

Radical Islamist Activity in Central Asia is Going Nowhere Soon

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Religious extremism is regarded as a major threat to the stability and security of the international community. Particularly cases of Islamic extremism such as the Iranian Revolution, attacks on Western embassies, hostage takings and other violent acts have all led to expectations of an inevitable clash between a radical Islam and the West. Unrest among Muslims of the former Soviet Union from the Caucasus to Central Asia, in former Yugoslavia, in Xinjiang in China, in Palestine and in North Africa has strengthened images of a potentially explosive Islam in global politics. After the break-up of the Soviet Union, Islam in Central Asia constitutes a very powerful transitional force. Radical Islam in Central Asia is largely a result of a repressive political atmosphere and authoritarian policies. Repressed and unable to operate in their own countries, the radicalized portion of Central Asian populations, mostly found in the Fergana Valley, emigrated to join international groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Al-Qaida only to return to Central Asia with greater prospects.

History

Arriving in Central Asia in the mid-seventh century, Islam had become the dominant religion in the region by the eighth century.[1] Until the rise of the Soviet Union in the twentieth century, Islam continued to be the major force shaping the culture and identity of Central Asian peoples. Under Soviet rule, Islam throughout Central Asia had been driven underground. However, even Soviet totalitarianism could not suppress it entirely. Mosques were closed, destroyed, or turned into something else.[2] Young Muslims joined the Soviet youth organization rather than going to the mosque. The repression of Islam under Stalin was very severe from 1927 onwards. In 1943, Stalin set up a system of four muftiyyas with territorial coverage. These muftiyyas did not have a national anchor point. Two offensives against Islam were to follow after Stalin's death. Khrushchev delivered the heaviest blow by forcing the closure of 25 percent of official mosques between 1958 and 1964.[3] The effect was particularly felt in Tajikistan (16 out of 34) and Uzbekistan (23 out of 90). The four official mosques stayed open in Turkmenistan and of the 26 Kazakh and 34 Kyrgyz mosques only one in each republic closed.[4] The last offensive was under Gorbachev in 1986, which was largely overshadowed by the general liberalization atmosphere. During the Soviet rule Central Asia was on the edge of the Islamic world, with no contact with the major centers of Islamic civilization. When independence came to the former Soviet Republics of Central Asia "most Kazakhs had little knowledge of Islam"[5] and "most Muslims possessed a rudimentary knowledge of Islamic teachings." [6] In 1991 as borders reopened, the region's political leaders were poorly informed about Islam. However many ordinary people began seeking religious answers in the ideological vacuum that followed the collapse of communism. Islam was well equipped to provide simple answers to the complex questions of identity and purpose that accompanied the political turmoil of independence.

Overall three points could be made with regard to Islam in Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. First, although Islamic teachings and learning had largely been destroyed under Soviet rule, the majority of the population's self-perception as Muslim was still in tact. Islam is an integral part of the identity of the majority of people in the region. Second, the religious revivalism which emerged in the 1980s, after a period of underground development is not foreign import. According to Roy, "It is the public appearance of a culture and a religious practice that never entirely disappeared." [7] Third, political Islam and radical Islamist groups in the region are not imports either. The militant networks existed under the Soviet Empire such as *Adolat* (Justice), *Taubat* (Repentance), *Baraka* (Blessings) and *Islam Lashkarlari* (Warriors of Islam) and re-emerged on the surface with the political reforms of the 1980s.

Current Situation

According to International Crisis Group (ICG), the most recent trend in the revitalization process of radical Islam is the increasingly important role played by women in movements such as HT.[8] In Kyrgyzstan, increasingly repressive policies by governments towards HT “will play into HT’s hands and may even accelerate its recruitment,” ICG reports. HT frames itself on political repression and social injustice and views political crackdown as the opportunity to produce martyrs and hire new recruits. Women, either already members of the groups or whose husbands are arrested, increasingly feel more compelled to associate themselves with the HT organization, argues the ICG report.

Furthermore, a suicide bombing in Andijan in May 2009 and armed clash between security forces and militants in the Uzbek town Khanabad suggest that anti-Taliban operations taking place in Pakistan and Afghanistan are pushing the terrorists to flee for safe havens in Central Asia.[9] According to a Eurasianet report, “a security source in Tashkent suggested that ‘a lot of arrests’ had been made in the Andijan region and other locations in Uzbekistan, in the weeks prior to the Khanabad incident.”[10] With increasing anti-Taliban activity in Pakistan coupled with heavy handed rule in Central Asia, we are beginning to see a trend toward revival of insurgency in the region.

In addition to the suicide bombing and clash in Khanabad, increasing radical Islamist activity in the region is also substantiated by the arrests of three suspected IMU members in Tajikistan, who were involved in anti-government protests in Waziristan (Pakistan) in July 2009, and a shoot-out in Tashkent which was linked to IMU militants.[11] Added to this list are the increasing security concerns for the Northern Distribution Network which provides a vital blood line for US-led NATO operations in Afghanistan.[12] All kinds of support material passing from Kyrgyzstan to Tajikistan and then to Afghanistan increasingly became the focus of attacks.

Even Kazakhstan, which has traditionally been more immune from the threat of terror than its neighbors, has recently found itself victim to a series of attacks that are suspected to have been staged by Islamic militants. The attacks, beginning in May 2011, have primarily occurred in the west and include suicide bombings, car bombings and violent confrontations between perpetrators and security forces. While not part of a coordinated campaign of violence originating from a specific group of militants, the incidents reflect a growing social unrest that could lead to more widespread Islamic fundamentalism.

In response to the perceived threat of Islamic radicalism, governments in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have taken new actions to regulate the role of Islam in society. In June 2011, the Tajik government passed a law that prohibits children under the age of 18 from attending services at mosques.[13] By the beginning of 2012, the Kyrgyz authorities had closed down over 170 unregistered mosques.[14] Perhaps most notably, the Kazakh government passed a new religion law in October 2011 that requires all religious organizations and missionaries to re-register with the authorities, bans prayer rooms in state buildings and makes the construction of new mosques and other places of worship subject to government approval. Shortly after the law was passed, a previously unknown group called Jund al-Khilafah (Soldiers of the Caliphate) claimed responsibility for two terror attacks in Atyrau after threatening violence if the law was not repealed.[15] In April 2012, a Kazakh court sentenced 42 men “to prison terms from 6 to 12 years for creating a terrorist group and preparing or carrying out explosions in Atyrau and other towns in the region.”[16] In addition to possibly inciting further terror attacks, the recent crackdown on Islam in the region could have the unfortunate effect of helping radical Islamists recruit new supporters from those dissatisfied with the new religious restrictions.

Finally the role of prisons in the spread of radical Islam in Central Asia has increased recently. The length of prison sentences for radical Islamists has increased in recent years as has the number of those sent to prison for involvement in extremist activities. Prisons are slowly becoming a breeding ground for extremists, a place for radical Islamists to recruit new members and to promote a militant brand of Islam. Imprisoned Islamic radicals are consolidating their power inside prisons by infiltrating, and sometimes competing with, traditional criminal power structures. According to the ICG, “HT and other groups like Tablighi Jamaat have exploited the weakness of underfunded, demoralised and corrupt prison systems to extend their own networks and recruit within the prison population. They are helped by a program of prison mosque building, allegedly funded in part by a major organised crime figure, where their own imams usually preach their brand of radical Islam.”[17]

Conclusion

Developments covered so far with regard to radicalization of Islam in Central Asia, current events and reactions by central authorities suggest that the trajectory of groups like HT and IMU has laid the foundation for a trend that will likely persist. Especially given the fact that dissatisfaction with and opposition to authoritarian regimes and corrupt ruling elite are growing, we will likely see revitalization of radical groups. Also, external factors such as the war on terror in Afghanistan and regional instability have been and will continue to be substantial for the dynamics of Islamist mobilization in Central Asia. These regional and international security threats provide excellent opportunities for Islamists to further mobilization of their constituents. Finally, it is clear that central authorities in the region are convinced that the iron fist is the best way to protect the stability and security of their country. This repression and consequential exclusion of Islamic groups from legitimate governmental procedures will continue to cause them to seek out different ways to express their grievances.

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[1] See David Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), Richard Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1996), Mehrdad Haghayeghi, *Islam and Politics in Central Asia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), Svat Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[2] See Yaacov Ro'i, *Islam in the Soviet Union: From the Second World War to Gorbachev* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), Mehrdad Haghayeghi, *Islam and Politics in Central Asia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996) pp. 1-70.

[3] John Anderson, "Islam in the Soviet Archives: a research note," *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1994, pp. 46.

[4] These figures are indicative of the greater weight of Islam in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan compared with the other three republics.

[5] Martha Brill Olcott, *Kazakhstan: Unfulfilled Promise*, (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2002), pp. 211.

[6] T. Jeremy Gunn, "Shaping an Islamic Identity," *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 64, No. 3, 2003, pp. 390.

[7] Olivier Roy, *The New Central Asia: The creation of nations* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 144.

[8] International Crisis Group (ICG), "Women and radicalization in Kyrgyzstan." *Asia Report* 176(3), 2009.

[9] Central Eurasia Project, (26 May 2009), Eurasianet, "Uzbekistan: If a Taliban Outpost Falls in Pakistan is the Ripple Felt in the Fergana Valley?" <<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav052609.shtml>>.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Deirdre Tynan, (13 Sept. 2009), Eurasianet, "Afghanistan: Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan fighters active in Kunduz" <<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav091409a.shtml#>>.

[12] Deirdre Tynan, (7 Sept. 2009), Eurasianet, "Afghanistan: Northern Distribution Network Grapples with Growing Security Threat," <<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav090809a.shtml>>.

[13] Michael Schwartz, (16 July 2011), *New York Times*, "On the Rise in Tajikistan, Islam Worries an Authoritarian Government," <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/17/world/asia/17tajikistan.html?_r=1&ref=tajikistan>.

[14] Stephen Blank, (12 January 2012), Eurasianet Commentary, "Central Asia & Caucasus: Hiding Weaknesses with Shows of Strength," <<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64828>>.

[15] Joanna Lillis, (16 November 2011), Eurasianet, "Kazakhstan: Astana Jolted by terror Incidents," <<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64529>>.

[16] RFE/RL Kazkah Service, (18 April 2012), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Forty-Two Sentenced to Prison In Kazakh Terrorism Trial" <http://www.rferl.org/content/42_sentenced_to_prison_in_kazakh_terrorism_trial/24552707.html>.

[17] ICG, (15 December 2009), Asia Briefing No. 97 < <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/central-asia/B097-central-asia-islamists-in-prison.aspx>>.