

Muslims at the Crossroads

An Introductory Survey of Historical and Contemporary Aspects of Islam in Central Asia

By Reuel R. Hanks

Central Asia Reemerges

Central Asia has reappeared as a player in the ebb and flow of international relations. Ironically, the region the political geographer Halford J. MacKinder called “the geographical pivot of history” in 1904¹ was for most of the twentieth century consigned to the sidelines, as world wars and their geopolitical aftermath carried other actors to center stage. Yet at many earlier historical junctures, Central Asia had served as a crossroads, linking Asian, European, and Middle Eastern civilizations, a bridge that facilitated a “global economy” more than a thousand years before the industrial age. Moreover, the region was not only a conduit for economic exchange. Traders and invaders brought wares and warfare, and their religious beliefs with them. Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and other faiths all made their way to the heart of Asia, but the most enduring of the religious currents to flow into this cultural crucible was Islam.

A Brief Historical Outline

Joining the Dar-ul-Islam

Central Asia encountered Islam less than a century after the death of the Prophet in 632 AD. Muslim armies, bent on pursuing the riches beyond the river the Greeks had called the Oxus (the contemporary Amu Darya), launched forays against the city-states occupying that territory. The redoubtable Arab general Qutayba ibn Muslim, using Persia as a base of operations, brought first Bukhara (709 AD), and later Samarkand (712 AD) into the *Dar-ul-Islam*, or realm of Islam. His successors carried the Muslim standard completely to the Tien Shan and the edge of Tang China, thereby countering Chinese territorial ambitions in the Fergana Valley.²

The oasis cities along the Silk Road had served as cosmopolitan, entrepot centers for centuries—now as part of the Muslim realm Bukhara, Samarkand, Merv, and others burst forth as great centers of Islamic culture and learning. A dualistic culture arose melding both Persian and Turkic influences, at the same time employing Arabic as a language of the intelligentsia, especially among the *ulema*, or community of religious scholars.³ Two of the most influential thinkers in the Muslim world emerged from Central Asia in the centuries following the Islamic conquest: al-Farabi and Ibn Sina (Avicenna), although the former spent much of his life in Baghdad. For several centuries in the middle ages, Bukhara represented one of the capitals of Muslim intellectualism, and students from the far corners of the Islamic world sought knowledge and understanding in its universities and madresehs.

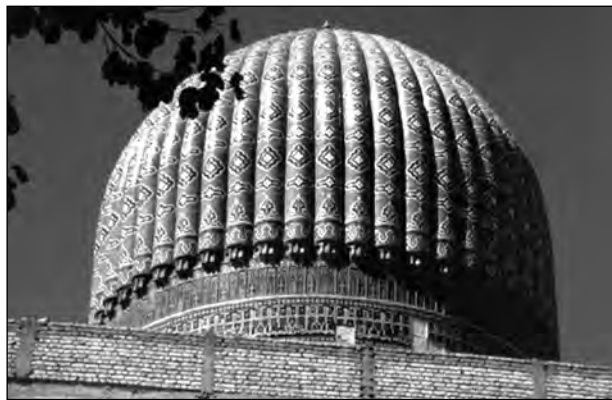
At the same time that the oasis cities along the Silk Road were flourishing, a multitude of nomadic peoples occupied the steppe lands to the north and mountain valleys to the northeast. Mostly Turkic, these groups had intermittent contact with the urban centers and limited knowledge of Islam, and followed a worldview dominated by shamanistic ritual and belief. Gradually, over the course of several centuries, many were converted to the faith, and perhaps by the sixteenth century many if not most were adherents of Islam, although conversion continued among some Kazakh and Kyrgyz into the nineteenth century. The agents of conversion were in many instances Sufi adepts, who traveled among the widely dispersed tribes and clans, preaching their mystical, devotional brand of the faith.

Sufism became deeply ingrained in the region, and Central Asia eventually produced its own *tariqa*, or Sufi orders, the most influential of which are the Naqshbandis. The Naqshbandi order was established by Baha al-din Naqshband, whose tomb near Bukhara has once again in the post-Soviet period become the destination of pilgrims from around the Muslim world.⁴ Sufism historically served as a counterweight to more austere, doctrinal variants of the faith in Central Asia, a balance which still holds there.

The Age of World Conquerors

The invaders who made their way to Central Asia in the thousand years after the arrival of Islam were sometimes Muslims themselves, but frequently were non-believers who often eventually adopted the faith. This was true of the Mongols, who first destroyed many religious structures except those that overwhelmingly impressed them (allegedly, Genghis Khan was so awed by the stature of the Kalan minaret in Bukhara that he spared it), but who frequently later adopted the monotheistic faith of their new subjects. Unlike many who followed them, the Mongols did not leave behind great monuments, and in general the Mongol invasion had little long-term effect on Islam in Central Asia. But those empire-builders who followed in the next several centuries were uniformly Muslim and left their mark on the landscape, including the Timurids and Shaybanids.

The precise religious orientation of Amir Timur, or Tamerlane as he is popularly known in the west, is somewhat unclear, although he considered himself a devout Muslim, and may have used his faith to justify his conquests.⁵ Some have suggested that he leaned towards Shiism, since he employed Shiites as advisors and other officials at his court. On the other hand, there is compelling evidence that Timur favored Sunni variants of Sufism, the most obvious example of this support being the enormous and magnificent mausoleum Timur constructed for Ahmad Yasawi, the



The magnificent ribbed dome of the Gur-i-Amir, Amir Timur's final resting place in Samarkand. Islamic architecture in Central Asia was dramatically changed under Timur, who imported artisans from the Middle East.

Photo by Reuel Hanks.

founder of the Yasawi tariqa, which stands today at Turkistan in southern Kazakhstan. Timur's patronage of Islamic arts, in particular architecture and the painting of miniatures, also provides evidence of his commitment to Islam. His grandson Ulugh Beg, best known perhaps for his contributions to astronomy, also built the first of three stupendous medressehs in the heart of Samarkand, in what would eventually become the world famous square called the Registan. One of Timur's more distant successors, a prince named Babur, had only a marginal impact in Central Asia, but sought his fortunes to the south in India where he established the Mogul dynasty.

After Babur's departure, the Shaybanids maintained Central Asia's Islamic traditions, occasionally contributing further to the grandeur of the preceding centuries, but largely the glory days of Islamic civilization in the heart of Asia had run their course. Yet no significant threat to the Islamic worldview in Central Asia would appear until the twentieth century, and for three centuries Central Asia retreated to the shadows, as new empires were built across the world's oceans.

A New Player on the Central Asian Stage

Russian penetration of Central Asia began with Ivan the Terrible. Ivan's capture of Kazan, the Tatar capital, in 1552, and Astrakan, at the mouth of the Volga four years later, brought Russian influence to the doorstep of Central Asia. Russian interest in Central Asia intensified a century and a half later during the reign of Peter the Great, when rumors of large gold deposits in Central Asia reached the Russian court. In 1717, Peter sent Prince Bekovich-Cherkasskii on a "mission" to Khiva, but the Khivans destroyed the force, viewing the expedition as Christian aggression against their corner of the *Dar-ul-Islam*. Thus, early on, Russia's relationship with Central Asia was defined to some degree in religious terms.

The decline and decadence of Central Asian leadership, along with the rise of British power in southern Asia, would invite greater Russian interest and intervention along the old Silk Road. The "Great Game," as Kipling called it, was on.⁶ Slowly but steadily, the Russian empire spent the first half of the nineteenth century bringing the vast Kazakh steppe lands under control, and by June of 1865, Russian troops had taken Tashkent, the gateway to the verdant Fergana Valley. Thousands of Slavic settlers moved into the newly "opened" lands and garrisoned cities, bringing their Christian faith with them, but Russian authorities also allowed their Muslim subjects considerable autonomy in which to practice their faith. Islamic institutions would continue functioning much as they had for centuries, and although there were efforts by the Russian Orthodox Church



Women circumambulating the mausoleum of Ahmad Yasawi, in Turkestan, Kazakhstan. Local Muslims believe that this ritual will bring the blessings of the Sufi holy man, who founded one of the major branches of Sufism in Central Asia. Photo by Reuel Hanks.

and other Christians at conversion, these did not have the official sanction and support of the local authorities.

Russian control, however, was not universally welcomed by Central Asian Muslims, some of whom chafed under the Tsar's rule. Rebellions were typically localized and short-lived, and usually the work of discontented Islamic authorities, such as Madali, a Sufi sheik who instigated a brief but bloody revolt in 1898. The advent of the Russian empire had engendered more subtle reactions in the Muslim community as well, especially among some of the intelligentsia. By the end of the century, younger Muslim scholars known as the *Jadids* were pressing for reforms in Central Asian society, initially in the education system, but

later across the social and political spectrum. Russian colonization wrought profound change in the lives of Central Asia's Muslims, but few could have imagined that greater and much more destructive changes lay only a few years ahead.

Soviet Repression: Red and Green Don't Mix

Soviet policy toward Muslims differed fundamentally from the relatively tolerant approach of the Tsarist administration. The Soviet regime persecuted the entire spectrum of religious believers, but Islam generally suffered a more aggressive approach than other faiths. Early Soviet strategy sought some accommodation with Muslims, but by the late 1920s an overt and belligerent campaign was underway against the spiritual and physical manifestations of Islam. Thousands of mosques were closed, and Muslim women were accosted by mobs of young Bolsheviks who ripped the *paranja* (veil) from them. As a result, an insurgency emerged that persisted into the 1930s, the so-called Basmachi movement.⁷ The Basmachi were an eclectic mixture of common criminals, disaffected Muslims, and even former Jadids and revolutionaries, all of whom were not

completely eradicated from Soviet territory for two decades. A sizable number of the Basmachi eventually took refuge in northern Afghanistan.

The rise of Josef Stalin to the helm of the USSR led immediately to a number of additional prohibitions against Islam. Among the most damaging changes was the shifting of Central Asian languages from the Arabic to the Latin, and later to the Cyrillic script. This policy severed many of the connections between Central Asia and the remainder of the *Dar-ul-Islam*, since Arabic had long functioned as a common language among the Muslim elite, and also broke the bond Central Asians had with their religious heritage. The new generation of Central Asians could no longer read the Koran in its original language, classical Arabic, nor could they read the rich Islamic literature of their forebears. Two essential activities became impossible



The mausoleum of Ismail Samani, founder of the Samanid dynasty, in Bukhara, Uzbekistan. The crypt is one of the oldest Islamic structures in Central Asia, and bears pre-Islamic motifs. Photo by Reuel Hanks.

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for most Muslims to observe: the *haj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca, and *zakat*, or the giving of alms to the needy. The observance of rituals such as daily prayer and Ramadan, the month of fasting, faded as the Soviet administration pursued a relentless propaganda campaign against such “vestiges of the past.”

During WWII and afterward, some tempering of the official approach to Islam occurred. An official structure of Islamic governance was erected, featuring four “spiritual directorates” that were closely tied to the regime. While this allowed for additional control, it also represented a de facto recognition of the presence and persistence of Islam in Soviet society. The 1980s brought Mikhail Gorbachev’s policy of *glasnost*, which gradually took root in Central Asia. “Muslims” in the Soviet Union, many of whom had never attended mosque, never prayed, and freely consumed both pork and vodka, began to rediscover their cultural roots, as the façade of Marxism-Leninism crumbled.

Islam in the New Central Asia

It is rather inaccurate and misleading to speak uniformly of “Islam” in contemporary Central Asia, for the level of religiosity and nature of ritual and practice there are far from consistent, and vary across the landscape. Those new states that contain the heart of the oasis cities that were first brought into the Islamic realm, aligned along the old Silk Road, generally possess the most devout populations. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and southern Kyrgyzstan, with its large population of Uzbeks, all fall within this scope, and the Tajiks and Uzbeks are generally considered the most “Islamic” of the Central Asian peoples. Those groups who were traditionally nomadic and who converted to Islam much later in history, most prominently the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, are viewed as less rigorous in their devotion to the principles and observance of Islam, and also have integrated more elements of “folk Islam” into their religious views and behavior. An example of the latter includes the placing of votive offerings at “holy” sites, a practice widely observed in some parts of Central Asia.

Central Asia experienced a cultural renaissance in the waning years of Soviet control, a movement that continued after independence. Thousands of mosques and dozens of medressehs, or Islamic seminaries, sprang up across the Central Asian landscape, most prominently in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. A



Local Muslim leaders with the author, after the afternoon prayer in Turkistan, Kazakhstan. Photo by Reuel Hanks

politicization of the faith transpired, as various “Islamic” parties appeared, seeking a voice in the political process. Among the most influential of these was the Islamic Revival Party in Tajikistan (IRPT), which won official recognition in the early 1990s but was later banned. The IRPT played a key role in the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), a coalition that eventually forced the former communist leadership in that country to democratize, after a protracted and costly civil war.⁸ By the mid-1990s, virtually all Islamic political organi-

zations had been disbanded or driven underground by the “new” Central Asian regimes. The IRPT remains the only legal Islamic party in Central Asia, as other states have refused to allow even moderate Islamic groups to operate openly.

Indeed, after the “rediscovery” of the region’s Islamic heritage in the early 1990s, a coercive and threatening atmosphere towards Islam has settled in over much of Central Asia, especially in Uzbekistan, the region’s most populous country. Islam Karimov, the former leader of the communist party, initiated a campaign of intimidation and brutality directed at devout Muslims in the mid-1990s. Islamic leaders who might have organized opposition to the government were arrested, and a number have not been seen or heard from for nearly a decade—numerous others have died in the custody of Uzbek authorities. In 1997 the Uzbek government instituted what is arguably the most repressive statute governing religion in the world,

a law which bans believers from wearing “religious clothing” in public, prohibits the teaching of religion even in the privacy of one’s home, and requires all religious organizations to register with the government and to provide the authorities with membership lists.⁹ It is important to note that the crushing of Islam in Uzbekistan began several years in advance of any major incidents of violence in the country, which were allegedly the work of “extremists.”

Not surprisingly, in reaction to the Uzbek government’s crackdown, some Islamic groups turned to a more confrontational strategy. In February of 1999 a series of car bombs were detonated in Tashkent, in an alleged assassination attempt against President Karimov. The administration charged that the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), an opposition group based in northern Afghanistan, was behind the violence, but IMU representatives denied involvement. Later that year, however, a small force of IMU insurgents entered southern Kyrgyzstan before being driven out, and the next



An Uzbek man in traditional dress in Tashkent. The figure in the background is an enormous statue of Amir Timur. Photo by Reuel Hanks

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summer several remote areas of southern Uzbekistan were briefly invaded. The IMU was supported by the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and evidently received financial and logistical backing from Osama bin Laden. The American air campaign during the fall of 2001 in Afghanistan decimated the ranks of the IMU, and apparently killed the IMU's military leader, Juma Namangani, an Uzbek from the city of Namangan. For the last three years, the IMU appears to have been mostly dormant, although several incidents, particularly in the spring of 2004, have been blamed on the IMU or its remnants.

A seemingly more pervasive radical Islamic movement is Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT), a highly secretive organization that operates underground in every Central Asian country. HT is anti-Semitic and anti-Western, and has as its central goal the re-establishment of the Islamic Caliphate, vacant since the fall of the Ottoman Empire. HT followers are organized into small cells, have no connection to other cells, and typically spread their message through word of mouth or via the clandestine distribution of literature. Clearly opposed to secularization and antithetical to Western global influence, HT has nevertheless not been conclusively implicated in any violence in Central Asia, although the group has frequently condemned President Karimov on its Web site. HT leaders, headquartered in London, publicly renounce the use of violence, yet mere possession of the group's literature is sufficient cause for imprisonment in Uzbekistan, where as many as 5,000 accused members of HT are incarcerated.

Radical Islamic movements like the IMU and HT have failed to develop into mass movements in Central Asia, and have little appeal to most Muslims there. Conservative variants of the faith have to date found little fertile ground, due to long contact of the indigenous population with non-Muslims, particularly in urban areas, and the weakening of traditional Islamic worldviews during the Soviet period. While Soviet rule had many harmful effects on the lives of Central Asians, it must also be pointed out that literacy rates increased exponentially, economic production was modernized, and the societal opportunities for women, especially in education and business, expanded dramatically. Central Asians generally do not seek to pattern their emerging societies on ultra-conservative Islamic countries like Iran, Saudi Arabia, or Pakistan, but rather on those states which appear to have successfully blended an Islamic heritage with Western standards and expectations, like Malaysia or Turkey. This goal becomes increasingly distant as the Central Asian leadership rejects democratic principles, and consistently fails to achieve the economic progress their constituents increasingly demand. Until Central Asia's autocratic rule is modified and democratic reforms are introduced across the region, extremist Islam will seek a foothold among the disenchanting and dispossessed.

Conclusion

Islam has been a salient component of Central Asia's cultural milieu for 1,300 years, and has shaped the region's social and economic development as well as its political environment. Islam's role in the region today remains essential and determinative, as the "threat" of Islamic militancy directs both internal policy and Central Asia's relationships with external geopolitical players, particularly the United States and Russia. In forging those relationships, it is vital for all involved to recognize that Islam in Central Asia has rarely indicated intolerant or extreme tendencies—such would have been counterpro-

ductive at a crossroads of commerce and culture. Through the centuries of turmoil and conquest, Islam has remained as a resilient cultural foundation in Central Asia. As the region reemerges in a globalizing world, it is likely to continue in that role. ■

NOTES

1. H. J. MacKinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *Geographical Journal*, Vol. 23, 1904.
2. Svat Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 51–69.
3. Maria Eva Subtelny, "The Symbiosis of Turk and Tajik," in *Central Asia in Historical Perspective*, edited by Beatrice F. Manz, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1994).
4. Vernon Schubel, "Post-Soviet Hagiography and the Reconstruction of the Naqshbandi Tradition in Contemporary Uzbekistan," in *Naqshbandis in Western and Central Asia*, edited by Elisabeth Ozdalga (Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 1999).
5. Beatrice Forbes Manz, *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 17.
6. A highly readable account of this period is offered in Karl Meyer and Shareen Brysac, *Tournament of Shadows: The Great Game and the Race for Empire in Asia* (London: Abacus Books, 2001).
7. Michael Rywkin, *Moscow's Muslim Challenge* (revised edition), (Armonk: NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1990).
8. Gregory Gleason, *The Central Asian States: Discovering Independence*, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), 105–109.
9. Reuel Hanks, "Religion and Law in Uzbekistan: Renaissance and Repression in an Authoritarian Context," in *Regulating Religion: Case Studies From Around the Globe*, edited by James T. Richardson (New York: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004), 319–330.

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