

The Rise of Radical Islam in Uzbekistan

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Perhaps the most significant contemporary issue facing Central Asia today is the rise of radical Islam. This is especially evident in Uzbekistan. The radical Islamic elements that have gained support in Central Asia over the past decade differ greatly from strains of Islam native to the region. Since Uzbekistan Islam traditionally has moved away from Islam found in other parts of the world, including the Middle East, Asia, and Africa, the recent drive toward radicalism in the region can be viewed in the larger context of the global Islamic movement. However, before examining the factors that have given rise to radical Islam in Uzbekistan in the 1990s, one must briefly consider the history of Islam in the region.

This history demonstrates that Islam has served and continues to serve as an important part of the identity of Uzbekistan. Although the populations of Central Asia have long embraced Islam, this identity has played a limited role as a vehicle for political mobilization. Given this history, the question arises as to whether or not radical Islam will serve as a mobilizing factor in Uzbekistan in the twenty-first century.

The path of Islam in Central Asia has been one of continuity and change. Islamic traditions have been passed down for centuries, despite periods of repression of the faith. The religion was first introduced to Central Asia in the seventh century by Arab invaders arriving from the Middle East. It was not until the ninth century, however, that Islam was adopted by local rulers and became the predominant religion in the region. During this period, Islam was promoted from the top down, rather than forced upon the Central Asian populations by foreign conquerors. Central Asian rulers viewed their endorsement of Islam and its acceptance among the people as one means of creating and maintaining their bases of power. Support for Islam continued to grow in the tenth century, with the cities of Samarkand and Bukhara in present-day Uzbekistan becoming great centers of Islamic learning and culture.

The majority of Central Asian Muslims embraced Sunni Islam, although Shia Muslims also can be found throughout the region. Sunni Islam was first embraced by the settled populations of today's Uzbekistan, while the nomadic peoples of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan maintained stronger ties to their pre-Islamic culture and beliefs. Early differences in how Islam was embraced in Central Asia continue to be reflected in local practices in the region. In the twenty-first century, identification with Islam remains stronger in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan than in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan.

Islam was an important aspect of the culture of Uzbekistan up to and including the period of Russian colonization of the region in the nineteenth century. The Muslims of Uzbekistan did not begin to experience repression at the hands of the Russians until after the Bolsheviks came to power at the end of World War I. In the 1920s, the Soviet state launched an attack on Islamic beliefs, traditions, and institutions as it initiated the process of replacing religion with a new form of "scientific atheism." The crack down on Islamic identity coincided with Soviet leader Josef Stalin's creation of the five Central Asian republics between 1924 and 1936. The republics had not existed previously as separate entities and had no historical basis for division. As part of

a larger effort to eliminate loyalty to the Islamic identity and replace it with loyalties to the newly formed republics, purges of the Muslim leadership also took place throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

Official hostility toward Islam in the Soviet Union lifted slightly following World War II. The Soviet policy of suppression, which had marked the earlier period, turned to one of limited religious tolerance. Soviet authorities attempted to regulate Islam by creating an “official” authorized version of the religion. A Muslim Religious Board was formed and charged with overseeing “Official Islam” in the Central Asian republics. Despite these efforts to suppress and then co-opt Islam, the religion continued to serve as an important symbol of identity for the people of Uzbekistan. Muslims also continued to practice their own unofficial or “parallel Islam” underground.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 marked another significant turning point for Islam in Uzbekistan. The mobilization of thousands of Central Asian men to fight in the Soviet army against the Afghan Mujahedeen put many Soviet Muslims in contact with foreign Muslims for the first time. The Central Asian Muslims were impressed by the commitment the Afghan people had for Islam. They also recognized shared ethnic and linguistic ties with the people they were fighting. This reminded them of how the Soviet Union had incorporated their lands and deprived them of their true identity and national pride. Contacts that were made between Central Asians and Muslims from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia during this period later would weigh heavily on the resurgence of Islam in Central Asia, following the breakup of the Soviet Union.

The relationship between Islam and Central Asia again entered a new phase with President Mikhail Gorbachev’s rise to power in the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s. Along with the introduction of Gorbachev’s policies of glasnost and perestroika came greater religious freedom. Gorbachev’s reforms led to a religious revival in which many Uzbekistan Muslims were allowed to make a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia for the first time. The reforms also allowed outside Islamic influences to begin filtering into Uzbekistan and the rest of Central Asia. Foreign Islamic governments, organizations, and individuals began sending money to Central Asia to fund the construction of new mosques and reinvigorate Islamic practices. These influences would come to play an important role in the development of radical Islam in Uzbekistan in the 1990s.

Once the Central Asian republics’ borders were open to the world, among the first visitors were Islamic missionaries from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. Pakistan and Afghanistan played a particularly significant role in influencing the revival and radicalization of Islam in Central Asia. In addition to providing funding and religious training to support mosques and religious schools, these sources distributed free copies of the Koran, which had been translated into Russian and other Central Asian languages. Sources in Saudi Arabia also contributed to the rise of Islam in Central Asia. In early 1990, these sources funded the development of Adolat (Justice) - an Islamic movement that arose in the Uzbek part of the Ferghana Valley. The movement worked not only to introduce Islam, but also to expose corruption and social injustice among the ruling regime. Adolat quickly gained support and began to spread across

the Ferghana Valley in 1991. However, by March 1992, following the break up of the Soviet Union, the movement was banned by independent Uzbek authorities.

Although external factors played a significant role in the emergence of radical Islam in Central Asia, they have not been alone in affecting the changing nature of Islam in the region. Support for radical Islam in Uzbekistan developed in large part as a form of opposition to authoritarian government. As government corruption and oppression increased and economic conditions deteriorated throughout the 1990s, segments of the Uzbekistan population viewed radical Islam as an alternative to the status quo. There also has been a strong show of support for radical Islamic movements in northern Tajikistan and southern Kyrgyzstan, particularly among ethnic Uzbeks who have experienced discrimination based on their ethnicity. The failure of Uzbekistan leaders to introduce democratic and economic reforms, coupled with the repression of Islam, increased support for radical Islamic elements. President Karimov continues to keep a tight reign on Islamic activity in Uzbekistan.

In order to translate support for radical Islam and opposition to regional governments into action, several organizations have been formed in Central Asia in support of radical ideals. These organizations differ in their tactics as well as their goals. The two most significant organizations to emerge are the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and the Hizb-ut-Tahirir.

Among Islamic groups active in Central Asia, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan has received perhaps the most attention. Prior to the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan was considered the most radical Islamic organization operating in the region. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan was known to have close ties with the Taliban and had set up training bases in the north of Afghanistan. They also reportedly were receiving financial backing from Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda network, as well as from Saudi Arabia.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan began forming in 1992-1993, when future members fled Uzbekistan in response to President Karimov's crackdown on Islamic activities. The initial goal of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan was to topple the Uzbek leadership. The organization's mandate was later enlarged to include overthrowing all of the region's secular governments and replacing them with regimes based on Islamic law. The movement promised to form a state in the Ferghana Valley - a center of Islamic traditionalism for centuries. In order to achieve their goal of removing Uzbek President Karimov from power, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan launched terrorist attacks against the Uzbek government from bases in neighboring Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

Hizb-ut-Tahirir, the Party of Islamic Liberation, is a second well-known Islamic movement that has taken hold in Uzbekistan and is steadily increasing its influence. It draws a large base of support among ethnic Uzbeks, as well as recruits among Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Tajiks. Hizb-ut-Tahirir shares with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan the desire to overthrow the secular governments of Central Asia. In their place, Hizb-ut-Tahirir proposes to introduce an Islamic Caliphate across present state borders in Central Asia similar to that established in seventh century Arabia following the death of the Prophet Mohammed. An important difference between Hizb-ut-Tahirir and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan is that Hizb-ut-Tahirir rejects

violence as a means of bringing about political change. This has allowed the group to gain a broader base of followers than the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which was in part discredited as a result of its support for violence. The Hizb-ut-Tahirir movement, headquartered in London, was first founded between 1952 and 1953 in the Middle East, and has since grown to operate in approximately forty countries worldwide. The movement was originally established by Palestinian activists who oversaw the introduction of Hizb-ut-Tahirir to Central Asia in 1995 when the party opened its headquarters in Uzbekistan. The organization originally drew its support from educated urban youth mainly in who then helped to spread the Hizb-ut-Tahirir message among poorer segments of the population living in rural areas.

In response to growing popular support, the Uzbekistan government has cracked down on Hizb-ut-Tahirir activities, and the organization has been banned. Despite the arrests of its members, Hizb-ut-Tahirir continues to attract followers in Uzbekistan. In southern Kyrgyzstan, ten percent of the population is believed to be involved in Hizb-ut-Tahirir activities. The success of Hizb-ut-Tahirir in Uzbekistan has been attributed in part to its ability to target its message to post-Soviet grievances. Unlike their activities in London and elsewhere in the West, where the organization distributes leaflets and holds meetings denouncing the United States and Israel, in Central Asia the organization criticizes local governments for their inability to fight corruption, poverty, drug use, HIV/AIDS, and other social and economic ills.

No single factor can fully explain the emergence and rise of radical Islam in Uzbekistan and throughout Central Asia. Uzbekistan has faced multiple and varied internal and external pressures since gaining independence, which have contributed to differing levels of support for Islamic radicalism. These pressures include: increasing government corruption and repression, declining economic conditions, and growing influence from foreign Islamic elements. The rise in popular support for radical Islamic groups in Central Asia can be viewed as a sign of discontent with the status quo, rather than a voice in support of Islamic government and radical views.

While gaining in popularity, the majority of Central Asian Muslims do not support the end of the secular state and many perceive radical Islamic groups as a threat to state and regional stability. That being said, the radical Islam movements will continue to be the most significant contemporary issue in Uzbekistan today. It appears this will only change if the conditions of the country change. Under better economic and social circumstances, movements such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Hizb-ut-Tahirir would have little public appeal or impact. The forces of Radical Islam will continue to destabilize Uzbekistan and the region and significantly hinder development unless the underlying factors that created it are addressed.

References

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