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# Islamic Revival in Post-Independence Uzbekistan

JAMSHID GAZIEV

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*Islamic slogans are always used as a doctrine and not a religious one, but as a political doctrine and mostly as a means of attaining quite definite political aims.*

Barhold V.V.

This paper will seek to analyze the revival of Islam in Uzbekistan after a century of suppression. Islamic revivalism emerged during the last decade of the Soviet Union and has since played a significant role in the politics and society of the state. The author's main aim is to explore the political consequences, either positive or negative, caused by the revival of Islam. The paper will examine the factors that promoted the resurgence of Islam, paying attention to the present government's position towards Islamic revival, and the changes occurring in domestic policy due to the Islamization of society. The concept that Islam plays a significant role in forming self-identity, and is confused and intertwined with other national and regional identities will be analyzed throughout this paper. In order to illustrate the political scene in Uzbekistan, Islam's division on both horizontal and vertical levels in terms of indoctrination and institutionalization will be discussed in detail. Finally, as it poses a major challenge to the stability and prosperity of the country, Islamic fundamentalism, and wahhabism in particular, will also be discussed.

## Factors and Determinants of Islamic Revival in Uzbekistan

*The most significant event in the cultural and spiritual life of Uzbekistan since the mid-1980s was the return of Islam to its proper place in society. At last it can be stated that liberty of conscience and religion has become a reality.*

Zahid Munnavarov, famous Uzbek

Towards the end of the 1990s there has been an extensive Islamic revival which has grasped Central Asia in general, and Uzbekistan in particular. There are several factors which may have served as a catalyst for this process and greatly influenced the political, social and cultural spheres of the Uzbek people.

The first factor, as acknowledged by Warikoo and Norbu, was triggered by the spill-over effects of Khomeini's revolution in Iran and the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan.<sup>i</sup> Iranian ideologues launched widespread propaganda on Islamic fundamentalism through mass media, and incited turmoil in the area by arousing religious passions. This strategy succeeded in provoking a series of anti-Soviet demonstrations and riots in Dushanbe, Alma-Ata and Tashkent. It should be noted that although not all disturbances had a religious basis, Islamic ideology played a role in fomenting them. This widespread turmoil generated fears amongst scholars that the 1979 Iranian Islamic revolution could 'set a pattern' for Uzbekistan, where Muslims form the majority of the population.

The Afghan *mujahideen* had an even greater influence in promoting Islamic revival in the region in terms of propagating the militant ideology of Islam. Attempting to identify the success of the Afghan propaganda over the Iranian, Warikoo points out that:

The cross border smuggling of religious and political literature by Afghan *mujahideen* and their agents into Soviet Central Asia has been facilitated by the common ethnic and religious background of the people inhabiting the Tajik and Afghan border areas.<sup>ii</sup>

However, many scholars suggested that Afghanistan was only a catalyst for the inevitable Islamic resurgence. In Victor Spolnikov's opinion, even if the well-known events in Afghanistan did not take

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place, the Islamic revival in the Soviet Central Asia was bound to turn into an important political factor, and this dynamic was only accelerated by the war in Afghanistan and the disintegration of the Soviet Union.<sup>iii</sup>

The second determinant had its roots as early as 1988, under Gorbachev's new religious policy. One of the first fruits of this policy was the celebration of the millennium of Christianity in Russia. The Orthodox Church began claiming the role of spiritual leadership and some priests became political figures, attempting to explain the idea of perestroika in terms of the words and the will of God. Rorlich, revealing the contradiction in the essence of Soviet religious policy, stressed that:

During this period the Soviet press highlighted the organic link between Russian culture and Orthodoxy and extolled the virtues of the religion [Christianity] which gave Russia a special place among the nations of the world...; meanwhile, Muslims still had to request passes to visit the tombs of their own saints.<sup>iv</sup>

Such questions as "Why are only Christians allowed to practice their religion and traditions? Are Muslims and Islam less important?" were frequently asked by the Muslim intelligentsia and clergy of Uzbekistan. This perception of inequality generated a series of religious protests: for instance, in December 1988 spontaneous demonstrations by Uzbek students broke out in Tashkent.

Finally, the native elite, regardless of the official policy of the Communist Party, started to inspire the Islamic revival. Shirin Akiner described the motives of this official encouragement as "in large part a political gesture, an astute move to establish new credentials rooted in local culture and not, therefore, dependent on Moscow."<sup>v</sup>

After the demise of the USSR, the ruling elite, with the help of religious functionaries, saved their positions in the government, replacing Soviet ideology with Islam. Apparently, it was not only political self-interest which persuaded them to embrace Islam, but also the inevitable fact that tradition and religion would have to be encouraged in order to escape political extremes.

Before analyzing the effects of Islamic renaissance on the political and social life of Uzbekistan, it is worthwhile to define its main features. The debate over the features of this phenomenon divides scholars into two opposite views. The first, such as Husain and Taheri, argue that Islamic revival was not politically but culturally oriented.<sup>vi</sup> Husain maintains that the Islamic renaissance in Uzbekistan is neither 'exclusively fundamentalist', nor 'predominantly political', but primarily cultural. Taheri's analysis, lending support to Husain's opinion, established that:

The Islamic revival [in Uzbekistan]... is not a monolithic movement with a set of clearly stated political objectives. It has no central organization or even a set of organizations capable of using it as a political weapon or as a means of exerting pressure.<sup>vii</sup>

The opposite opinion was expressed by Haynes and Rashid.<sup>viii</sup> Jeff Haynes' argument, supported by Rashid, is based on two important issues: first, Islamic organizations with political objectives do exist in Uzbekistan (some officially and some unofficially); and second, radical Islam in Uzbekistan offers an alternative governmental structure to that of the current 'reformed' government.

Bearing in mind these opposite views, reality appears to lie somewhere in between -- Islamic revival in Uzbekistan initially emerged as a cultural episode in the development of the country and then, due to the reasons which will be clarified later, was transformed into a religious, political and social phenomenon that now plays a very significant role in the present and future of the country.

### **Official Policy of the Uzbek Government towards Islamic Revival**

*The process of the revival of national traditions and Islamic culture in Uzbekistan has invalidated any ideas of the 'import' of Islam, the politicization of Islam or Islamization of the politics.*

Islam A. Karimov, The President of Uzbekistan

The Islamic revival in Uzbekistan has brought some changes in the state's attitude to Islam. Pending the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Islam Karimov (current President of Uzbekistan) was highly critical of Soviet cultural policy towards Muslims, in which everything religious and cultural was banned. He criticized the fact that religion was persecuted, mosques were closed down and everything that was deeply national was suppressed, mocked and discredited.

In September 1991, the Communist Party changed its name to the People's Democratic Party and elected Islam Karimov as its chairman. In the first direct presidential elections in Uzbekistan, held on December 29, 1991, Islam Karimov, according to Bess Brown, won a fair election, receiving 86 percent of the total votes.<sup>ix</sup> The first steps of the new government consisted of conciliatory gestures towards Muslims, including returning mosques and *madrasas* to their original Muslim practitioners, changing the old communist names of the streets and towns to traditional Muslim forms and finally, renaming some administrative positions as they used to be prior to the Russian conquest. In 1994, out of 7800 mosques in Central Asia, nearly half were officially functioning in Uzbekistan, and 380 *madrasas* have been operating in the country since independence.<sup>x</sup> Moreover, Qur'ans and other instructional material became widely available in Uzbek and the government went further in partially sponsoring the annual pilgrimage to Mecca.

During the first years of independence, the official policy of Karimov's office was focused on changing the Soviet atheist mentality of the population and propagating the spiritual wealth of the Uzbek nation. Warikoo notes that relative to the material poverty in rural areas, Islam Karimov felt that 'spiritual poverty' was of equal, if not greater concern.<sup>xi</sup>

As I recall from my personal experience, the history of Uzbekistan was reconsidered, its rich Muslim heritage glorified, and nationalist heroes, purged during the Soviet period, rehabilitated. New courses, such as 'Spiritual Heritage of Uzbekistan' and 'Uzbekistan's Own Way to Independence and Progress,' were included in the curriculum of schools and higher educational establishments. Karimov, explaining this policy, stated:

From the first days of our independence, the state policy faced the significant task to revive that tremendous, precious spiritual and cultural heritage, which has been built by our ancestors.<sup>xii</sup>

It could be argued that in order to succeed in this policy, the Uzbek president made a loose political alliance with Uzbekistan's official Muslim religious leader, Muhammad Sadiq Muhammad Yusuf. James Critchlow claims that Uzbek history and traditions were becoming the ideological standards, which opened the door as never before to an Islamic resurgence.<sup>xiii</sup>

Shirin Akiner criticized the official policy of the government on the grounds that:

The chief beneficiary was the republican government, which was adroit enough to use Islam to strengthen their own positions and to pave the way for an eventual transformation from Communist Party functionaries to nationalist leaders.<sup>xiv</sup>

Warikoo, providing support for Akiner's criticism, stressed that Karimov's attitude reflected the general tendency among the ruling elite in Central Asia to cover up their own failures by blaming Soviet policy.<sup>xv</sup>

The above criticism, defining Karimov's attempts to encourage Islam as self-interested and politically driven undertakings, is perhaps too harsh. Karimov realized that independence could not be achieved if the people were not aware of their true history and of the detrimental Soviet legacy. This educational policy was responsible 98.2 percent of the voters endorsing Uzbekistan's independence in the December 1991 referendum.

Above all, the criticism against the policy of the new government towards Islamic revival can be challenged on the following grounds. First, the government relied on state Islam as a device to help channel and control dissident Muslim forces. Second, the new policy reflected an attempt to fill the vacuum in society created by the decline of secular authority, and finally, the state policy responded to growing pressures from Uzbek intellectuals to restore Islam to its rightful place in their history. Islam Karimov, explaining his motives of a broad educational propaganda, maintains:

History proves that only educated and enlightened society will appreciate all advantages of democratic development [like that taking place in Uzbekistan], and vice versa, uneducated and ignorant people will accept an authoritarian and totalitarian system [as that of the former USSR].<sup>xvi</sup>

With regard to the legal aspects of the state's strategy towards Islam, it can be argued that legislation and constitutional provisions were designed to define parameters of religious activities, the violations of which would give the government legal sanction to level criminal charges against individuals and religious organizations.

The overall policy of the Uzbek authorities towards Islam has sought to provide freedom for its growth as a religion, encouraging the building of mosques and the establishment of religious schools and training colleges, but to resist any manifestation of a political voice for Islam. Diloram Ibrahim argues that it was not the state that dictated spiritual and religious drive, but the unstable social, political and economic situation in Uzbekistan made it necessary to seek spiritual support in religion to compensate for all the shortages in real life.<sup>xvii</sup> It also seems to be natural that Islam, a key feature of Central Asian civilization since the eighth century, should re-emerge vigorously once freed from official repression.

### **Islam and Identities in Uzbekistan**

*An Uzbek may feel Uzbek, Muslim ... or just part of his extended family, depending on the situation, the identity of the interlocutor, or just the mood of the moment. Facing a Kazakh he feels Uzbek, facing a Tatar he feels Turkestani, while confronting a Christian or a Jew he feels Muslim. A Russian makes him feel all three (Uzbek, Turkestani, Muslim) and awakens the latent resentment of a native against a settler.*

Michael Rywkin, Professor of Russian Studies, City College of New York

The hold of Islam on Uzbek society makes the religion a social and political tool with colossal potential. As claimed by the Uzbek party ideologue, Khatam Abdurahimov, this potential was successfully used by party officials to retain power, and the secret of their success was to play the nationalist card by mixing religious and nationalist themes hoping to capture the popular imagination.<sup>xviii</sup> In other words, the government celebrated Islam's cultural heritage but sought to control the political manifestations of Islam, manipulating Islam to their political needs. The nature of Islam in Central Asia lends itself to this problem. Concerned with growing nationalism, Graham Fuller hypothesized that:

The two concepts [Islam and nationalism] tend to be self-reinforcing, enabling Islam to serve as a vehicle for nationalist expression as well, especially against non-Muslim populations such as Slavs.<sup>xix</sup>

Nationalism in Uzbekistan emerged during the Soviet period, mainly because of Soviet linguistic and cultural policy, along with the carving up of Central Asia into five republics by Stalin in 1924. The architect of the national delimitation further complicated the ethnic picture by his policy of deportation of the 'politically unreliable' and resettlement of minority groups of the region. There is no doubt that such territorial division of ethnic groups has increased the feelings of ethnic exclusivity between the dominant and subordinate ethnic groups within the country.

Often the native peoples' perception that being an Uzbek is synonymous with being a Muslim leads to the confusion of Islamic identity with that of nationality. Genuine and superior Muslims are Uzbeks.

Islam is not only a religion but also a part of personal identity: one cannot simply call oneself an Uzbek or a Tajik and, at the same time, reject Islam. This not only strengthens the Islamic tradition but makes it part and parcel of the ethnic one.<sup>xx</sup>

Even at the cultural level, the two identities are inseparably intertwined, so that Islamic customs are viewed as national and national traditions are viewed as Islamic practices. In this respect, national rebirth is indissolubly linked with religious renaissance, and it is difficult to say which element dominates in Uzbekistan. Furthermore, issues of ideology, religion and ethnicity are complicated in Uzbekistan by the presence of regional differences in the nature of state-society relations based on regional as opposed to national or ethnic identification. Regardless of the Soviet policy of changing Uzbek's Arabic script to Latin and then to Cyrillic, 'russifying' Muslim culture and implementing widespread atheist propaganda, Islamic identity in Uzbekistan survived and was reinforced after the collapse of the USSR. One of the

reasons for the survival of Islamic identity is the above-mentioned confusion of religious and national feelings.

It has been observed that the lack of religious education and religious knowledge due to Soviet policy has caused a dangerous situation, where the majority of Uzbeks are ignorant about elementary Islamic teachings. This situation can be, and often is, taken advantage of in the political scene through the ease with which religious views can be imposed on the broad masses and manipulated in the necessary directions.

Another group identity which is closely related to and often confused with Islam is the 'Turkic' one. The Turkic identity or pan-Turkism is of great importance to followers of jadidism and for Uzbek intellectuals. The doctrine of pan-Turkism is based on linguistic and historical links. Recently, many followers of this centripetal concept are looking for the ways of establishing and reinforcing links amongst Turkic language speaking peoples, including Central Asians, Tatars, Azerbaijani and even Turkish people. This seemingly cultural doctrine bears very significant geopolitical implications, both advantageous and disadvantageous, for the foreign policy issues of the republic of Uzbekistan.

The 'Turkestan' or 'Central Asian' identity is closely linked with the Islamic and Turkic one. The Turkestan identity covers the peoples of Central Asia, Afghanistan and western China. Different from pan-Turkism, the 'Central Asian' category is based on geographical affiliation, rather than a cultural and linguistic link and includes the Persian-speaking Tajiks, leaving out Tatars and Azerbaijanis.

It is necessary to point out that Central Asian identity as well as the Islamic and Turkic ones must be seen against the background of mass inter-ethnic disturbances in Central Asia. In these riots, members of one Muslim (and often Turkic-speaking) ethnic group have clashed with members of another Muslim Turkic-speaking group (for instance, the 1989 clashes between Uzbeks and Meskhetian Turks in the Ferghana Valley and the bloodshed between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in 1990 in Kyrgyzstan).

Most of these identities, when linked with Islamic identities, may cause centrifugal or centripetal proclivity in the nation-building process in Uzbekistan, and the outcome depends mainly on the political and social atmosphere and on the strategy adopted by the government.

### **Horizontal and Vertical Divisions of Institutional Islam in Uzbekistan**

*Islam is not just a creed or a system of theological beliefs but a way of life. Islam is a perfect religion that touches every aspect of human life. It prescribes a general canon of behavior for the social, the political, the economic, the cultural, the private and public, the foreign and domestic. But Islam is not a religion that exists only in the hearts of the believers - it is in the fabric of the civilization as well*

Gregory Gleason, Professor of International Relations, University of New Mexico

Although Uzbekistan is more uniformly religious than any other republic in Central Asia, Islam in Uzbekistan is commonly divided horizontally and vertically. The horizontal division splits Islam into Shiism and Sunnism, with further subdivisions into orders and sects. The vertical division, stemming from the Soviet period, classifies Islam into 'official' and 'unofficial'.

The majority of the Muslim *umma* in Uzbekistan are Sunni Muslims. Predominantly, the Sunni Muslims of Uzbekistan are from the Hanafi school, but some adhere to Sufi brotherhoods. The Hanafi school, founded by Abu Hanifah al Numan in Kufa, was established in Bukhara in the early ninth century. The Hanafi school is noted for its liberal religious orientation, which allowed the pre-Islamic traditions of the native people to be incorporated into Islam. Haghayeghi found that several Hanafi principles provided flexibility and more freedom in practicing Islam for believers in Uzbekistan. The first principle postulates that if a Muslim wholeheartedly believes in Allah and the prophet Muhammad, and is neglectful towards his religious duties, he is still a Muslim but a sinful one. Due to this flexibility, Diloram Ibrahim claimed that:

In Uzbekistan Islam has become a religion of rites performed universally. The five pillars of Islam are, by and large neglected ... Uzbeks are ignorant about elementary Islamic teaching, unable to read even a simple prayer.<sup>xxi</sup>

Second, the Hanafi teachings place strong emphasis on the expediency and the usefulness of Islam, thus refraining from an interpretation of Islam based on absolute obedience, a characteristic

associated with fundamentalist practice of Islam. Muslims are allowed to conduct the prayer in languages other than Arabic, and to choose the selection of the Qur'an they wish to read. Third, the Hanafi school holds a very tolerant position towards the issues of criminal and civil punishment, divorce and almsgiving. The fourth maxim says that socio-economic necessity supersedes the need for Islamic orthodoxy. In other words, realizing the inevitability of socio-economic changes, especially if the religion itself is to survive, the Hanafi philosophy advocates the postponement or alteration of the conduct of religious affairs to accommodate the needs of the believer. The final principle asserts that difference of opinion in the Muslim community is a token of divine mercy. As can be seen at present, the non-binding and liberal character of the Hanafi school facilitated its rapid spread among the majority of the Muslim *umma* of Uzbekistan. In addition, these features of the liberal form of Islam have affected the political beliefs of the population of Uzbekistan.

There are small communities of Twelver Shiism in Bukhara and Samarkand, which have their origins back in the beginning of the Abbasid rule in Central Asia. The Shias believe that Ali ibn Abu Talib is the legitimate heir of the Prophet Muhammad, whereas Sunnis first submit to Abu Bakr and then Ali as the fourth legitimate ruler of the Muslim community.

Sufism, a mystical doctrine that aims at achieving personal union with God, has played a very important role in the Islamization of Central Asia. Sufis were the first Muslim missionaries in the region and have influenced political affairs since the twelfth century. Under the Soviet regime, Sufism preserved Islamic traditions and became very active after the revolution in Iran. In order to avoid confusion, it should be noted that some scholars classify Sufism in Uzbekistan in terms of the vertical division of unofficial Islam. Although the Sufi *ishans* represented unofficial Islam under the Soviet regime, they did not oppose the representatives of official Islam who co-operated with the Soviet Uzbek authorities. It is true that the Sufi orders used to function underground during the Soviet period, thus preserving Islamic traditions among the rural population of Uzbekistan; however, the Sufi brotherhoods have been recently incorporated into the official Islam and the majority of them function openly today.

At present, there are two active Sufi Sunni brotherhoods in Uzbekistan: the *Naqshbandiya* and the *Qadiriya*. The Qadiriya, having a well-defined hierarchical structure, are particularly strong in the Ferghana valley, now a center of radical Islam. The most popular Sufi fraternity in Uzbekistan, the Naqshbandiya, was founded by Muhammad ibn Muhammad Bahaudin Naqshband (1317-89) in Bukhara. Analyzing its historical role in the Islamization of the native people, Ludmila Polonskaya states that:

At first, the Naqshbandiyah brotherhood was urban and Iranian, but later it absorbed many traditions of Turki nomads and contributed to their Islamization, promoting a synthesis of Iranian and Turki, farmers' and nomads' cultures.<sup>xxii</sup>

At present, the Naqshbandiya exerts significant influence in the Ferghana valley and Bukhara. Its prevailing success can be explained by a variety of reasons: first, the Naqshbandiya is extremely adaptable to changing social and political conditions; secondly, it is linguistically accessible to everyone, since it has Turkic and Persian roots. Finally, this Sufi order constitutes 'doctrinal liberalism' that excludes fanaticism and radicalism. Another important feature of the Naqshbandiya brotherhood is its highly decentralized structure with multiple centers under the independent religious authority.

Since the demise of the USSR, the Sufi orders have enjoyed more freedom in their religious activities. The local authorities are very careful in dealing with the Sufis. On one hand, they realize that the popularity, influence and widespread structure of the Sufi orders can be of use in gaining popularity and propagating the official policy of the government. On the other hand, the Sufi sects' code of secrecy and sophisticated organizational framework has the potential to mobilize Muslims and build a 'political infrastructure'. Bearing these factors in mind, the government seeks to build friendly relations and place the Sufi orders within the frames of official Islam, which will provide greater control over the Sufis' activities.

However, due to its liberalism, the Naqshbandiya has enjoyed special attention from the government; the Islamic complex at the shrine of Bahaudin Naqshband in Bukhara was refurbished, and the anniversary of Naqshbandi's birthday was grandiosely celebrated in 1992. The new mufti of Uzbekistan, Mukhtarkhan Abdulayev, was the Imam of the Naqshbandi mosque near Bukhara. It has been argued that he was elected for his Sufi background, which assisted in boosting Karimov's popularity since 1992.

The vertical division breaks Islam into 'official' and 'unofficial'. This division, which emerged as a result of Soviet anti-Islamic policy, is more complicated than the horizontal. Official Islam is a state-instituted system, which includes Islam in the framework of the society. Presently, official Islam is represented by the Spiritual Board of the Muslims of Maverannahr. In legal terms, religious groups or organizations can be registered and function officially if they meet the parameters, maintained by the law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations in Uzbekistan", from May 1998.

After independence, the ruling elite sought to maintain control over the religious establishments of official Islam by the constant monitoring of, and interference with, the religious affairs of the clergy. In response to this policy, a large number of Muslims gathered in front of the Uzbek Council of Ministers in Tashkent on February 3, 1989. The demonstrators demanded the resignation of the Soviet-appointed Mufti, Shamsuddin Babakhanov, and the nomination of Muhammad Sadiq Muhammad Yusuf, director of the Tashkent Al-Bukhari Islamic Institute. This demonstration was less an act of fundamentalism than a political act, through which the people demanded a voice in the decisions affecting the religious life of their communities.<sup>xxiii</sup>

The reflection of Islamic revival and the growing peoples' power in the state policy towards Islam can be seen not only in the election of the new mufti, but also in the election of seven religious leaders as People's Deputies to the national parliament. Gradually, state policy has shifted from confrontation to co-optation as a pattern in dealing with Islam. The coalition of religious clergy and the government was exemplified in the 'peace-making' efforts of the Mufti Muhammad Sadiq Muhammad Yusuf in restoring peace and order following ethnic turmoil in Ferghana in 1989. In his public statements, he emphasized that "danger to interfaith and interethnic harmony could come not from the 'mainstream' Islam, but from the splinter groups".<sup>xxiv</sup> To prevent the radicalization of these 'splinter groups' activities, official Islam has undertaken to co-opt the members of the Islamic opposition, even offering them high religious posts. Despite the coalition between state policy and mainstream Islam, the official clergy continues to challenge the ever-increasing involvement of government in religious affairs.

Some observers have claimed that such a close alliance of the official clergy and the state, reminiscent of subservience of the former to the Communist government, has accelerated the growth of unofficial Islam's popularity among the people. Expressing himself on this issue, Graham Fuller suggested that:

The institutions of 'established' Islam in Central Asia - long dominated by the Communist state - do not enjoy prestige and respect of the people as a result of their too cozy relationships with the state. Unofficial Islam or Islamic movements then inevitably fill in the vacuum, gain adherence and legitimacy among the people, and can often be able to impose powerful demands upon the state itself and threaten its legitimacy.<sup>xxv</sup>

It would be sensible for the Uzbek authorities to provide more freedom to the official clerical establishments to enable the latter to compete with a strong and diverse unofficial Islam. Since the number of religious and political parties has mushroomed in the political arena in Uzbekistan, the government's legitimacy has significantly suffered. The reason being is that the political opposition parties, being constantly harassed by the government, have tried to find unifying grounds with unofficial Islamic groups against the common enemy. Although an alliance between the national democrats and unofficial religious groups is improbable due to differences in their methods of ousting the current government, the real danger to the state is 'hidden' in the Islamic slogans, which are expressed to achieve political objectives.

Some of the active influential unofficial religious organizations in Uzbekistan are: Islam and Democracy of Uzbekistan, the People's Front of Uzbekistan, the Adolat, the Islamic Democratic Party, Islam Lashkari (Army of Islam) and the Islamic Renaissance (Revival) Party. The objectives of these parties can be classified into two main trends: the moderate and the radical. The moderate parties demand a return to the purity of Islam, the spiritual cleansing of the people from immorality and the preaching of the democratic principles of the Qur'an. The radical movements generally advocate the establishment of an Islamic state, but they disagree on the form of the state and the methods of achieving it. Due to the clandestine nature of the activities of unofficial Islam, it is difficult to carry out thorough research on their form, hierarchy and goals.

### **Islamic Fundamentalism and Wahhabism in Uzbekistan**

*People may be initially lured by the fundamentalists because of their vast funds and their message of revolution, but the beauty of Islam in Uzbekistan is that it is rooted in culture and philosophy and above all tolerance. This can not be wiped out in a hurry.*

Safarbai Kuchkarov, Prominent Sufi in Djizak, Uzbekistan

Most scholars agree that Islam has become one of the major characteristics of Central Asia, but their opinions on whether Islam will take the radical or the moderate form differ. Some argue that due to the long-term Slavic experience in the region, the people have become secular and, even though they consider themselves Muslims, do not want Islam to be involved in politics. Others believe that Islamic fundamentalism is inevitable in Uzbekistan due to a combination of political, economic and social determinants.

In accordance with Haynes's findings, there are four types of Muslims: nominal, traditionalist, mainstream and radical.<sup>xxvi</sup> The nominal Muslim is defined as such because he is born to Muslim parents. As discussed earlier, this Muslim believes in the convergence of Islamic and national self-identity in Uzbekistan. The traditionalist is concerned with the observance of the five Pillars of Islam and is not involved in political activities. The mainstream Muslims, or 'Islamic liberals', as defined by Ayubi, perceive Islam as "broad and flexible enough to be able to accommodate itself effectively to the changing requirements of time and peace."<sup>xxvii</sup>

The official politicization of Islam has caused several side effects. It has created strict borders between the ideology of 'state-sponsored' Islam, followed by the majority of the nominal and the traditionalist Muslims, and the fundamentalist ideology of Islam, supported by those disappointed in official Islam, 'Islamic reformers', traditionalist and radical Muslims. The refusal of the government to introduce Islamic education in government schools has, for example, resulted in the spread of unofficial schools. The lack of freedom to achieve their radical objectives through the ballot has made the Muslim radicals attempt to achieve them by force. In addition, the radical Muslims have proliferated due to the vacuum created by the lack of leadership from the official Islamic hierarchy.

The radical Muslims, according to Ayubi, observe the three Ds: Islam as a *dunya* (way of life), *din* (religion) and *dawla* (an Islamic state). In Uzbekistan, in an attempt to achieve a *dawla*, the fundamentalists have been bifurcated into the moderates and the radicals. The moderates advocate a return to the purity of Islam and want people to live according to Islamic norms. One of the moderate active Islamic organizations is the Islamic Democratic Party led by Dadakhan Hassanov, a famous composer and performer of traditional Uzbek music. Set up by Uzbek intellectuals in August 1990, the Islamic Democratic Party demands the imposition of *sharia* with eventual transformation to an Islamic state. However, they want to fulfil their aims through a non-violent Islamic revolution in Uzbekistan. The radical parties in Uzbekistan are the Islamic Revival Party, Islam Lashkari and the Adolat (Justice) organization. The political objective of these parties is to establish an Islamic state through any means. These parties are most popular in the Ferghana valley and Samarkand. They were accused of extremism and have been subsequently banned.

Threatened by the civil war in Tajikistan and encouraged by Western states, the Uzbek government increased its authoritarian drive against fundamentalism. The official clergy supported the government's campaign against Islamic fundamentalism. In his official speech, then-Mufti Muhammad Sadiq Muhammad Yusuf stated:

There were attempts to form a Moslem party...The official clergy object to it. We consider that Islam by itself is a party which has existed for over 1400 years already.<sup>xxviii</sup>

This state strategy was often criticized on the grounds that instead of supporting moderate Islam and legalizing Islamic parties, the rulers drove political Islam further to the wall, giving Islamic militants reason to accuse the rulers of being crypto-communists and unbelievers. Graham Fuller suggests that only tolerance of the emergence of other legitimate opposition parties will diminish the Islamic monopoly on opposition politics.<sup>xxix</sup> Another consequence of banning Islamic parties and movements is that such authoritarian policies, almost invariably, strengthen the legitimacy of the fundamentalists, while at the same time adversely affecting the legitimacy of the government.



A number of factors could contribute to the growth of Islamic fundamentalism. Economic and financial instability, combined with widespread corruption and strangling bureaucratic regulations, is a source of tension. Additionally, the poverty of the majority, as opposed to the wealth of the minority of 'new Uzbeks', and the absence of a middle class improves the odds in favor of Islamic fundamentalism. On the other hand, the developments in Tajikistan and the Taliban factor have highlighted the risks of militant Islam. For instance, the Ferghana valley, with the highest level of Islamic activism in Central Asia, has the highest population density in Central Asia and one of the lowest economic standards. Recognizing the explosive atmosphere in the valley, efforts to industrialize the region and raise the standard of living have been undertaken by the government. Research carried out by Polonskaya showed that Islamic fundamentalism is most popular among students, rural dwellers, young men who have recently come to the towns from the countryside, representatives of the traditionalist intelligentsia, and middle or lower sections of the clergy.<sup>xxx</sup>

There are major impediments to the radical Islamization of Uzbekistan. The liberal Hanafi tradition of Sunni Muslims, which co-exists with a secular state, has a strong hold. The tolerant Islam of Sufi sects is also widely adhered to, particularly in rural areas. The unwillingness of numerous ethnic minorities to join radical movements led by the ethnic majority makes it difficult for Islamists to unify the population under the Islamic banner and overcome ethnic clashes. Widespread regionalism in Uzbekistan would pose a similar impediment to mass mobilization for *jihād*. High literacy levels, the continuing impact of Slavic and now Western cultural influences, the growth of a free-market economy and the chaos that Tajikistan and Afghanistan have descended into under Islamic regimes will remain important factors in dissuading people from joining such movements.

Recent political developments in Uzbekistan have shown that the threat of Islamic fundamentalism, though unorganized, should not be underestimated -- particularly that of a radical sect called Wahhabis. The Wahhabi movement in Uzbekistan has been receiving sizable financial support from the Saudi Arabian movement, Ahl-e Sunnah. Wahhabism is well known for its puritanical views, denounces the conceptualization of the four main schools of Sunni Islam: the Hanafi, the Maliki, the Shafi'i and the Hanbali. The Wahhabis consider the Qur'an and *hadith* as the only authoritative source for the conduct of the Muslim *umma's* behavior. The Wahhabi movement is particularly strong in the Ferghana Valley region. According to the Russian Fpapers, which sought to analyze the Ferghana riots in 1989, the Wahhabi movement is rapidly gaining strength in the Ferghana Valley and enjoys considerable prestige among different strata of the population - from elite literary circles in Tashkent to teenagers in schools. The latter are especially impressed by the Wahhabis' contempt of money, their rejection of remuneration for the religious rites they perform, and by their nationalist fervor.

The Wahhabis, due to their ideological and political beliefs, condemn other moderate fundamentalist groups like the Islamic Revival Party. An important Wahhabi leader said, "the IRP wants to be in parliament. We have no desire to be in parliament. We want a revolution."<sup>xxxi</sup> Moreover, they condemn Shias and other minority sects in Islam. Many scholars argue that the Wahhabite insistence on a narrow and highly sectarian view of Islam will bring them up against not only the government, but also other Islamic groups in the future.

In December 1997, the Wahhabis began using force in an attempt to establish an Islamic state in the country. The government claims that a number of Wahhabis have received military and terrorist training in Pakistan. In the beginning of December 1997, the Wahhabi sect was officially blamed for the murder of four policemen in Namangan (Ferghana Valley). A few days later a group of masked men killed a highly placed official of the GAI (the automotive inspection committee) and decapitated him. The government suspected the Wahhabis of the December 1997 killings, and sent troops from elite security units to keep peace in the region. In addition to the militant response to the Wahhabi threat, the Uzbek parliament enacted a new 'law on religious freedom and organizations' in May 1998. The law creates extremely restrictive regulations for the registration of religious organizations, bans religious activities and education outside the 'official' Islam and prohibits the activities of foreign missionaries in Uzbekistan.

Abdumannob Polat, chairman of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan, claimed that a large number of religious leaders were arrested or fled the country. Furthermore, at least a hundred and twenty people imprisoned in the Ferghana Valley were jailed on what are likely fabricated charges of narcotics and weapons possession. The situation has become worse after a terrorist act on February 16 in Tashkent which

killed sixteen and wounded more than hundred people. In his speech in the parliament of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov highlighted two factors, which caused this tragic event:

Firstly, some extremist forces beyond the borders of our country, using the sacred values of Islam, attempt to turn Uzbekistan from the path of democratic and secular development and secondly, there are some forces that feel hostility towards our independent policy and try their best to dominate and dictate their own policies to Uzbekistan.

Meanwhile, Islam Karimov has introduced a strategy of development in the XIVth session of Oliy Majlis, which includes the liberalization of political and economic life in the country, further spiritual renovation of the society, the creation of a clever human resources policy, a progressive increase in material prosperity of the people, improvement of the social protection of the population, and finally, reform of the national army, frontier and internal forces to maintain peace in the country. It can be seen from this strategy that the government seeks to eliminate all possible grounds for the successful development of radical Islam in Uzbekistan.

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## ***Appendix 1***

**Table 1.**

### **Central Asia: Ethnic Composition**

	Uzbe- k i- s- t- a- n	Kaz- a- k- h- s- t- a- n	Kyrg- y- r- g- z- s- t- a- n	Turk- m- e- n- i- s- t- a- n	Taj- i- k- i- s- t- a- n
Uzbe- k i- s- t- a- n	14,142,475 (71%) )	33,201,702 (62%) )	55,009,631 (93%) )	31,733,924 (92%) )	1,197,841 (24%) )
Ru- s- s- i- a- n- s	16,653,478 (83%) )	62,549,828 (98%) )	91,558,292 (92%) )	33,848,797 (97%) )	33,848,797 (97%) )
Kaz- a- k- h- s	808,261 (6%) )	653,418 (8%) )	373,822 (6%) )	87,026 (3%) )	1,197,841 (24%) )

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	(4%)	(39%)	(negl.)	(2%)	(negl.)
<b>Kyrgyz</b>	174,907	14,112	2,229,663	-	63,832
	(negl.)	(negl.)	(52%)		(1%)
<b>Tajiks</b>	933,560	25,514	33,518	3,149	3,172,420
	(5%)	(negl.)	(negl.)	(negl.)	(62%)
<b>Turkmen</b>	121,458	3,846	-	2,536,606	20,487
	(negl.)	(negl.)		(71%)	(negl.)

Total Population	1	1	4	3	5
	9	6	,	,	,
	,	.	2	5	0
	8	4	5	5	9
	1	6	7	2	2
	0	4	,	,	,
	,	,	7	1	6
	0	4	7	1	0
	7	6	5	7	3
	7	4			
	(	(	(	(	(
	1	1	1	1	1
	0	0	0	0	0
	0	0	0	0	0
	%	%	%	%	%
	)	)	)	)	)

Source: *International Security*, Vol.20, No.1, 1995, p.152

Notes: Negl.= under 1%; - = none reported. Figures are for 1991-1992. Not all nationalities in a given country are included.

## EndNotes

<sup>i</sup> K. Warikoo and D. Norbu, eds. *Ethnicity and Politics in Central Asia*. (India: South Asian Publishers, 1992), 67

<sup>ii</sup> *ibid.* 69

<sup>iii</sup> H. Malik. *Central Asia: Its Strategic Importance and Future Prospects* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 109

<sup>iv</sup> W. Fierman. *Soviet Central Asia* (USA: Westview Press, 1991), 205

<sup>v</sup> P. Ferdinand. *The New Central Asia and Its Neighbours* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1994), 21

<sup>vi</sup> M.Z. Husain. *Global Islamic Politics* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 250; A. Taheri. *Crescent in a Red Sky* (London: Hutchinson, 1989), 189

<sup>vii</sup> *ibid.* 189

<sup>viii</sup> J. Haynes. *Religion in Third World Politics* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1998), 148; A. Rashid. *The Resurgence of Central Asia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1994), 244

<sup>ix</sup> M. Haghayeghi. *Islam and Politics in Central Asia* (London: Macmillan Press, 1995), 141

<sup>x</sup> *ibid.*, 96

<sup>xi</sup> Warikoo and Norbu, 81

<sup>xii</sup> I. Karimov. *Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the XXth Century* (Tashkent, 1997), 131

<sup>xiii</sup> J. Critchlow. *Nationalism in Uzbekistan* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 85

<sup>xiv</sup> S. Akiner. *Political and Economic Trends* (London: British Academy Press, 1994), 186

<sup>xv</sup> Warikoo and Norbu, 81

<sup>xvi</sup> Karimov, 143

<sup>xvii</sup> D. Ibrahim. *The Islamization of Central Asia* (UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1993), 20

<sup>xviii</sup> M.B. Olcott. "Central Asia's Post-Empire Politics". *Orbis* 36 (2), 1992, 256

- <sup>xix</sup> A. Banuazizi and M. Weiner. *The New Geopolitics of Central Asia and Its Borderlands* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1994), 26
- <sup>xx</sup> M. Rywkin. 1990. 89
- <sup>xxi</sup> Ibrahim, 22
- <sup>xxii</sup> L. Polonskaya and A. Malashenko. *Islam in Central Asia* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1994), 15
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Fierman, 209
- <sup>xxiv</sup> *ibid.*, 211
- <sup>xxv</sup> Malik, 138
- <sup>xxvi</sup> J. Haynes. *Religion in Third World Politics* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993), 70
- <sup>xxvii</sup> N. Ayubi. *Political Islam* (London: Routledge, 1991), 67
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Polonskaya, 127
- <sup>xxix</sup> M. Mandelbaum ed. *Central Asia and the World* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1994), 119
- <sup>xxx</sup> Polonskaya, 128
- <sup>xxxi</sup> M. Haghayeghi. *Islam and Politics in Central Asia* (London: Macmillan Press, 1995), 95

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