to have a considerable following, and the government's tactics have actually done more to enhance this party's prestige, limited though it might have been, and make the party actually appear stronger and more influential than it likely was. As the state constituted itself around new images and symbols, including the Islamic heritage, Hyman believed that ethnic nationalism posed the greatest threat to the embryonic regime, arguing that the Islamic threat of "irresistible 'Wahabi' or Iranian radical influence" was "exaggerated out of all proportion." He concluded that the shape of Islam in Central Asia will be based upon internal influences and not from the "impact of external, alien ideologies unsympathetic to the majority of its people."[21]

In conclusion, this paper does not argue that the scholars writing shortly after the Soviet Union collapsed were wrong in their assessment of the situation in Central Asia, but rather that their concerns were premature. None assumed that the various regimes' abilities to suppress opposition movements would be as thorough and vigorous as it has been. Thus, this paper argues that the potential threat to Central Asia from militant Islam is most likely to be in the post-transition transition. That is when nascent political opposition, disgruntled by years of repression, will have the most opportune moment to influence the political direction and outcome. What we failed to understand was just how strong the regimes were and, instead, focused attention on the perceived weaknesses. Moreover, I think

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gence agencies on their toes for much of the year" (A. Rashid, *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism?* Zed Books, London, New Jersey, 1994, p. 235).

[17] See: Ibid., p. 236.

[18] Ibid., pp. 243-244.

[19] See: A. Hyman, "Moving out of Moscow's Orbit: The Outlook for Central Asia," *International Affairs,* Vol. 69, 1993, p. 290.

[20] Ibid., p. 291.

[21] Ibid., p. 301.

we failed to realize how politically passive the populations were and the depth to which religion could unify unprepared societies in Central Asia. I argue that the events in Kyrgyzstan have been misunderstood by the leaders in Central Asia and rather than easing political restrictions they will further entrench and solidify power.[22] Events in Andijan in 2005 are, I believe, an example of this misconception of the causes behind Akaev's ouster. The problem remains, however, that determining exactly what occurred is still elusive.

Thus, here are questions that I want to pose:

(1) Were observers wrong to assume that the collapse of the Soviet Union meant too that the political structures in the Central Asian republics were equally fragile?

(2) Were observers wrong to speculate about the power of militant Islam to infiltrate and negatively hinder the political, social, and economic evolution of these new states?

(3) Have the post-Soviet regimes in Central Asia successfully established mechanisms, no matter how authoritarian, to allow peaceful transition?

(4) Are we at all comforted by the seemingly peaceful transitions in Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan to believe that this trend positions Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for similar change?

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[22] The prescription for the political difficulties in Central Asian are, perhaps, evident by the post-transition transition in Kyrgyzstan where the mechanism for political change is founded upon the fragile, even dangerous, model of demonstration. Opposition forces in Kyrgyzstan called for public demonstrations against the Bakiev regime on 11 April, 2007. Some opposition groups desire his ouster, Akaev-like, whereas others insist upon further negotiations and political compromise. In other words, the opposition has seemingly subscribed to only one lesson of the Tulip Revolution: dissatisfaction with a political impasse gives rise to demonstrations that oust the leadership rather than democratic evolution which is ultimately best achieved via elections. An unhealthy precedent has been established in Kyrgyzstan that could prove more destabilizing than the initial transition from Soviet to post-Soviet regime (see, for example: E. Marat, "Bakiev Tries to Save his Presidency but Opposition Prevails," *Eurasia Daily Monitor,* Vol. 4, No. 62, 29 March, 2007).