

“Roots of Rage: Militant Islam in Central Asia”

Edward W. Walker
University of California, Berkeley

Let me begin by correcting an impression that I may have given in choosing the phrase “Roots of Rage” in my title today. I did not mean to suggest that Central Asians are, in fact, deeply enraged, hostile to their governments, radically anti-Western or pro-Taliban, or sympathetic to fundamentalist or militant Islam in general. On the contrary, polling data and anecdotal evidence suggest that overwhelming majorities are deeply fearful that the conflict in Afghanistan and Islamic militancy will destabilize their countries. Large majorities also appear to support their governments (with the exception of Tajikistan) despite the fact that none are particularly liberal or democratic—and, in the cases of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, are extremely repressive. While most see Russia as their most important source of external support, most also have generally favorable attitudes towards the United States and the West. As for Islam, significant majorities describe themselves as believers, but large majorities also feel that secular, not Islamic, law should govern and that Islamic parties should be banned. And few have even *heard* of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (the IMU), the Islamic militant group that was designated a terrorist organization by the State Department last year and that President Bush mentioned in his War on Terrorism speech last month.

So the first point I want to make is that Central Asia is not Afghanistan. With the exception of Tajikistan, governments in the region have managed to preserve order, and society is politically demobilized and for the most part unarmed (again with the exception of Tajikistan). Above all, Central Asians value personal security, internal order, and material well being, and they will support governments that can provide those valued goods at a time when all are seen as being at great risk.

Nevertheless, Central Asian officials are deeply concerned about a perceived threat from militant Islamic movements, which they claim are products of external meddling. They

accordingly refer to all Islamic radicals as “Wahhabis,” a reference to the Islamic puritanical movement of the early eighteenth century that was adopted by the Saudi royal family and is Saudi Arabia’s state religion today.

What I want to do in my twenty minutes, then, is try to assess whether these fears are justified and consider whether there really is a significant risk that militant Islam will find fertile soil in Central Asia.

First, however, let me say just a few words on terminology. I make two types of distinctions. The first is between “traditionalist” Islam and “fundamentalist” Islam, a distinction that mirrors that which was made during the Afghan “Mujahideen War” with the Soviets between so-called “traditionalist” and “Islamist” parties. Traditionalists are Muslims who support forms of Islam traditionally practiced in most parts of the Islamic world—that is, an Islam that accommodates practices, beliefs, laws, and social institutions not specifically prescribed by the Koran or the sayings and actions of the Prophet (the *sunna*). Fundamentalists, on the other hand, advocate a literal interpretation of the Koran and *sunna*, oppose accommodation to tradition or to changing social conditions, and espouse a return to an idealized vision of Islam as practiced at the time of Muhammed and/or the caliphates. This is not to suggest that one or the other is any more or less “modern”—“fundamentalism” in Central Asia, for example, is arguably a modern phenomenon, despite its atavistic qualities.

Second, I distinguish between moderate, radical, and militant forms of Islam. By moderate Islam I basically mean tolerant Islam—that is, an Islam that is willing to accommodate both other religions as well as other forms of Islam itself. Radical Islam is the opposite—that is, Islam that is intolerant of “heretical” or non-Islamic beliefs and practices. Militant Islam, finally, is any form of Islam that advocates the use of violence in an effort to impose a particular form of Islam on others. In principle, then, one could be a militant traditionalist—as indeed was the case for some of the mujahideen parties fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan that were willing to take up arms in defense of traditional way of practicing Islam and tribal law (for example, *pushtunwali* for the Pushtuns). Likewise, one could be a radical but non-militant fundamentalist, as in the case of the Hizb-ut-Tahrir party, which advocates the establishment of a caliphate throughout the Muslim world but by non-violent means.

Let me turn now, briefly, to historical background. Islam arrived in the region that we know today as Central Asia—which is part of what was once referred to as Transoxiana, or the

entire region of Turco-Persian civilization from today's Iran in the west to Xianjiang province in the east, that included Afghanistan, Pakistan, even much of India—at the hands of Arab invaders at the beginning of the seventh century. It was embraced only gradually and variously, however, becoming the majority religion around the ninth century. By the tenth century, Central Asia had become one of the great centers of Islamic learning and culture, particularly the great Silk Road cities of Bukhara and Samarkand.

The vast majority of Central Asians are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi'i school (or *mazhab*), one of the four main branches of Sunni Islam (the other three being the Shafi', Hanbali'i, and Maliki'i *mazhabs*). The standard argument is that Sunni Islam ultimately prevailed over Shia Islam in the region because it was better able to accommodate local practices and traditions, including eventually Sufism, a mystical and popularized form of Islamic worship that is very open to customary practices and that is particularly offensive to many of today's fundamentalists. Shia Islam became the dominant form of Islam only in Iran and across the Caspian Sea, in what is now Azerbaijan, but it is also practiced by the Khazaras of Afghanistan, the Ismailis of the Pamir region of Tajikistan and Afghanistan, as well as minority groups among certain Central Asian nationalities, such as the Turkmen.

The speed and degree to which Islam was embraced by the peoples of the region varied. In general, formal Islam was accepted more readily by the sedentary peoples of the region—particularly ancestors of today's Uzbeks and Tajiks. The region's nomadic peoples—ancestors of today's Turkmen, Kazakhs, and Kyrgyz—converted more slowly and retained more pre-Islamic beliefs and practices in the culture. Likewise, formal and orthodox Islam was more prevalent in urban than in rural areas. As Adrienne has already indicated, the region was also home to a tremendous diversity of cultural influences. Linguistically, the vernacular tended to be a Turkic language, with the exception of the version of Persian spoken in Tajikistan, while the predominant language of literature was Persian and the language of religion was Arabic.

Russian colonization in the nineteenth century was driven primarily by geopolitical, not religious, concerns, and as a result, Russian colonial administrators, who already had centuries of experience accommodating Muslim peoples in the empire, were for the most part willing to allow local peoples to practice Islam in peace. The Soviets, in contrast, launched a full-scale assault on Islamic institutions and practices in the mid-1920s, a campaign that intensified dramatically during Stalin's "revolution from above" and the purges of the late 1920s and 1930s.

The great majority of mosques were destroyed as a result, and most members of the Islamic clergy were imprisoned or shot. Nevertheless, Islamic beliefs and practices of everyday life survived, while World War II brought a softening of the campaign against organized religion.

Eventually, an accommodation of sorts was reached between the regime and Islam. While the clergy was formally prohibited from proselytizing, the church was legalized. A so-called Muslim Religious Board was established in Tashkent for Central Asia and Kazakhstan, which became the most prestigious and powerful of four such Religious Boards in the USSR (the others were in Makhachkala, Dagestan, in Ufa, Bashkortostan, and Baku, Azerbaijan). While the official clergy was deeply penetrated by the political police and important appointments were vetted by Communist Party organs, the official clergy was also given a substantial measure of autonomy, albeit within hazy and shifting limits. At the same time, Central Asians, like Muslims elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, adapted Islamic beliefs and practices to Soviet conditions—clerics found ways to represent Islam as politically non-threatening, and lay believers engaged in non-politicized practices such as daily prayer, the visiting of shrines, the veneration of ancestors and saints, and use of Islamic life cycle rituals such as circumcisions, marriages, and funerals. Even Communist Party officials, for example, would frequently be buried in accordance with Islamic practices.

Islam thus remained an important part of everyday practice and identity in Soviet Central Asia. So-called “parallel” Islam (as opposed to the official Islam overseen by the Spiritual Boards and the Communist Party) was not, however, necessarily political or hostile to the regime. Even less was it fundamentalist. A great many Central Asians smoked tobacco, drank alcohol, and prayed intermittently at best (although few would eat pork), while women almost never covered their faces in public, let alone wore the full *burqas* that we see in Afghanistan today (although many would cover their hair with scarves, particularly in rural areas). Women also had more-or-less equal access to education and employment. In general, better-educated urban residents tended to be more sovietized and secular than residents of rural or highland areas.

With the launching of the Gorbachev reforms, the region began to undergo an “Islamic revival.” The number of Central Asians making the *hadj* to Mecca increased dramatically, and many new mosques were built, much of it with funding from Islamic governments, charitable organizations, and wealthy individuals abroad. The number of imams and mullahs, and the

number of students studying in Islamic schools both in the region and abroad, also increased dramatically.

Nevertheless, both elites and society in Central Asia remained politically conservative throughout the Gorbachev period, suspicious in general of Gorbachev's liberalizing reforms and very opposed to the breakup of the USSR. Independence for them was for the most part an unwelcome surprise.

In the decade since, Central Asia's Islamic revival has continued, and the great majority of the traditionally Muslim peoples of the region today identify themselves as believers. Nevertheless, all five states are formally secular, and only Tajikistan has legalized Islamic parties or allowed an Islamic party to participate in government. There is, however, considerable variation in the way that Islam is practiced in the five Central Asian successor states, as well as in the way that different regimes have reacted to politicized Islam.

I do not have time today to take up the situation in each country, so let me instead make instead a few broad observations, with particular reference to the crisis in Afghanistan.

First, we should distinguish between the region's frontline states and those that do not share a border with Afghanistan—that is, between Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, on the one hand, and Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan on the other. Kyrgyzstan, however, is quite close to Afghanistan, and its territory also includes part of the Ferghana Valley (which I'll talk more about in a moment). Of the five Central Asian states, then, the one that is the least directly affected by turmoil in Afghanistan and that is least concerned about destabilization by Islamic militants is Kazakhstan.

Second, a distinction should be made between the three states whose borders extend into the Ferghana Valley—Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—and those that do not. While it makes up only a tiny portion of the total territory of the region, the Ferghana Valley is the most densely populated and fertile part of Central Asia. It's also an ethnic patchwork with a substantial number of residents living on territory that isn't part of their titular homeland. It has been the scene of most of the political violence in the region, with the exception of the Tajik civil war, as well as a source of constant tension between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. And it's the region where Islamic militants have been most active.

Finally, of the five successor states, the two most important for regional stability are Uzbekistan and, to a lesser extent, Tajikistan. The Tajik civil war, which killed some 50,000

people, completely devastated the Tajik economy. Its population is also now the most armed and militarized in the region, and it has an extremely weak government that is unable to exercise any writ over large parts of Tajik territory. More Tajiks than any other nationality identify themselves as Muslim believers. There are also many Tajiks in northern Afghanistan, and Tajiks make up the core of the fighting forces of the Northern Alliance, which I should note is comprised only of parties that describe themselves as “Islamist.” Finally, the peace agreement that ended the Tajik Civil War in 1997 afforded the Islamic Renewal Party a share of power. The settlement, I should note, remains extremely precarious.

As for Uzbekistan, it has the region’s largest population—roughly 25 million. Its strong-arm leader, President Islam Karimov, is convinced that Uzbekistan deserves to be the dominant power of the region. Uzbekistan has by far the strongest military in Central Asia, and it has tried to intimidate its neighbors in various ways and at various times. Uzbekistan has been most resistant to Russian influence, and it has had a special defense relationship with the US since the mid-1990s. There are a significant number of ethnic Uzbeks in Afghanistan, where Tashkent has supported the Uzbek warlord, Abdul Rashid Dostum, who was a major and brutal player in the Afghan civil war and is currently leading the Northern Alliance forces attacking Mazar-i-Sharif.

To date, Uzbekistan has also been the most cooperative Central Asian government in the US-led campaign against the Taliban. Tashkent has apparently agreed to allow the US to use its territory not only for humanitarian assistance but for offensive operations as well, in exchange for which the US is stepping up economic assistance. More importantly, Washington has apparently offered the Uzbeks a rather vague security guarantee. A joint Uzbek-US statement issued on October 12 reads, “We recognize the need to work closely together in the campaign against terrorism. This includes the need to consult on an urgent basis about appropriate steps to address the situation in the event of a direct threat to the security or territorial integrity of the Republic of Uzbekistan.” All this is hardly likely to further endear Uzbekistan to Islamic militants, and it risks encouraging Tashkent to be even more repressive internally and aggressive externally.

Indeed, the Uzbek government has already been extremely aggressive in repressing non-sanctioned Islamic groups, including kidnapping and the “disappearing” of many Islamic opposition figures (most notably, the well-known Islamic activist, Abdulavi Qori Mirzoev of Andijan, in 1995). It targets people who make public their sympathies with non-official Islam,

forcibly cutting men's beards, harassing people who wear Islamic costume, arresting unofficial mullahs, and closing down non-sanctioned mosques and Islamic schools (*madrassas*). The Uzbek government, like the Soviet government before it, vigilantly monitors the activities of the Spiritual Board of Muslims in Tashkent, as well as officially-sanctioned mosques and mullahs, to the point that it frequently gives the official clergy instructions on what to say or not say in sermons. Tashkent was also the site of Central Asia's most significant terrorist attack when six bombs went off in February 1999 that killed 13 people and wounded many more, and very nearly killed Karimov himself. Uzbek officials blame the attack on the IMU, a claim that is given additional credence by the fact that the Uzbek government, and Karimov in particular, have been the "Great Satans" for the IMU, at least until the beginning of the US bombing of Afghanistan.

Just a few words about the IMU. The movement emerged out of an Islamic group, Adolat (Justice), that was based in the Uzbek city of Namangan in the Ferghana Valley at the time of the Soviet dissolution. In late 1991, Adolat seized effective control of local government in Namangan, emphasizing above all its ability to stamp out crime and official corruption in the city. Karimov ordered a crackdown in early 1992, which led to the arrest of many and the flight of others, some of whom ended up fighting alongside Tajik Islamists in the Tajik civil war. Others fled to Afghanistan and fought in the Afghan civil war as well. By 1997, with the Tajik civil war winding down and the Taliban in control of Kabul, the IMU became increasingly active in the Ferghana Valley, where its stated goal is to establish a new Islamic caliphate. At that point, Karimov concluded that the main challenge to his regime was no longer the liberal-democratic opposition but the Islamic opposition, and the result was even harsher repression, which only further intensified in the wake of the Tashkent bombing in early 1999. Then, in the summer of 1999 and again in the summer of 2000, IMU militants carried out armed incursions into Uzbek territory that led to scores of deaths. Even more Uzbeks, moderates and radicals alike, fled across the border into Tajikistan and Afghanistan as a result of the violence and Tashkent's harsh reaction, many of whom took up arms with the IMU. By the beginning of this year, Western estimates put the number of IMU fighters at between 2,000 and 3,000, with Russian intelligence estimates even higher—5,000 to 6,000. Most, if not all, of the IMU's fighters were based in Afghanistan, where they received safe-haven from the Taliban as well as training, funding, and military supplies from al-Qaeda. In addition, however, they have had relatively unrestricted access to much of Tajik territory, with its mountainous terrain and weak state. Many Uzbek

officials are also convinced that the Tajik government, which has had very poor relations with Tashkent and includes members of the Islamic Revival Party, is at least turning a blind eye to the activities of the IMU, if not aiding them outright.

Let me conclude with a few brief comments on the roots of Islamic militancy in Central Asia. Certainly both internal and external factors are important. External influences include the safe-haven provided to militants by the Taliban; access to terrorist and guerilla training camps in Afghanistan; funding from wealthy individuals and charitable organizations sympathetic to militant Islam; and the provision of weapons and supplies. However, most important, in my opinion, is the fact that Islamic radicals abroad offer up an extremely effective mobilizing ideology of resistance to a region that is deeply troubled and where communism and socialism have been discredited by 70 years of Soviet power; where nationalism has been undermined by the multi-ethnic nature of society and by numerous competing sub-national and supra-national identities; and by the apparent inability of liberalism or democracy to provide answers to the region's profound problems. Moreover, militant Islam has an extraordinarily effective, decentralized, and autonomous propaganda apparatus available to it in the form of often well-funded mosques and *madrassas* led by militantly anti-Western and orthodox mullahs and imams, an apparatus that benefits from the fact that in most cases both Islamic and non-Islamic governments are reluctant to intrude into spiritual affairs.

While external factors look more significant in the wake of September 11 and what we've learned since about al-Qaeda, internal factors are at least as important. Population pressures, land scarcity, depletion of water resources, environmental degradation, widespread corruption, drug smuggling and consumption, growing inequality, and extremely high unemployment have given Central Asians much to be disgruntled about. The social base of militant Islam in Central Asia, as elsewhere, are young unemployed males, both rural and urban, poor and middle class, who feel that their life opportunities are minimal. Moreover, in most of Central Asia, as in much of the Islamic world, opportunities for articulating grievances are minimal. State intrusion into spiritual affairs—and particularly the cooptation of the official clergy by the state—help discredit the official clergy. And in Uzbekistan, where many thousands have been arrested and even more harassed or beaten for their religious beliefs, most now have family members, friends, fellow villagers, or clan members who have been victims of government abuse.

On the other hand, it is important to reiterate that, as of yet at least, militant Islam has relatively few supporters, even in the Ferghana Valley, and there are powerful obstacles to its popularization in the region. The form of Islam traditionally practiced in Central Asia is neither puritanical nor fundamentalist. Fundamentalist Islam, not to speak of militant Islam, is opposed not only by the great majority of political and economic elites but also by the traditional Muslim establishment, which views it as a threat to its influence and position. Central Asians in general, and urban professionals in particular, find the asceticism of Islamic fundamentalism very difficult to accept. Even more importantly, fundamentalism has to overcome the many national, ethnic, clan, and regional lines of cleavages in the region. Indeed, only in Uzbekistan is religion the most salient political cleavage today. In Kyrgyzstan, in contrast, it is ethnicity, while in Tajikistan it is regionalism. Throughout the region, moreover, there is a tendency to view Wahhabi style fundamentalism as a non-indigenous “Arabic” form of Islam that is alien to Central Asia’s Turko-Persian traditions. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, unlike Afghanistan and Chechnya, the region has managed to avoid, with the partial exception of Tajikistan, a complete breakdown of internal order, civil war, and the arming of the civilian population.