Islamic Activism in Eurasia: Directions and Demographies

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Introduction[1]

Following the collapse of communism Muslim regions of the former Soviet Union experienced an Islamic revival which occurred within the wider context of a post-Soviet spiritual re-awakening and ideological emancipation. Former Soviet Muslims, who like other ex-Soviet people had been subjected to over seven decades of the Sovietised version of secularism and atheism, were free at last to express their religious affiliation, to conduct essential Islamic practices, including *hajj,* and to re-engage with their co-religionists beyond the ex-Soviet frontiers. All former Soviet Muslim regions witnessed the Islamic construction and publishing boom, the development and upgrading of the existing system of Islamic education, the formation of Islamic and Islamo-national political parties, as well as non-political Islamic educational and cultural organisations. An important financial and methodological factor of the Islamic revival has been the involvement of various foreign Islamic foundations, Islamic teachers and missionaries. Considerable external Islamic educational engagement has confronted ex-Soviet Muslims with Islamic teachings and practices which differed significantly from those learned from their ancestors. Among the most significant implications of ex-Soviet Muslims' re-integration into the wider *ummah* has been the advance of *Salafi* Islam, including that of a radical nature.

The level of post-communist Islamic activism and Islamic radicalization, in particular, have varied considerably from one ex-Soviet Muslim-majority region to the other. Defining factors have been the history of Islamicisation of a particular Muslim people, the extent of their exposure to Russian/Soviet political and cultural domination, the extent of their Sovietised secularisation, the ethno-confessional make-up of their habitat, the severity of official control and suppression and, more generally, the social and economic situation in a particular region.

The Volga-Urals region

In the Volga-Urals, one of Russia's economically advanced and resourceful regions, which is characterised by relatively high living standards, Islamic activism, including of radical nature, has largely been restricted to the sphere of ideas, providing issues for theological and intellectual debate, leaving the bulk of the region's 'ethnic Muslims', mainly Tatars and Bashkirs, unaffected by it. By the end of the 1990s local Muslim clerics admitted the creeping replacement of the traditional Hanafi *madhhab*, which for centuries had ensured Muslims' productive and peaceful existence within the non-Muslim state, by the more rigid Hanbali *madhhab,* which was better suited for homogeneous Muslim states and societies. This dogmatic

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radicalisation was due to intensive foreign Islamic involvement in the training of the younger generation of Muslim clerics during the 1990s. Most Muslim 'clergy' have rejected the ongoing *madhhab* change and favoured the actual, rather than declared, return to traditional *Hanafism,* which also included various ethnic and customary norms. The Muslim 'clerics'' position has been challenged, however, by some local intellectuals who associated traditional *Hanafism* with economic and political backwardness. Like some of their European counterparts, such as Tariq Ramadan and others, they have subscribed to Euro-Islam*,* which represents a comprehensive modification of Islamic beliefs and practices in accordance with the requirements of modern Western societies (Ramadan 2004).

However, the Islamic establishment and Tatar and Bashkir national elites have remained largely disengaged from the grassroots Muslim communities (*mahallas*). They have lacked unity and have been strongly dependent on the state. The Islamic 'clergy' have been weakened by the insufficient funding; the continuing conflict between "old" and "young" imams; the influx in the region of Muslim immigrants (Uzbeks, in particular) who favoured their 'ethnic' imams. Among the implications of the latter has been growing 'Russification' of Tatar/Bashkir Islam through the switch of the language of prayer from Tatar/Bashkir to Russian. Overall, the political and Islamic establishments have had a limited impact on the Islamic dynamic in the region.

Azerbaijan

In oil-rich Azerbaijan the Islamic re-awakening began within the framework of Azerbaijani national revival which was triggered by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the early 1990s. During the 1990s the level and nature of Islamic activism was largely determined by external Islamic influences (Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia). Since then the state has pursued a policy of tight legal, political and administrative control over Islam-related activities and has sought to maintain the Shi'a-Sunni balance as a safeguard against excessive Iranian influence.

Overall, the Islamic activism and Islamic radicalization, in particular, have been a marginal phenomenon. As in the Volga-Urals it has been linked to the religious training of young Azerbaijani 'clergy' either in foreign Islamic universities and institutes, or by foreign Islamic teachers at local Islamic colleges. In the 1990s the main providers of Islamic education for Azerbaijanis were Shi'a Islamic universities with funding from Iran, and the Sunni Islamic colleges and foundations of formally secular Turkey. The convergence of these two educational trends has resulted in the parallel development of non-political Shi'a and Sunni Islamic activism among some groups of younger Azerbaijanis. Of notable significance has been the continuing, although limited, 'Sunni-isation' of traditionally Shi'a Azerbaijanis. However, the intellectual position of most Azerbaijani Islamic activists has been congruent with that of the proponents of liberal Islamic reformism in the Volga-Urals and wider Europe.

Three main forms of Islamic activism could identified in present-day Azerbaijan. One is Shi'a traditionalism, represented by the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan under the leadership of Movsun Samadov (Shi'a). It has a limited appeal among young people. The second is Shi'a Modernism which is associated with charismatic young imams, such as Ilqar Ibrahimoğlu from the Içəri *Şəhər Cümə* mosque (Baku), and the like. It has a wider appeal among the young. The third form of Islamic activism is of the *Salafi* nature. Its main representative is the Islamic community of the *Əbu Bəkr* mosque under the leadership of Qamet Suleymanov (the mosque was closed in

August 2008). This form of Islamic activism has a growing appeal among young people both in northern Azerbaijan, and the traditionally Shi'a central Azerbaijan and especially Baku. It is significant that most Islamic activists in Azerbaijan adhere to non-violent methods.

The North Caucasus

In the late 1980s-early 1990s the central features of the Islamic revival in the region were the re-emergence of popular (Sufi) Islam, the fragmentation of the regional Muftiiate along political-administrative lines; the Islamic building and publishing boom; and the proliferation of radical Islam (*Wahhabism*) in Dagestan (Islamic Revival Party, Islamiyya, Islamic *Jamaat* of Dagestan). By the mid-1990s popular Islam, labelled as 'traditional Islam' (Sufism in the north-eastern Caucasus) was legitimized and 'non-traditional' (*Wahhabi, Salafi*) Islam assumed a role of protest ideology in Dagestan. This period witnessed a proliferation of Wahhabism from Dagestan to Chechnya and Ingushetia. The Russo-Chechen conflict acted as catalyst for 'Wahhabisation' of the Chechen resistance. In the late 1990s *Wahhabism* also spread to Kabardino-Balkariia and Karachaevo-Cherkessiia.

Since 1999 the Russian federal and regional authorities have applied tough military and administrative measures to suppress Muslim radicals (*Wahhabis)*. *Wahhabism* was officially banned. This, however, has had only a limited success and has not prevented the further development of an underground Islamist network throughout the region and the merger of radical Islam and terrorism (*Jamaats* Yarmuk and Shariat). Furthermore, in the past five to six years, the North Caucasus has witnessed an upsurge of violence of unprecendented levels. Whereas during the late 1990s and early 2000s, most of the fighting in the region occurred between Russian Federal Troops and Chechen separatist forces, since the mid-2000s, the neighbouring Muslim North Caucasian republics of Ingushetia and Dagestan have bore the brunt of the bloodshed. In the first ten months of 2009 alone, Dagestan witnessed over 180 attacks on high-ranking government officials, military servicemen, local policemen and religious figures, which resulted in over 100 people dead, and 150 wounded. In the meantime, Ingushetia has become the most violent republic of the entire region, with attacks on similar targets occurring almost daily and causing the death of hundreds of individuals. Violence of a similar kind has also engulfed Kabardino-Balkariia and Karchaevo-Cherkessiia, although at a much lower level of intensity. Chechnya, in turn, has seen a return of suicide bombers aiming at police officers, the military and government officials, after the revival of the *Riyad us-Saliheen* battalion by rebel leader Dokku Umarov in the spring of 2009. Despite the declaration of an end to counter-terrorist operations in Chechnya in April of 2009, violence in the republic is far from abating.

Most of these attacks have been conducted by Islam jihadist fighters, belonging to local radical Islamic communities or *jamaats*, who adhere to Salafi (pure) Islam and call for the establishment of an Islamic state in the Caucasus under *Sharia* law.

More recently, these fighting *jamaats* have become further radicalised and their aims and strategies have become closer to the global Islamic *jihadist* movement. Nowadays, there is a growing tendency among most, if not all, Islamic fighters in the North Caucasus to view themselves as part of the broader Islamic global *jihad*. They adhere strictly to key *Salafi* principles currently upheld by other radical Islamic groups worldwide, such as the concepts of *tawhid* (monotheism) and *takfir* (accusation of non-belief). Compared to the previous generation

of Islamic fighters who prioritized national goals, their successors have been increasingly influenced by 'global *jihad*'s agenda. Moreover, there is a rising trend among the various North Caucasian movements to be less ethnically-based and more pan-Caucasian in terms of objectives and organisation – as testified by the declaration of the Caucasian Emirate, by Dokku Umarov in November 2007, and the appointment of non-Chechen fighters to key positions in the resistance movement.

The Ferghana valley

In the early 1990s the major agencies of Islamic activism in the region were the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), *Adolat* (Justice), *Baraka* (Blessing), *Islam Lashkarlari* (The Warriors of Islam) and *Tawba* (Repentance), *Tablighi Jama'at (*emphasis on *da'wa)*; *Nurjular* (Sayid Nursi), *At-Takfir wa-l-Hijra* and some other small groups. In the 1990s the region also witnessed the proliferation of Sufism in the form of Naqshbandiyya (groups of Hazrat Ibrahim and Husaniyya), Rifaiyya and Qadiriyya *tariqats* (brotherhoods).

In 1996-99 a militant Uzbek-centred Islamist organization, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) under Tahir Yuldashev ('Faruq') and Juma Hojiev (Namangani) was the leading radical Islamic force in the region. The IMU prioritized political and military engagement rather than religious education and indoctrination. The IDU members portrayed themselves as *mujahedin* (Islamic warriors) waging a *jihad* against the rule of *kafir* President Karimov and the creation of an Islamic state in the Ferghana valley. Many of them underwent a combat training in *jihadist* camps in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Chechnya. The IMU militants used predominantly guerilla tactics against the Uzbek state and police employees and other official targets. They strongly relied on foreign support, especially from the Pakistani-based *Jamiat Ulema-e- Islam* (Assembly of Islamic Clergy) and later the *Taliban* in Afghanistan. The IDU's finances derived from its involvement in drugs trafficking from Afghanistan to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, hostage-taking, robberies and other forms of criminal activities.

Since 1999 *Hizb al-Tahrir Al-Islamii* (Party of Islamic Liberation) has been the major Islamist organisation in the region. (Smaller Islamist groups included *Al-Akramiyya* (1996); *Hizb an-Nusra* (Party of Victory (1999) and Islamic Jihad *Union* (2003) and Islamic Party of Turkestan).

It is possible to identify three main factors of Islamic radicalisation in the region.

1. <u>Economic and social hardships</u>

   - Drastic decline in living standards as a result of the reduction in arable land
   - The disruption of previously unified water system and the lack of state loans for agriculture
   - High unemployment: *de facto* over 30 per cent of the Ferghana Valley's economically active population, especially young people under 25 and women
   - High level of seasonal migration among men (to Kazakhstan and Russia)
   - Proliferation of drug-trafficking, prostitution and other illegal activities

- Severe restriction of movement within the Valley due to numerous border controls and customs. This has jeopardized the support networks which had played a central role in the well-being of many families
- Widespread resentment of actions of border guards and customs officers who supplement their meagre income by arbitrary customs fines on local traders
- Inaccessibility of higher education for the vast majority of impoverished families (compared to the Soviet period)
- Absence of governmental policies for the young and relevant funding analogous to the pioneer and *komsomol* organizations
- Creeping re-traditionalization of local rural societies and the social marginalization of its young people. The reverse of relative gender equality in favour of the relations based on male supremacy and domination. The rise in girls' early withdrawal from formal schooling, their early marriages and their subsequent confinement to the Islamicized household routine.

2. Political

- Lack of democracy and people's disillusion with the possibility of change through legal political process
- Resentment against pervasive corruption and inefficiency of state institutions
- Mass frustration with the reluctance of regional governments to address acute ecological and socio-economic problems of the Valley
- Repression by law-enforcement officers against Islamists and their sympathizers and heavy-handedness of border guards
- Official "anti-Islamic" foreign policies of governments of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and initially of Uzbekistan.

3. Theological

- Continuing predominance of poorly-educated 'traditional' Islamic clergy (over 90 per cent in the Ferghana valley)
- Theological incompetence
- Corruption and pro-government position
- Avoidance of a debate with Islamists on vital
- Socio-economic political and ideological issues
- As a result, a low level of public trust in them and growing attractiveness of *Tahriris* and other unofficial Islamic preachers and activists who offer ideological guidance and practical assistance
- *Islamists'* better religious education than most of traditional official Muslim clerics;
- *Islamists'* belonging to local clan and regional network and their ability to adjust their tactics and salvation message to particular local conditions
- *Islamists*' substantial material and financial resources which enable them to design and produce locally and in local languages their propaganda video and audio

materials, leaflets and other Islamic publications, as well as to provide welfare assistance to the most needy members of local communities.

Conclusion

In the Ferghana valley in Central Asia and North Caucasus, Islamism has transcended theological and intellectual discourse and fused with politics. Its patterns have resembled some Middle Eastern Islamist movements of the past. Thus, like Middle Eastern Islamists of the late 1960s, local Islamists rejected kafir (impious) oppressive political systems, which were 'camouflaged' by a democratic façade, as well as the pseudo market economy, that in the difficult conditions of post-Soviet transition, became synonymous with economic break-down. Echoing Sayyid al-Qutb and Mawdudi they regarded the sovereignty of God as the main criterion of an Islamic state (Kepel 2003: 372, 274). They believed that the creation of the North Caucasian, or Central Asian Caliphates would radically improve the well-being of the vast majority of its inhabitants through the dissolution of the existing political-administrative borders within the region and the replacement of corrupt and inefficient governments by fair and competent Islamic administration under Caliphate rule. The official suppression and imprisonment of local Islamists and their sympathisers boosted their martyr image as the only defenders of impoverished and desperate people, and contributed to their appeal amongst some disadvantaged and disillusioned young men.

At the same time the actual content of the Islamists' salvation message, as well as the forms of their activism, differed between the North Caucasus and the Ferghana valley. From the late 1990s Islamists of the north-eastern Caucasus, and from the early 2000s of the north-western Caucasus, have widely embraced jihadist ideology and merged with various pro-violence and terrorist organisations and groupings. An important contributing factor has been the diffusion of Chechen *jihadists* in the region as a result of the strengthening of the authoritarian rule of President Ramzan Kadyrov in Chechniia. Islamists have been either directly responsible for, or involved in sporadic attacks on, local militiamen and other representatives of various law enforcement agencies in Dagestan, Ingushetiia, Kabardino-Balkariia and other parts of the North Caucasus.

By comparison, members of the dominant Islamist movement, represented by the *Hizb al-Tahrir,* have maintained their strict adherence to peaceful methods of *da'awa* and to welfare provision to those in need. In this respect their activities have had much in common with contemporary Middle Eastern Islamist organisations, such as *Hamas* in Palestine.

It could be argued that there are major similarities between the dynamic and patterns of current Islamic radicalisation in Muslim regions of the former Soviet Union and the historical experiences of radicalism in the Middle East and other parts of the Muslim world. There are important parallels, for example, between what has been happening in the last decade in Muslim Eurasia and the spread of Islamic radicalism in the wake of the failed secular nationalist projects in Egypt and Algeria in the late 1960s and '70s.

Appendix 1

Major characteristics of post-Soviet Muslims

Population: over 60 million
Lingua franca - Russian
Doctrinal affiliation: the majority of the ex-Soviet Muslims are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi juridical school, although Chechens, Ingush and the majority of Dagestanis adhere to the Shafi'a juridical school of Sunni Islam; the majority of Azeris are Shia (Twelvers); there is also a relatively small group of Ismailis (Nizarites) in the Pamir mountains of Tajikistan;
Ethnic composition:
Turkic peoples (Uzbeks, Kygryz, Kazakhs, Turkmens, Azeris, Tatars, Bashkirs, Kumyks, Nagais, Balkars, Karachay, Meskhetian Turks;
Caucasian peoples: Chechens, Avars, Ingush, Dargins, Laks, Lezgins, Kabartay, Abkhaz, Adygheans, Abazins;
Indo-European peoples: Tajiks, Russians.
"More religious" peoples: Avars, Kymyks and some other peoples of Dagestan, Chechens, Ingush, Tajiks and Uzbeks;
"Less religious" peoples: Lezgins, Azeris, Tatars, Bashkirs, Kyrgyz, Kazakh and Turkmen.

Appendix 2

The North Caucasus

Social and doctrinal characteristics of 'Islamic traditionalists'

- Syncretic belief system (Islam, pre-Islamic beliefs, *adat*, Caucasian etiquette);
- Deep integration into the system of traditional community, ethnic, clan and family ties;
- Closed, localised nature and hostility towards *other* Muslims;
- Compliance with secular authorities;
- Interpretation of *jihad* as spiritual self-perfection of Muslims;
- Sufis as leading representatives of Islamic traditionalists:
    - Veneration of saints and sheikhs;
    - Practices of ziiarat, reading of the *Qur'an* at cemeteries, amulets and talismans;
    - Domination of pro-government Muftiiates.

Social and doctrinal characteristics of Islamic radicals

- *Tawhid* (strict monotheism)
- Rejection of Sufism
- Emphasis on *bid'a* (sinful innovation)
- Emphasis on *takfir* (accusation of non-belief) ; the doctrine of *at-takfir wa al-*
- *hijra*
- Rejection of *madhhabs* (juridical schools within Sunni Islam)
- Emphasis on the armed *jihad*
- Ultimate goal - an Islamic state.

Appendix 3

Organisation and ideology of *Hizb Al-Tahrir al-Islamii*

- Estimated number of *Tahriris* and their sympathizers between eight and twenty per cent of the population of the Ferghana valley);
- Pyramidal structure: primary cell of 5 members;
- Strict discipline;
- A monthly membership due (5-20 per cent of individual monthly income);
- *HT* ideology- *Salafism* (Islamic fundamentalism*),* but tolerance towards local "folk" Islam;
- Skilful attuning of the HT message to local needs and conditions;
- Goal – the creation of Central Asian Caliphate, based on the *shari'a;*
- Elimination of borders between Central Asian states;
- A fair government, justice for everyone, and an end to corruption and social inequality;
- Rejection of armed *jihad* and readiness for dialogue with authorities and Islamic officialdom.

Ethno-national and social profile of *Tahriris* :

- Uzbeks, Tajiks, Uighurs, Kyrgyz and others)
- Aaverage age; 25 years old
- Female membership
- Lower middle class