RECLAIMING ISLAM IN UZBEKISTAN: SOVIET LEGACIES AND POST-SOVIET REALITIES

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I

Though the Soviet empire has long since collapsed and been dismantled, its countless legacies (technological, institutional, philosophical, and political, among others) remain powerfully real, alive and well, and they do so perhaps nowhere more than in the newly independent states of Muslim Central Asia and Uzbekistan in particular. An especially influential component of these legacies is the persistence and potency of a *political culture of scientific atheism* affecting the perceptions, attitudes, policies and practices of the old communist leaders of these states not only toward religion, especially Islam and Muslim religious activism, but toward freedom of thought and action in general. Another dimension of the same legacy has been the apparent expectation of the rise of militant Islamic movements against the successor state regimes as voiced by the media, most Russian and Western "experts" and Central Asia's current power elites.

Let me begin with the second issue, since it is more familiar to us: the all pervasive Manichaean view propagated by Sovietologists before the collapse of the Soviet Union that Islam and Muslims posed the only real and potential threat to the integrity of the USSR. After the historic events of August 1991, however, credit was rightly given to the Polish Pope (John Paul II); the Catholic and Orthodox churches in the Ukraine, Lithuania and Russia (see Bourdeaux 1991, 1992; Ash 1990;Weigel 1992); and the Jewish refuseniks, among others, for the Soviet Union's implosion (see Sharansky and Dermer 2004). The fact remains that Muslims were not even part of the Human Rights movements in the former Soviet Union. Unfortunately, instead of asking and investigating why the presumed Muslim threat to the former USSR did not materialize, the same experts began to warn of the rising threat of Islamic fundamentalism to the newly independent states of Central Asia. Wrapping themselves in a thin veneer of nationalism, almost

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without exception, the leadership of the emergent post-Soviet governments began to act in a way prophesied by Andrei Amalrik in his 1969 book, *Will the Soviet Union Survive until 1984?*, which warned that "the countries of post-Soviet Central Asia were far more likely to continue Soviet patterns of behavior long after communist power fell than any other countries that might emerge from the rubble of the collapse of the USSR" (See, Paul Goble 2000: 1).

Policies enacted by the Central Asian states since the demise of the Soviet Union have all but ensured this tragic continuity. In the name of securing "peace and stability" in the region, many have spread fear that an imminent tide of Islamic fundamentalism (often referred to as Wahhabism) and fanaticism is sweeping over the region (see Bezanis 1995). Hence, most former Sovietologists and many emergent post-Soviet transition policy experts have encouraged the new states to take measures against any signs of such a threat, and they have happily complied[1]. This in spite of the fact that during the latter part of the 1980s (the period of *glasnost & perestroika*) Islam was seen as a part and parcel of incipient nationalisms in Central Asia, especially in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (see, Rashid 1994, Roy 2000).

More significantly, much to the surprise of the expectant Muslim World, especially countries of southwestern Asia and the Middle East, the highly anticipated enlargement of the Muslim *umma* did not materialize after the collapse of the USSR. Instead, a frenzied but wasteful competition for influence in the region ensued between Turkey and Iran, and Iran and Pakistan. Indeed, these petty acts of local jockeying continued while Central Asian regimes fixed their gaze firmly on the West, with occasional glances to the Far East, in search of seemingly desirable models for economic and social developments. The May 13, 2005 events in Andijan have clearly demonstrated the tragic consequences of post-Soviet Uzbekistan's policies towards Islam and Muslim activism[2]. The fundamental questions, nevertheless, remain largely unexplored: Was there any evidence to the alarmist allegations concerning the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia during 1990s to justify these nations' draconian policies? Who were the Muslim activists and what were they doing and saying, where, how and why? Also, was there any indication of rising Muslim *religious intolerance* in post-Soviet Central Asia? Or, as it has become increasingly clear, have we been witnessing another tragic case of *intolerance of religion* (especially Islam) in this increasingly important but volatile part of Inner Asia, encouraged or even orchestrated by post-

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[1] For a critique of "Sovietlogical Islamology" see Devin Deweese's "Islam and the Legacy of Sovietology: A Review Essay on Yaacov Roi's Islam in the Soviet Union" in Journal of Islamic Studies, 13(3):298-330. Also see Rumer 2002, 1993, and Critchlow 1989, and reports prepared for RAND Corporation by Cheryl Benard 2004, 2003; and for Policy Planning Unit of the Finish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, by Zeyno Baran, S. Fredrick Starr and Svante E. Cornell 2006 of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Johns Hopkins University.

[2] For a useful review of the reports on these events and the role of Uzbek government policies and practices, see Alisher Ilkhamov 2006, and Sarah Kendzior 2006.

Soviet successor regimes with considerable help from some policy experts and media pundits? Some recent titles offer a glimpse of the Manichaean nature of this discourse: the Pakistani journalist, Ahmed Rashid's *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism?* ; Sagdeev and Eisenhower's (2000) *Islam and Central Asia: An Enduring Legacy or an Evolving Threat*; Boris Rumer's edited volume, *Central Asia: A Gathering Storm?*; a RAND Corporation report by Cheryl Benard *"Central Asia: 'Apocalypse Soon' or Eccentric Survival?";* Zeno Baran of the Nixon Center's "The Road from Tashkent to the Taliba: An Islamist terror group is undermining a U.S. all"; and Zeyno Baran, Fredrick Starr and Svante Cornell's latest on *Islamic Radicalism in Central Asia and the Caucasus Iimplications for the EU*).

II

I would like to explore these questions, however briefly, based on some eight months of ethnographic fieldwork (summer 1992, July-December 1994, and brief visits in 1997, 2000 and 2004) in Uzbekistan and shorter visits to Kyrgyzstan and southern Kazakhstan[3]. My purposefully non-traditional anthropological research involved spending time in rural areas in Qashqa Darya (a relatively remote and less densely populated province in southeastern Uzbekistan), the densely inhabited Andijon region in Farghana valley, and the capital city, Tashkent. In addition I visited many other parts of Uzbekistan, both rural and urban, including the cities of Bukhara and Samarkand and the Navoi wiloyats. I have talked to people with widely different life experiences ranging from ordinary rural *kalkhuzniks* (peasants working in collective farms), factory workers, and religious scholars (both official/establishment types and those outside of it), to secular/atheist intellectuals and political elites. I attended many regular prayers as well as Jum'a (Friday) congregational ones in variety of settings; listened to and recorded many *khutbas (sermons)*, preaching, and organized lessons (*dars*); and invited "private" lectures at household and family celebrations (*Musulmoncha tuey* and *ihsons*). I have collected considerable locally produced Islamic print and electronic media (audio and video cassettes) in the local vernacular which have been widely disseminated in the region and beyond. What follows then is a brief discussion of the ethnographic realities on the ground in the mid-1990s, especially in post-Soviet Uzbekistan, the most populous of the Muslim Central Asian newly independent nations. It is important to note that I am examining these materials from the standpoint of a Muslim, a perspective which has been absent from the discussion of Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia, with the rare exception the works of Bakhtyor

[3] My field works (summer of 1992) were supported by a travel grant from IREX and a Fulbright Research grant (1994), their generous assistance is gratefully acknowledged. The analysis of data was carried out in part during my tenure as a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars (1997-98) at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Babadjanov (2002, 2001, 1999 and n.d.). I will also address, however briefly, the disruption and distortions of these ethnographic realities in recent years due to hostile state interventions aggravated by the ongoing US Global War on Terror following the tragic events of September 11, 2001 and their potential implications for the future of state-society relations in Uzbekistan and the region.

III

The summary results of my ethnographic research findings may be best understood in light of a brief discussion of the following closely related issues: (1) the effects of Soviet policies on religion in general and Islam and Muslim Central Asians in particular; (2) the specific means and strategies used to enforce the Soviet state policies; (3) their levels of effectiveness in achieving Soviet anti-Islamic policy goals in the region; and (4) the lingering effects of the Soviet legacies and their real and/or potential impact upon the present and future processes of socioeconomic developments in general, and the reclamation of Islam and Muslim heritage in Central Asia and Uzbekistan in particular.

The Bolsheviks' political and ideological stance was based on a powerful discourse of rejection of religion in general and Islam in particular. It is important to note here that this policy of rejection was not even remotely comparable to the policies of Western secularism and its manifestations in America in the shape of what Stephen Carter (1993) has termed *The Culture of Disbelief* --i.e., the legal and political trivialization of religious devotion in public life. The Soviet policy of rejection of religion also radically differed from Western European colonial policies regarding religion in their Asian, African and Latin American possessions where considerable freedom was allowed in cultural and spiritual domains (see Chatterjee 1993, for a discussion of British policies in India).

Soviet policies of rejection of religion in all its forms began under Lenin and continued virtually unabated until 1988 under Gorbachev, and were enforced by a violent and militant persecution not only of Christian churches, but especially of Islam and Muslim believers and practitioners (see Haghayeghi 1995: 10-39, also cf. Lipovski 1996, Fierman 1994, Northrop 2004, Keller 2001, and ICG Asia Report No. 59, July 2003). The Soviet state utilized all available coercive and institutional/infrastructural means at its disposal, including: direct physical attacks against places of worship and education, and their destruction or closure; virulent attacks against religious teachers, ritual leaders, and individual believers, who were accused of every conceivable crime, ranging from the crimes of custom to trumped-up charges of murder & embezzlement. Three out of the five pillars of Islam were outlawed (*zakot*, *hajj*, and fasting during Ramadan) and alleged violators were punished. All forms of Muslim education, including the printing, dissemination and teaching of Islamic texts were prohibited. The alphabet changes during the 1920s and 1930s from Arabic/Persian to Latin and then to Cyrillic

effectively cut off the younger generations of Central Asians from the textual sources of their Muslim literary heritage. The policy of de-Islamization was accompanied by a policy of re-educating the Muslim masses in "scientific atheism" which was systematically and militantly pursued. The integrity of Islam and Muslim values and institutions was seriously undermined through subversion of its leadership in 1941 when Stalin created an officially constituted Muslim Religious Boards (MRB), the so-called "Official Islam" or establishment/conformist Islam.

Soviet policies of rejecting Islam were overwhelmingly successful in Muslim Central Asia, especially in Uzbekistan. By the late 1960s, the Soviets had achieved a condition of near universal ignorance of the most basic knowledge of Muslim beliefs and practices among Central Asian “Muslims” in the region. This was accomplished by means of forced, effective and prolonged denial of access to the sources of knowledge about Islamic beliefs and practices, especially of the Hanafi Muslim scholarly or “Great Tradition” of Central Asian Muslims. This condition give rise to the valorization of the practices of Muslim “Little Traditions” or the so-called “Parallel Islam”, acceptable to Soviet authorities since they were camouflaged as Central Asian traditional customs--i.e., folk practices of healing, pilgrimages to local shrines and extravagant elaboration (involution) of life cycle rituals such as mourning, births, circumcisions, wedding, etc.– some of them clearly approaching *bed'a* (“unauthorized” innovations in Muslim beliefs and practices). The promotion and valorization of the so-called “parallel” Muslim practices also accompanied effective penetration of Soviet (Russian) culture in the celebrations of Muslim life cycle rituals (e.g., in *qezil tueylar,* Red celebrations of weddings and other events, involving consumption of pork sausages/*kalbasa* (cold-cuts) and very large quantities of alcoholic beverages) beginning in the 1950-1960s.

The effectiveness of Soviet policies, while universal in scope, was somewhat uneven spatially: Contrary to the assumptions of the modernization theorists, rural areas in Central Asia have not remained bastions of traditionalism and Muslim conservatism. Instead, because of their vulnerability to Soviet penetration and control, rural communities were affected far more than urban enclaves by the impact of Soviet policy. Islamic knowledge and practices were decimated more effectively in villages than in the Central Asian cities, especially in the more isolated areas. Indeed, knowledge and practice of orthodox Islam among the masses survived minimally and only in hiding in some cities. Soviet policies appear to have been particularly effective for the previously illiterate masses, as compared with educated Muslims, and among orphans and members of broken families, as compared with intact families. Regionally, the traditional urban centers such the Holy City of Bukhara (Bukhara-i Sharif) and Samarkand, famed for their Muslim seminaries *(madrasalar),* saintly shrines (*ziyaratlar*), and prominent *‘ulama*, were apparently under much greater Soviet pressure and as a result have suffered greater losses of religiousness (i.e., knowledge and awareness of Muslim

beliefs and practices or Islamic consciousness). During the 1990s, inhabitants of Bukhara and Samarkand displayed lesser levels of religious activism in reclaiming Islam compared to those in Tashkent, the capital, or in smaller towns in the Farghana valley such as Namangan, Osh, Quqand, Andijan or Jalalabad. Similarly, the effectiveness of Soviet policies was far greater in the traditionally nomadic areas of northern Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan than in the more sedentary Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Because of the highly successful Soviet programs of de-Islamization in Central Asia, the near universal claims of Muslim identity by Central Asian natives became devoid of any meaningful religious content--they *became Muslims in name only!* That is, a link was increasingly forged between being a "Muslim" as a form of "cultural" identity, and the Soviet-constructed Central Asian "nationalisms" based on titular languages of the new republics created by Stalin's National Delimitation Policies starting in 1924. Indeed, as Paul Goble (2000) has suggested, Central Asians sought to "retain attachment to it [Islam] as marker rather than a guide" and Islam became a "shell, an identity, a primordial tie, rather than a political [religious?] reality." This Muslim cultural identity gained particular significance for Central Asian "Muslims" in their relationships with their Russian and other European masters (see Saidbaev 1978; Poliakov 1992; Polonskaya and Malashenko 1994; and others). Aside from those who attended the two Soviet-run madrasas in Bukhara and Tashkent, very few knowledgeable Muslim scholars and practitioners survived with a modicum of reflective thought about the meaning and functions of religion in general, and Islam in particular (see, Babadjanov 2002, 2001, and n.d.). Because of the obvious success in their prolonged anti-Islamic campaign, by the 1970s the Soviet attitudes had began to shift--i.e., Islam and Muslims in Central Asia came to be regarded not as a competitor to Soviet state power, but a mere nuisance. However, the Soviet traditional policy of zero tolerance of Islam remained strong even during the early years of Gorbachev's rule--e.g. as reflected in his strongly anti-Islamic speech in Tashkent in 1986 (see Fierman 1994, Kangas 1995:18).

The immensely successful Soviet political culture of "fear and favor", enforced by all available means of aggression and terror, produced another powerful legacy in Central Asian political processes: *a crisis of trust*. That is, the traditional kin-based and community-centered politics based on *trust* became a casualty of the Soviet *politics of mistrust*, giving rise to and perpetuating a "modernized" form of factional politics—the politics of the so called "clans" among Sovietized Central Asian elite (see Ilkhamov 2004; Collins 2002, 2006; Roy 2000).

This environment of pervasive suspicion, not surprisingly, also led to what Babadjanov (2001) has called the "Great Schism" among the few surviving 'ulama and a few of their students in Ferghana Valley. This division manifested itself in the rising tensions between the Domla Muhammadjan Hindustani, one of the most

respected and learned scholars who had chosen to accommodate the Soviet state in order to survive, and a few of his maverick young students who became suspicious of his accommodationist policies on some "Islamic" social practices as well as in politics. It was during the late 1970s when Domla Hindustani attributed the Wahhabi ("purists") label to a group of his students allegedly led by Rahmatullah 'Alloma and 'Abduwali-kori (see, Babadjanov 2002, especially 2001 and n.d., see also Critchlow 1989). His maverick students however saw themselves as advocates of Mujaddidiya (renovation and reform) movement. This early attribution by the great master to his young students, in the context of what appears to have been an internal debate[4] between the defenders of what came to be known as Hanafi traditionalist and their "Wahhabi" detractotrs, was later fully exploited by the KGB and Uzbek government to eventually instigate factional violence in Ferghana valley, as well the creation of the militant and radical organizations such IMU(T) and Hizb al-Tahrir, among others.

Because of the persistent crisis of trust, a situation of constant fear, suspicion and uncertainty prevails in all forms of interpersonal relations in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. The loss of a precious commodity, *the social capital,* has in turn seriously affected the ability (or willingness) of individuals to take initiatives or accept responsibilities in Central Asian societies. It has virtually precluded any possibility for public debate about the role of Islam in public life or, for that matter, any other critical issues, especially constructive criticism of government policies. The top leaders have surrounded themselves with hoards of *laganbardarlar* ("yes men" or literally the ones carrying-offering the tray as butlers do). It should be also noted that while the Soviet-trained native Central Asian political and intellectual cadre (the *aparatchek & nomenklatura*) are well versed in the discourses of the Soviet political culture of scientific atheism, the great majority of them have neither knowledge of, nor investment in, their own Muslim heritage. This sociological (anthropological?) condition has already had a considerable detrimental impact on the political ecology of post-Soviet policies and practices in Central Asia.

IV

During the last years of the 1980s, the southern republics of Central Asia, namely Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, experienced a brief but intense politicization of Islam due to both internal and external factors. The significant internal factors were: (1) the onset of Gorbachev's policies of *perestroika & glasnost* in Russia which resulted in the weakening of the Soviet state; (2) the humiliating publicity and trials of thousands of Party and government officials connected with the so-

[4] According to Babadjanov (n.d:7, footnote #5) it may have been even in a gist when Domla Hindustani, having been summoned by the KGB for regular interrogation, and asked about the views of his detractors, he may have declared: "I am not a wakhabit [Wahhabite]."

called “Cotton Affair” in Uzbekistan[5]; and (3) the collapse of the Soviet Union which opened the newly independent states to the outside world. Critical external forces included the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the prolonged anti-Soviet and anti-Communist jihad in Afghanistan.

The heavy-handed and repressive anti-Islamic policies of the government in Uzbekistan, launched by a female Communist party ideologue, Ra’no Abdullaeva, on the heels of Gorbachev’s visit to Tashkent on his way to India in 1986, coincided with the investigations of the cotton scandal, and were immediately followed by liberalization of policies in Moscow[6]. The conjunction of these events, together with the withdrawal of the Red Army from Afghanistan in 1989, marked the beginning of a process of Islamic activism in Central Asia. Unsure of the meaning and true intent of the liberal policies from Moscow--i.e., whether these were merely tricks, as were often used in the past, to identify and catch enemies of the Soviet state— a variety of small-scale Muslim action groups began to form in 1989 in different parts of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and southern Kyrgyzstan (see Abduvakhitov 1993, Atkin 1995). These organizations’ activities consisted of organizing study and teaching groups in secret, and reprinting and disseminating vernacular Islamic educational texts (mostly from the Jadid era), especially in a few towns in the Ferghana Valley. By early 1989, a young Uzbek named Aqilbek Ishanbaev -- a follower of Rahmatullah ‘Allama, an allegedly radical Islamist from the city of Namangan who was killed in a mysterious car accident in 1981-- demanded the restoration and reinstatement of the Gumbaz mosque, the largest in Namangan, as a place of worship. These activities, which quickly spread to other cities and towns such Andijon, Osh, Marghilan and Tashkent, were aimed primarily at reclaiming *masjidlar* (mosques) through peaceful means— rallies, sit-ins, and hunger strikes. These initial acts of *reclaiming Islam* and Muslim spaces were highly effective and several important *jami’ masjidlar* (large Friday congregational mosques) were returned to their original use as prayer halls.

Emboldened by a string of successes in their own localities, a coalition of groups from the Ferghana Valley demanded, and were granted, the removal of the long-time conformist Mufti Shamsuddin Babakhanov from office. He was promptly replaced (February 1989) by a more credible Libyan trained ‘alim from Namangan, Muhammad Sadyq Muhammad Yusuf, as the Mufti of the Soviet created Spiritual Administration of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, located in Tashkent (Kangas 1995:20). By this time even the Spiritual Administration was engaged in the production and sales of popular Islamic texts, a trade which was

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[5] The accusation lodged by Moscow that the then Uzbek Communist Boss, Sharaf Rashidov and his minions had over reported the amount of cotton produced in the republic and gotten money from Moscow for the non-existent cotton and kept it through a wide criminal conspiracy (see Boris Rumer 1989, also see Collins 2006).

[6] Gorbachev’s policy of liberalization toward religion was triggered by the celebrations of the Millennium of the Russian Orthodox Church (see Fierman 1994).

proving to be quite lucrative. According to Babadjanov (n.d.: 6), the new Mufti even tried to reconcile the schism between the followers of Domla Hindustani, the respected Hanafi scholar who had passed away in 1989, and his "Wahhabi purist" students in a meeting held in his office, but he was unsuccessful.

In early 1990, the various Muslim activist groups in Uzbekistan decided to create an Islamic Renaissance (Rustakhez) Party similar to the ones taking shape in Tajikistan and the Caucuses[7]. During the same year in Namangan two Muslim groups were formed. The first, Adolat (Justice), was created to help the government police force protect local urban neighborhoods and surrounding villages from organized criminals who were operating in the area. It was the first and only armed Muslim group in the region, but it was formed in support of government security forces, not against them. The second group, Tawbah (Repentance) allegedly had a more political agenda. As Moscow's grip on power weakened and uncertainty grew, Uzbek Republican authorities adopted a go-easy policy towards the increasing politicization of Islam, while Moscow authorities began to employ the label of Wahhabi in reference to all Muslim activists in Central Asia. It was during this very brief period (late 1990-mid 1992) that emergent national democratic movements (e.g. Birlik and Erk in Uzbekistan, as well as several other parties in Tajikistan) also began to take shape, and reclaimed their Islamic heritage in their rhetoric aimed at Moscow. Indeed, it was also during these formative years, at the height of the cotton scandal investigations instigated by Moscow, that a new Uzbek Communist Party administration headed by Islam Karimov rose to power in Tashkent (see Collins 2006:122-25). At his presidential inauguration later that year, Karimov took the oath of office on the Qur'an, an act unprecedented in the history of the republic, however hypocritical it may have been. With declarations of independence, on August 31st and September 1st, 1991 by Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan respectively, followed by similar decrees from the other three Central Asian Republics later that year, the prospects for Islamic activism in the region began to change considerably (see Kangas 1995, Bezanis 1995).

V

With independence came a genuine opportunity to redefine the relationship between states and societies in post-Soviet Central Asia. President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan, along with other Central Asian leaders, publicly expressed enthusiasm for the secular Turkish model (see Yavuz 2000), but also began to reclaim elements of Islam and Muslim traditions to help consolidate state power. In a 1991 interview, Karimov declared that "the gravest crisis that has befallen us [in

[7] The first legal Islamic party under the name of Islamic Renaissance was formed by Muslim delegations from all over the USSR in the city of Astrakhan, Russia (the sixteenth century capital of the Tatar khanate), during the summer of 1990 (for detail see Lipovski 1996).

CA] is not economic but moral-- the destruction of the age-old moral principles for ideological reasons will be far more difficult to overcome than the chaos in the economy" (Berger 1991:30). He bemoaned how a Communist could not even attend the burial ceremonies of his/her loved ones; and how *awqaf* were confiscated, shari'a abrogated, mosques and shrines destroyed and desecrated by the Soviet regimes. For a short period, the opening of old mosques was encouraged and the building of new ones permitted without much official interference by the state or the Spiritual Administration. President Karimov visited Saudi Arabia, performed *'umra* (pilgrimage to Mecca outside of the Hajj period), and made official visits to Muslim capitals. Indeed, the independent Uzbek state engaged in a wide array of activities which could at best be called "reclaiming" Islam and Muslim heritage on its own terms, but did so in a way that was not entirely successful nor free of cynicism/hypocrisy (see Abduvakhitov 1995, Shahrani 1995).

However, the state was not the sole actor, as there were many other claimants to the vast Muslim cultural and symbolic resources of Central Asia. In late December 1991, just a few months into national independence, two groups in Namangan city, Tawbah and Adolat, took over Communist Party Headquarters and presented the Uzbek government with a list of demands on behalf of the community. These included: “the constitutional recognition of Islam as the state religion, the priority of *shari’a* in the [laws] of the republic, and the introduction of separate schools for boys and girls” (Abduvakhitov 1995:297, also see ICG Asia Report No. 59 in 2003). They also demanded that the state provide them the city’s former House of Political (Atheistic) Education for their use. President Karimov met with them in Namangan, offered them the use of the building and made promises to present their petition to the Supreme Soviet of the republic for discussion.

Soon after these dramatic events, the Tawbah movement was confronted with a serious disagreement within the group over tactics and strategy. A very small faction of radicals was resorting to extreme measures against their moderate factional opponent, who did not wish to engage in any form of anti-government political agitation. Indeed, a great majority of the members favored non-political and primarily educational activities in their reclamation of Islam, especially at the local community level. Due to serious deterioration of societal trust exploited by government agents to encourage dissension, Tawbah and Adolat could not reach a decision over the use of space they were offered by the president, and were beginning to squabble. The escalation of intra-and inter-group tensions culminated in radical elements of the Tawbah group taking some members of Adolat group hostage in April 1992. This incident finally provided the government a fine pretext to effectively crush both groups by arresting and incarcerating their small membership, thus attempting to quash radical Islamist activism in Uzbekistan.

In its policy of getting tough with Muslim activists, the Uzbek state had a

powerful ally in the new Mufti, M. Sadiq M. Yusuf, who strongly condemned the Namangan activists by referring to them using Moscow's preferred term of "Wahhabis". As a man from Namangan himself, with earlier ties to these activist elements, the Mufti was attempting to publicly dissociate himself from such groups, especially those from his own town. The Spiritual Administration headed by the Mufti began to thrive, thanks to considerable donations by locals in support of religious activities and institutions and growing numbers of foreign Muslim visitors (mostly Turkistani exiles from the Bolsheviks now residing in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Europe and the United States) and organizations in the city.

Emboldened by his relative popularity and prosperity, Mufti Muhammad Sadyk Muhammad Yusuf allegedly tried to meddle in the Presidential elections. To counter the potential threat to presidential authority from the Mufti, Karimov began to promote and valorize the authority of the Religious Affairs Committee (Dini Idora) of the old Uzbek Communist Party (now called the Uzbekistan Democratic Party), by appointing as the Chairman of Dini Idora a well known political conformist, Abdulghani Abdullaev, to check the power of the Mufti. In February 1993, during an all-Muslim Kurultai (Congress) of Uzbekistan, Mufti Muhammad Sadyk Muhammad Yusuf was challenged by a "new wing" of the officials of the Spiritual Administration, and replaced by an older, less politically minded successor, Mukhtar Abdullaev, to head the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Uzbekistan. Within months after his ouster from the office of the Mufti, Muhammad Sadyk Muhammad Yusuf was accused of financial mismanagement and even of sending funds to the Islamist opposition forces in Tajikistan, and forced into exile[8].

Toward the end of 1992, with the increasing consolidation of the powers of the state in Uzbekistan, as well as in other republics (excluding Tajikistan) in Central Asia, the processes of Muslim political activism came to an abrupt halt. The triumph of the state culminated in constitutional and legal restrictions aimed at severely curtailing Muslim political participation in the governance structures. That is, in the newly independent self-proclaimed secular states, no mixing of religion and politics was to be tolerated. Therefore, a wide range of Muslim practices and groups were criminalized and severely repressed, the formation of Islamist parties prohibited, and Muslim clergy excluded from candidacy in elections or political appointments in the government, except for in the official organs of the Dini Idora and the Spiritual Administration. As an ICG interview with an imam in Tashkent shows, even government appointed imams find the level of government control beyond their expectation:

> Many imams are unhappy with the situation. There has never been a time when imams and religious officials were so totally dependent on various state

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[8] By 2004, he was allowed by the regime to return to Uzbekistan, and is living a quite meditative life according to the locals. For a comment on current attitudes towards him and his relationship with the Uzbek government see ICG Asia Report No. 72 (December 22, 2003:8).

structures, which has become simply humiliating for them. We are controlled by the regional hokimiats, the SNB [National Security Service], the MVD, [Ministry of Internal Affairs], chairmen of mahalla committees, the Muftiate...Even in the Soviet period the authorities consulted us, asked our advice, and in general just showed some respect and culture, although then there was also total control (ICG Asia Report No. 59 (2003):7).

In effect, the government of Uzbekistan under the pretext of national security and stability began trampling the fundamental human rights of its own people. The end of peaceful politicization of Islam and the triumph of the new "nationalist" states were conveniently justified in terms of avoiding the tragic and chaotic situations in neighboring Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

The policies pursued by the post-Soviet Uzbekistan government appear to be the same ones being advocated to the U.S. government for curtailing or coping with the global rise of Muslim militancy. In the Central Asia section of a report called *The Muslim World After 9/11,* prepared for the US Air Force by the RAND Corporation, Cheryl Benard (2003:366) recommends:

> Dividing radicals from the mainstream by raising the risks and costs associated with radicalism to the point where an average discontented young person will think twice about expressing his disaffection through membership in such an organization; keeping control over the religious establishment in order to avoid it becoming an autonomous, opaque societal zone where radicals can find concealment; permitting sufficient expression of religious sentiment that the average person can feel free to practice his religion; motivating and equipping mainstream religion to 'self-police' against radicals; *this is likely to be the most realistic and effective formula for Central Asia* (emphasis added).

Unfortunately for Uzbekistan, according to the assessment of International Crisis Group (ICG Asia Report No.14 (2001):1) exaggerating the threat of militant Islamic movements "to justify strong cooperative international security measures [with Russia and neighboring Central Asian states] against the perceived common threat and to win the acquiescence and assistance of Western governments... [may have been] misconceived and indeed counter productive–more likely to create the very threat it seeks to counter". Indeed, President Karimov's oppressive measures drove some Muslim activists to exile in Tajikistan where in the midst of civil war they formed the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the first truly militant organization aimed at opposing the Karimov regime. As Sharansky and Dermer (2004:12) state, "the price for 'stability' inside a nondemocratic regime is terror outside of it". Indeed, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan soon joined hands with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and started planning attacks inside Uzbekistan. Also formed in exile was Hizb-ut-Tahrir, who have possible international ties with similar Islamist groups and aim to oppose the Karimov

regime through non-violent means (for details, see ICG Asia Report No. 59 (2003):4-12, also No. 14 (2001), No.21 (2001); Benard 2003, 2004; Bezanis 1995).

Given the scale of repression, relatively few were willing or able to escape to neighboring countries. Many were forced underground and ultimately radicalized. In the environment of increasing intolerance of non-conformist or state-controlled Islam, however, many innocent people, families and communities were subjected to untold suffering– intimidation, harassment, public humiliation by the security forces, dismissal from jobs, arrests, prosecution on trumped-up charges, imprisonment, torture and mysterious disappearances. Among them was Obidkhon-Qari Sabitkhanoghlu Nazarov, the very popular imam of Tokhtabai masjidi near Charsu bazaar in Tashkent. He was dismissed from his job (in 1996) as an imam, had his home destroyed to widen a road, and was briefly detained in 1997 which triggered large public protests[9]. In 1994, I worked with this remarkable articulate scholars extensively. According to an International Crisis Group report (ICG Asia Report No.59 (2003):ii) as of July 2003 there were at least 6000 religious prisoners in Uzbekistan and "dissatisfaction with the regime continues to feed into Islamist sentiment." As a consequence, considerable and palpable fear, suspicion, uncertainty and distrust of politics and the state prevails in Central Asian societies, especially among the increasing numbers who were trying to reclaim their Muslim religious identities, beliefs and practices (see also ICG Asia Report No. 72 (2003)). Given this climate of fear and intolerance of Islam (political or otherwise) in the independent states of Muslim Central Asia, we need to ask then what were the nature, goals, strategies and structural dynamics of Muslim activism in Central Asia during the early to mid-1990s (that is, before it was transformed to what it has become today) and why?

VI

Most independent-minded Muslim religious scholars--i.e., those not attached to the Spiritual Administration or "Official Islam"-- who were living, teaching and preaching in major cities of the Ferghana Valley and Tashkent during the late 1980s and early 1990s were not interested in politics or challenging the authority of the state governments. They saw their mission within the altered conditions of post-Soviet states in a radically different manner: Unlike the radical Islamist movements (both at home and abroad), the reformist (mujaddidiya) 'ulama, such as Abdulwali-Qori and Obidkhon-Qori, did not consider the institution of state as a means for solving societal problems, but rather a problem of society. Therefore, they argued that the problems of these societies would be solved not by taking control of the state but by reforming the society itself--i.e., consciously or not, they

[9] Nazarov went into hiding in March 1998 for fear of detention and after eight years, in March 2006, he reached safety in Europe under the protection of UNHCR refugee program (see Saidazimova 2006).

were advocating the aborted approach of their own *jadidist* ancestors who grappled with the problems of social transformation in Turkistan (Soviet Central Asia) eight decades earlier, just before the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 (see Khalid 1998, 2000; also cf. Roy 1994). These scholars repeatedly asserted that, at the outset, the peoples of post-independence Muslim Central Asia must reclaim basic knowledge of Islam through education within the family and community. They were also painfully aware that they may have to do so within a blatantly hostile (or as they correctly feared even lethal) environment and a persistent hegemonic political culture of scientific atheism. Toward the realization of their peaceful educational goals, they had launched, in an earnest but highly *ad hoc* manner, five major activities that were expanding relatively quickly by the mid-1990s:

1. Reclaiming spaces for worship– machetlar (Tajik/Persian masajid). In a conversation with the current Mufti of Uzbekistan, Abdur Rashid-Qori, on October 20th, 1997, I was informed that there were some 4,000 registered and an estimated additional 6,000 unregistered mosques open and operating in Uzbekistan. Old mosques were reopening and new ones being built throughout the newly independent states of Central Asia. The major problem at that time appeared to be the serious shortage of well-trained imams to staff all the mosques. The 1999 Tashkent bombings, however, prompted new laws regulating religious organizations. In 2000, the same mufti told me that the number of registered mosques had dropped well below 2000 (also see ICG Asia Report No. 59 (2003): 6-7).

2. Tremendous emphasis was placed on traditional as well as modern means of formal and informal education. The highest priorities were obtaining primary teaching materials in the vernaculars, both printed and recorded (on audio and video cassettes), and training young teachers and imams. These objectives were especially important to the independent, reformist ulama -- the so-called Wahhabis. Starting mosque schools (maktab) and madrasas as well as organizing regular *dars* (lessons in the form of regularly scheduled lectures by the imams after daily prayers) and informal study circles, especially for women and young girls, were very popular endeavors. Disseminating knowledge of the fundamental Muslim beliefs, ritual practices and ethical behavior seemed the key goal of the Muslim activists. Fully aware of the total lack of even the most basic knowledge on the part of most of the new mosques' attendees (see Office of Research 2000: Tables 1-5, also see Ubaydullaeva et al. 2003:43-74), the imams, particularly those with reformist orientation, adopted a novel and "user-friendly" approach to Friday sermons (khutba). That is, unlike Muslim countries in southwestern Asia, where the topic for the sermon is chosen by the imam (or in some cases by the government religious affairs offices) and delivered mostly in Arabic and in an extremely dry formal fashion, in post-Soviet Uzbekistan the formal part of the delivery in Arabic was minimized. Instead, much of the presentation was devoted to answering questions from the members of the congregation. These questions--

ranging from minor ritual matters about daily prayers to important ethical and moral concerns-- were either raised (in person, in writing or over the phone) with the imam during the previous week or submitted to him in writing just prior to or during the sermon. Most of the questions were concerned with practical matters of daily life, such as: What should a practicing Muslim girl do when her parents force her to marry a non-practicing man? What should a hijab-wearing teacher do when threatened with dismissal by the school administrators? What should a young man do when his father tells him not to practice Islam? What should a son do when his father comes home drunk? Should a practicing Muslim son obey his father's demand that he go get him an alcoholic beverage from the corner shop or refrigerator?

Government control of Islamic preaching and education has thoroughly discredited such sources of information, and created new problems for those imams who do not share the view of either Karimov's regime or the radical militants, as expressed by a Tashkent imam to ICG reporters:

> The majority of our Muslims are people with a very limited knowledge of Islam, which allows Hizb ut-Tahrir to interpret *ayats* [Qur'anic verses] and hadith as suits their political ideology. But the tragedy is that my colleagues and I are under the same restrictions as Hizb ut-Tahrir—just like them, we are also not allowed to teach legally. So in those conditions, of course extremist groups will grow regardless of repression (ICG Asia report No. 59 (2003):9).

3. Serious and sustained attention was paid to the educational needs of Muslim women. Hijab-wearing women, for the first time in the history of Central Asian Islam, were attending congregational (*jama'a*) prayers, and holding their own study circles, in at least a few mosques in Tashkent[10]. During a visit to Khiva in October 1997, I attended a meeting of the local imams (some 35-40 of them, including some from the surrounding villages) with the visiting Mufti from Tashkent, Abdur Rashid-Qori, during which the imams solicited the Mufti's help in opening a madrasa where local girls could study. The Mufti responded positively to their request, noting that several such madrasas had been already opened in Tashkent and other cities, and saying that he would do his best to help them. During the same meeting the Khivan imams were also solicitous of the Mufti's assistance in sending their sons to study abroad--i.e., to Mecca, Medina, Istanbul and Cairo.

4. Unlike the traditional pre-Soviet maktabs and madrasas, and very much like the Jadid schools, the new mosque schools and seminaries (madrasalar) boasted a mixed curricula of both Islamic and secular subjects. The leaders and promoters of such schools were themselves graduates of Soviet compulsory education (i.e., up to

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[10] I am using the past tense here because due to the more recent media reports of a crackdown by the government of Uzbekistan on Muslim activism, it is not clear whether such activities are still permissible or not.

at least 10th grade) and were fluent in Russian and often in Arabic and Persian as well. But there numbers were woefully small. In the Farghana Valley, the bastian of Islamic knowledge and practice, I was told in 1994 that there may be no more than one hundred competent ‘alims in the entire area.

5. Mosque attendance was clearly on the rise during the 1990s and was more reflective of the demographic spectrum in the Ferghana Valley and in Tashkent (at least based on my own 1992, 1994 and 1997 and 2004 observations). In Bukhara, however, until 1997 (my last visit to the city), the majority of worshipers appeared to be the very old or very young. It is also important to point out that the vast majority of people in Uzbekistan, and other Central Asian countries, are not among those who attend mosques or hold a favorable view of the reclamation of Islam by their compatriots. Indeed, negative feelings and suspicions about religion, religious authorities and activists remain widespread in the region[11]. According to surveys conducted for the US Department of State’s Office of Research (2000:2), the number of people who declared “they believed in Islam” declined from 60% in 1994 and 71% in 1999 to 41% in March 2000. They attribute the exceptional decline to the intensification of the Karimov regime’s campaign against “Islamic fundamentalists” since the Tashkent bombings of February 1999.

VII

Much of what has been outlined here refers to the activities of the reformist oriented segment of the Muslim activists--i.e., those who were labeled “Wahhabis” in the late 1970s by the well-respected scholar Domla Muhammadjan Hindustani (Babadjanov 2001, and n.d.), in an internal dispute with a few of his young students. But, as indicated earlier in this paper, the label was later adopted and maliciously employed by the Soviet KGB, the Karimov regime and the establishment Islamic organizations in independent Uzbekistan in reference to all suspected practicing Muslims. In contradistinction, members of the officially sanctioned or establishment Islam call themselves the Hanafis, as did Domla Hindustani. Both in their educational activities and Friday khutbas, the officials of the establishment Islam follow a strictly traditionalist, conservative and conformist style. The reformist imams and popular preachers were often, but not exclusively,

[11] According to a December 2002 survey of 1,875 in Uzbekistan (36% urban and 64% rural) by a research team funded by the German Fredrich Ebert Stiftung, only 12.6% “lead a strictly religious lifestyle”–i.e., they observed all Muslim religious prescription. The study concludes that “despite the growth of religious consciousness of the titular population of Uzbekistan, their social behavior remains rather secular, and not religious” (see Ubaydullaeva et al. 2003:34, 69). Similar results are reflected in Surveys conducted by Russian research firm VCIOM in collaboration with researchers in Central Asian republic for the US Department of State’s Office Research in 2000. In March 2000 only 13% of 1052 Muslims responded that Islam was very important to their lives. In the same survey only 24% could name all five pillars of Muslim faith while 29% could not name any (see Office of Research 2000: 2,14).

privately trained Muslim scholars[12] who did not shy away from criticizing corruption, immorality and abuse of power by officials -- the kinds of issues, it should be added, which President Karimov also condemned and warned against in his public pronouncements. During the Soviet period, much of the reformist ulama's Islamic learning was accomplished in hiding with the few respected elder scholars such as Domla Hindustani. Perhaps a brief biographical sketch of one of the alleged leaders of the Wahhabi movement, Abdulwali-Qori, may be useful at this point.

In a conversations on November 18, 1994 in Andijan Jami macheti where Abdulwali-Qori was the much respected Imam, I learned the following about his personal background, educational training and mission in life:

Abdulwali-Qori was born in 1950 to an ordinary workers family of Ashurali and Khair khan. His father read only Turki ketab (Chaghatai texts) and the Qur'an, but was not a trained scholar. He was however a very devout and practicing Muslim–i.e., he was *halol tabiy'at* (with pure/pious nature). His maternal grandfather, Abdul Kholiq Khowja aka, born to a scholarly family, was a pious and extremely charitable, caring person. Recalling a saying of the Prophet Muhammad that his prophecy must have been due to the prayers of his great ancestor, Prophet Abraham, Abdulwali-Qori mused that it must have been the prayers of his own maternal grandfather Abdul Kholiq Khowja, that he (Abdulwali-Qori) was so favored by Allah to pursue a career in Muslim education.

The third son in a family of eight (four brothers and three sisters), he learned the basics of Islamic literacy from his own father who died at a young age in 1959. He was the best student at his 10th grade compulsory state school, and kept his fast and prayed while there. He also studied privately with a very well known local 'alim, Qosim Domla throughout the school year. Abdulwali-Qori decided against going to state universities, and instead moved to the city of Marghilan and studied with Abdulhakim-Qori, who was a highly respected scholar in the Valley. But self-study was most critical to his own education. When he turned 20 in 1970 he began memorizing the Qur'an, and completed the task in less than a year (memorizing more than half of the Qur'an, 16 *juz'* or chapters in just two months!). He said that he regretted the fact that he had not attempted it earlier in his life. He had also studied for a time with the famous Muhammadjan Hindustani Domla, the widely respected itinerant scholar in the region. Abdulwali-Qori acquired some of his books from the tombs in a cemetery near his home in Andijon where people had deposited them. He would sometimes spend long hours sifting through torn volumes page by page just to get a complete book. Friends who had hidden books in the walls also provided him with some volumes. Abdulwali-Qori added that most of his old books were lost in a house fire in 1993.

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[12]. For example, Abdulwali-Qori got his Islamic education entirely in private, mostly by underground tutors while Obidkhon-Qori was trained in the Soviet Madrasas in Bukhara and Tashkent, complemented by private learning.

Abduwali-Qori was the only one in his family to opt for an Islamic education because, as he said, "one had to be willing to devote his life [blood] in the Way of Allah" to undertake what he did. He added that he and his siblings were on diametrically opposed paths of East vs. West. He participated in peaceful activities such as reclaiming the Andijon madrassa, and eventually became its imam. He then undertook its complete renovation and rehabilitation, transforming it into one of the major mosques of the city. Abduwali-Qori noted that in late 1980, only six congregational mosques in Andijon province were active -- his current mosque not among them. But by 1994, he said, more than 50 congregational mosques and many more mahalla mosques were open and active. In his own mosque, he estimated some 15,000 worshipers attended the Friday prayers while some 5000 had been attending his regularly scheduled Monday evening *dars* lessons since 1990. These Monday evening lessons, as well as most of his Friday sermons (*khutba*) were recorded on audio and/or video tapes and widely disseminated both at home and abroad[13].

Abdulwali-Qori was also active in the life cycle ritual circuits. He and his like-minded colleague Obidkhan-Qori viewed family life crisis rituals as major educational forums for purifying some of the accretions (*bed'at*) that took shape during the decades of Soviet rule. Indeed, one of the reasons for the original schism between these reformers and their revered teacher Hinustani Domla, who attached to them the Wahhabi label, was their differing views on how the life cycle events should be celebrated. I will return to a discussion of this subject shortly.

In 1994, Abduwali-Qori seemed especially concerned about his relations with the Uzbek state. He said he is aware that the state authorities have been declaring they have found their Qur'an and that Uzbekistan is a Muslim country. But unfortunately, he added, the government's approach consists mainly of lodging false accusations against us. Our main task is to inform and teach the long-deprived public about the facts of Islam, and "it is not our job or intention to force our views on anyone". As Muslims, he asserted, we mean no harm to the anyone, including the state. However, the false innovations (bed'at) and un-Islamic accretions must be wiped clean from Muslim practices–for example, the oppressively long and costly cycle of funerary rituals. This is turned into a pretext for conflict in the community by enemies of Islam who would like to prevent people from learning the truth

[13] Indeed, in summer of 2002, I was able to obtain in Cairo, Egypt, a set of his Monday evening lessons devoted to a systematic commentary on major themes of the Qur'an. The 56 audio cassette-tapes, each 90 minutes long, were apparently produced in Saudi Arabia by Saudi-Uzbeks under the title of Majmu'at Drus Al-Shaykh 'Alamah Abdulwali-Qori Bel-lughat al-Uzbakiyya, Vol. I-III. A note on the jacket states that these *dorus* (lessons) were originally recorded in 77 cassettes and their contents have been reduced to 56 and that they contain only one third of Abdulwali-Qori's recorded lessons. Most of this material has now been digitized and is circulating in CD format; it may be also available on websites. Sadly, the contents of these and other electronic and print materials produced and widely circulated by the reformist ulama in post-Soviet Central have not been systematically examined yet. Access to these and similar data will be critical to our understanding of the nature, content, aims and objectives of the aborted Muslim reformist movement in post-Soviet Uzbekistan.

about Islam. There are elements (e.g., the local KGB agents in Andijan) whose job it is to spread discord *(fitna oyeshtrish)* amongst us. But he seemed optimistic about the future now that youth are turning to Islam and the new basic Islamic religious texts, the *Odob Namahs* (guidance to proper moral conduct) are popular among them. He reiterated again that our focus is mainly in educating the young, and assisting Muslim families in living morally and spiritually fulfilling lives.

Unfortunately, for him personally and for the people of Uzbekistan and Muslims of Central Asia generally, his optimism was misplaced as less than a year later, during summer of 1995, he and a companion disappeared without a trace, after checking-in for a Moscow flight to attend a conference, at the Tashkent airport. During our conversation in November 1994, Andulwali-Qori laid the blame on local KGB agents, who had just recently burglarized his mosque and taken all of their sound recording equipment, for making false charges and passing them on to Tashkent. He said only if President Karimov could check the veracity of the information that he was given about him, all would be fine. But that was not to be.

VIII

What truly set the two competing camps (the Hanafi vs Mujaddidya or Wahhabiya) apart were their attitudes and actions regarding the most significant Central Asian social practices, those surrounding family/household celebrations and life cycle/crisis rituals--i.e, *'aqiqa* or *beshik tuey* (cradle ceremony), *sunnat tuey* (circumcision feast), *nikoh tuey* (wedding celebration), *'azaa* or mortuary and memorial feasts marking the 3rd, 7th, 20th, 40th days after and anniversary of a death in the family. Also important are housewarming parties (*khudoi or ihson*), and birthday celebrations (clearly a Soviet era addition) marking the later decades in ones life *(jubilee*). Apart from these, one minor differences in the details of performing daily prayers--i.e., saying *omin* (amine) silently in the traditional Hanafi rites and saying it aloud in Hanbali (Wahhabi) and Shafi'i rites when the imam has completed the obligatory loud recitation of the opening chapter of the Qur'an at the early morning *(bomdod* or *fajr)*, the sunset (*shom* or *maghrib*) and the evening (*khuftan* or *'isha*) congregational prayers-- has also become a distinctive marker of, and source for, contention between the two groups[14].

The reformists generally denounced the extravagance of these celebrations as *israf* (wasteful) and as such discouraged if not forbid (*harom*). They also strongly discouraged practicing Muslims from attending weddings where alcohol and pork were served and mixed dancing to disco music occurred (i.e., the *Qezil tuey* or Red wedding celebrations), and they did not go to such events themselves. Similarly,

[14] It is worth noting that this phenomenon in other Muslim communities outside Central Asia where adherents of different schools of fiqh live and pray together (e.g., Muslim emigrants' mosques in Europe and America) is not a matter of concern at all, as members of each school follow their own rite by saying amine silently or a loudly after the imam.

they also discouraged the holding of wasteful memorial feasts. They give examples of how poor families went into considerable debt and economic hardship because of these practices which have no Islamic basis at all. They also accused the traditionalist mullahs of personally benefitting from their retention. The traditionalist or establishment *'ulema,* on the other hand, dismissed such charges as Wahhabi extremism, and regarded the celebrations as customary and as such harmless.

The reformists encouraged holding gatherings for weddings and other occasions free of alcohol, gender mixing, dancing and disco music. Such austere celebrations were on the rise in Uzbekistan, and were referred to as *Musulmoncha tueylar* (Muslim wedding celebrations) which eschewed live *estrada* musical bands in favor of popular preachers or *'alim* who gave a talk and answered pressing questions from the guests attending the feast. In 1994, I was asked by Obidkhan-Qori to accompany him to a wedding of a young friend of his from a village in Navoi province. I had attended many such events, but this one proved the most memorable. The groom was at the time attending college in Tashkent. According to the villagers, his was the first Musulmoncha wedding in his village since the 1950s. Much to everyone's surprise, and despite the local skeptics' misgivings about the viability of such austere Muslim celebrations, the evening festivities consisted of a lecture-discussion by Obidkhan-Qori, interspersed by live classical Uzbek music, which lasted until midnight, holding the guests' total attention. The next day, it was assessed by the villagers as an unprecedented success, thus improving the odds that such weddings might be held in the future.

In the mid-1990s, the type of celebration a family held in their neighborhood – i.e., *qezil tuey* or *Musulmoncha tuey*–was increasingly reflective of one's choice of personal and collective identity and loyalty within the rapidly changing socioeconomic and political environment of one's community. These tense social dramas, unfolding daily in towns and villages across Uzbekistan, were manifestations of the competing visions for reconstructing community and civil society in post-Soviet Muslim Central Asia. The reformists believed that, given the government's rhetoric of strengthening traditional moral principles and family values as well as their support for social and economic reform, they were natural allies and partners of the post-Soviet Uzbek state. The sad outcome, as we now know, however, was heavily contingent on the attitudes and policies of the government officials in the region towards Islam and the many competing Muslim activist groups within their domains. External developments, especially the post-9/11 global war on terror which began in neighboring Afghanistan, only made the situation more hopeless.

Another point of growing tension between Muslim reformists and the conformists was the means and methods of relating to the region's extremely rich Muslim Sufi heritage. Sufism, a living and thriving Muslim tradition in the pre-Soviet era, was for all intents and purposes almost completely destroyed during the Soviet period, despite recent claims to the contrary. That is, there were no credible

surviving *pir* or *ishan* alive in the region by late 1980s. Indeed, the absence of such a Sufi *murshid* (legitimate Sufi saint/authority) in the area at the time (unlike that of the many well-respected ulama and fuqaha who were still present) made the debate over the recovery of Sufi heritage even more complex and politically troubling for the future. Veneration of shrines also became an important battleground between the reformist and the traditionalist camps. The reformers were not objecting to shari'a based Central Asian Sufi tradition and practices; rather, they criticized the mindless veneration of shrines by those ignorant of the fundamental principle of *towheed* (or absolute unity of God) which Islam insists upon. The government and its allies misconstrued the reformist views by making them enemies of Sufism and mystical practices as such. Ignoring the significant historical role of Naqshbanadiyya Sufi *tariqats* in Central Asian politics, especially their resistance to Russian/Soviet colonialism, the regimes are promoting Sufism as a peaceful and apolitical alternative to allegedly control the rise of fundamentalism and radical Islam (see Benard 2003 and 2004 for some truly bizarre arguments).

Even had it been left undisturbed, the processes of reclaiming Islam and Muslim heritage and reconstructing a viable Muslim civil society would have taken generations, since the difficult task of *re-Islamization* of Central Asia for the emergent Muslim activists had just begun. From the perspective of reformist Muslim scholars in Central Asia, this process would have been slow and methodical. They argued that the highly educated and overwhelmingly literate peoples of post-Soviet Central Asia offered both a tremendously unprecedented opportunity not only for reclaiming but also reformulating Muslim heritage. This youthful population capable of critical thought was viewed by reformist scholars such as Abduwali-Qari and Obidkhan-Qari as an asset because they would not accept or tolerate a reactionary and backward-looking interpretation of Islamic doctrine and ideology—such as that of the Taliban movement in neighboring Afghanistan. The highly educated older generation, well indoctrinated in the political culture of scientific atheism and suspicious of the social utility or relevance of religion in modern life, presented a major challenge for Muslim activists and forced them to rethink Islam in relation to contemporary Western ideological and political issues. Central Asian reformist Muslim scholars were in a very favorable position to meet these challenges, if they were tolerated by their own regimes, and encouraged by the international democratic forces to pursue their goals peacefully. It would have been a slow and complicated process of re-education, carried out individual by individual and Muslim family by Muslim family, starting in cities and panning out to villages.

On the whole, however, despite the alarmist calls both from within and without Central Asia, the Muslim activist efforts appeared for the most part to be *ad hoc*, local, small scale, and very poorly organized. Muslim reformists also displayed, both in their words and deeds, no sign of religious intolerance toward the non-Muslim communities living in Central Asia. That is, despite claims for the

existence of considerable interethnic tensions in the region, no conflict motivated by religion has surfaced in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. On the contrary, Muslim reformists operated under enormously powerful constraints from the constantly watchful, youthful and fearful national states. Therefore, based on ethnographic and historical realities on the ground in Central Asia during the 1990s, there was little ground for alarmist calls of rising Islamic Fundamentalism or any signs of religious intolerance in the region. The same, however, could not have been said about the real threat of intolerance of religion, especially that of political Islam. Sadly, the post-Soviet Central Asian states in general, and Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan in particular, have not tolerated self-consciously non-political Islam. If it had been tolerated by the post-Soviet dictatorial regimes, would the processes of reclaiming Islam (from cities to villages) have led to creative thinking about the restructuring of political power and governance in post-Soviet Muslim Central Asia? More importantly, given the radically altered realities following the Andijan massacres and the ongoing American war on terrorism in the region, will the government of Uzbekistan, supported by the narratives of the so called Islamic global terrorism, espoused vociferously from Washington to Bejing and Moscow, allow any room for reclaimed Islam and Muslims believers and practitioners in Central Asian societies? The stakes are indeed very great in this increasingly volatile geostrategic region, but so is the potential for effecting positive change on a global scale. We should remember Sharansky and Dermer's (2004:12) assertion that "Freedom *anywhere* will make the world safer everywhere."

For the suffering people of Uzbekistan and others in the region, however, there remains the question of whether there will be, as Partha Chaterjee (1993:11) has put it, an end to the "roots of our postcolonial misery: not in our inability to think out new forms of modern community but in *our surrender to the old forms of the modern [oppressive] state*? (emphasis is mine). As a hopeful Uzbek, I wish to seek solace in the poetry of ‘Abdullah Ouloni, one of the remarkable spiritual ancestors of the post-Soviet *mujaddidlar,* who echoes their hopes, aspirations and disappointments so powerfully when he says:

Garchiman ma'yusu pergham milatem ahvolidan
Qat'i umid aylamam ta'min istiqbolidan
Har ghaming poyoni vordur, har alaming okheri
'Ilm alib shoyad qutulsa ghaflating changolidan

Although I am sad and disheartened, by the condition of my nation
I will not give up hope, in celebrating its future achievements
Since every grief eventually terminates, and every pain comes to end
With knowledge [freedom to think], will she escape from the clutches of ignorance [oppression].

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