



REVIEW ESSAY

Islam in the Former Soviet Union

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A History of Islamic Societies (Second Edition)

Ira M. Lapidus

Cambridge University Press, 2002

HBK: ISBN: 0521770564 £80.00

PBK: ISBN: 0521779332 £29.95

pp. 1000 (including: figures, maps, bibliography & index)

Islam in Post-Soviet Russia: Public and Private Faces

Hilary Pilkington & Galina Yemelianova (eds)

RoutledgeCurzon, 2003

HBK: ISBN: 0415297346 £60.00 \$90.00

pp. 307 (including: bibliography and index)

Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia

Ahmed Rashid

Yale University Press, 2002

HBK: ISBN: 0300093454 £16.95 \$24.00

PBK: ISBN: 0300099509 £9.99

pp. 304 (including: maps & index)

Islam in the CIS: A Threat to Stability?

Yaacov Ro'i

The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2001

PBK: ISBN: 1862031150 £12.50 \$14.95

pp. 96 (including: select bibliography)

Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity

Brenda Shaffer

MIT Press, 2002

HBK: ISBN: 0262194775 £29.95 \$45.00

PBK: ISBN: 0262692775 £15.50 \$22.95

pp. 264 (including: map, bibliography & index)

Recent decades have witnessed an Islamic revival worldwide and few developments have sparked so much controversy and confusion. This review essay focuses on one region, the Muslim areas of the former Soviet Union (FSU). This territory includes the five Central Asian states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan; Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus; and the Muslim ethnic republics of the Russian Federation which houses the largest Muslim minority of any country in the European West – Tatarstan and Bashkortostan in the Middle Volga and the North Caucasian republics of Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachaevo-Cherkessia. The review covers five volumes which either focus on or incorporate one or more of these regions in their analysis.

As its title suggests, the 2nd edition of the seminal *A History of Islamic Societies* has a global comparative focus and my comments here relate primarily to those sections that deal with Islam in the Muslim ex-Soviet regions, particularly its expanded chapters on the Caucasus and Central Asia. Rich in information and analysis, it is a compelling and

monumental work. Yaacov Ro'i's *Islam in the CIS: A Threat to Stability?* is an excellent primer on the nature and role of Islam in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and argues convincingly that the politicization of Islam will become destabilizing only if the current hardline repression continues. Ahmed Rashid in *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* similarly contends that only by addressing the socioeconomic plight and political repression of existing Central Asian regimes will continued radicalisation be averted. A seasoned writer and observer of the region, Rashid incorporates ten years research on the area into an accessible and necessary account of militant Islam. The remaining two volumes each look at two comparative case studies: Hilary Pilkington and Galina Yemelianova's *Islam in Post-Soviet Russia: Public and Private Faces* compares Islam in Post-Soviet Dagestan and Tatarstan through a fascinating empirical study based partly on in-depth interviews with both the political and religious establishment (the public face) and with the masses (the private face). Brenda Shaffer's important and engaging *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity* looks comparatively at the same ethnic group, the Azerbaijanis, but as two groups who have been divided from one another for over 150 years with their most recent experience under the two different regimes of Iran and the Soviet Union. The creation in 1991 of the Republic of Azerbaijan out of the Soviet republic has further encouraged the sense of a collective Azerbaijani identity in both regimes.

A Diversity of Islams

The attacks on September 11 led to numerous publications on Islam and its relationship with the West. Two broad approaches can be identified: one that regards Islam as defined by a core of essentialist values and another that stresses the diversity rather than cohesiveness of Islam by exploring its varied political and social contexts. This dual approach, as Lapidus underscores, results partly from the twin processes of globalisation (which favours universalistic Islam) and fragmentation (which favours parochialisation of Islam). The five works reviewed here emphasize Islam's diversity and the need to consider Islam's varied roles and influences through the context of its relations with history, society, culture, politics, geopolitics and economics. Pilkington and Yemelianova argue that the confusion surrounding the popular debate in the West on Islam 'stems not so much from the demonization or even ignorance of Islam as from its *decontextualization* as a faith system.' (Pilkington and Yemelianova, 1) The works show how the popular use of the term 'fundamentalist' in Western discourse obscures rather than enlightens.

That there is Islamic revival in some places and emergence in others already indicates that Islam has taken several forms in the FSU. They range, for example, from popular Sufism (crudely, the mystical side of Islam) to reformist movements, such as Wahhabism, or Islamist movements with mainly political agendas (either reformist or modernist), and 'jihadist' movements which are radical and envisage the use of force. The official Islamic hierarchy, for example, is opposed by various forms of Islam. In many regions, Islam is part of a cultural Muslim identity and closely linked with nation-building projects. In others, praying at Sufi shrines has again become popular. Proclamation of a Muslim heritage has occurred overwhelmingly within the framework of a secular state, not an Islamic one. In Central Asia, we encounter 'a microcosm of all the varieties of Muslim belief, practice, and organization found throughout the world. The diversity of the Islamic revival in Central Asia means that no unified or politically decisive movement has emerged. Nor does Islam unify the various ethnic communities...' (Lapidus, 712) The five works illustrate this diversity, and emphasize how Islam is sometimes mainly a cultural component of collective identity, sometimes a deeply spiritual element, or, again, a belief used for political ends (in its most radical manifestations often imported).



Rashid focuses on the political uses of Islam, particularly on Islamist and jihadist movements. Ro'i demonstrates the diversity between the official establishment, popular Islam, reformist, traditional and Islamist forces. Pilkington and Yemelianova show empirically the stark differences between the Islams of Tatarstan and Dagestan, and also often between the public and private narratives in both cases. While in Tatarstan Islam has been a component of the national-cultural revival (a point also made by Ro'i), in polyethnic Dagestan, where no one ethnic group is a majority, Islam has served to divide rather than unite – despite private views that it could serve an integrative role. Overall, Tatar identity is 'largely secularized', as is Azerbaijani collective identity. As Shaffer explains, the 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan's 'clear separation between religion and state is consistent with the anti-clericalism and Muslim secularism found among both north and Iranian Azerbaijanis'. (Shaffer, 209) Roi points out that Islamic themes also surfaced in the programmes of secular movements, such as in Azerbaijan's Musavat, Kazakhstan's Alash and Kyrgyzstan's Asaba parties.

The Sources of Contemporary Islam in the FSU

Legacies, both pre-Soviet and Soviet, have shaped post-Soviet Islam. Yemelianova partly explains Dagestan's deeper religiosity in terms of the Arab conquest in the seventh century and the fact that by the sixteenth century 'Islam had become the religion of the majority of Dagestanis.' (Yemelianova, 88) Lapidus identifies three historical forms of Islamic society in Inner and Central Asia as: a) a component of popular identity and belief, but not the basis of social organization; b) a Sufi-organised or –governed society; and c) a state-organized Islamic society on the lines of the Middle East. In Inner Asia, Islamization, which started with the conversion of Turkish Inner Asian peoples in the tenth century, was important 'for the creation of politically cohesive ethnic identities among Tatars, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, and other peoples, and for the organization of long-distance trade.' (Lapidus, 201)

The Soviet era was also important in shaping the contours of the Islamist revival. Like the Ottoman empire, the Soviet regime kept a tight control on Islam, particularly through the Directorate of Muslim Peoples; its Muslim Board for Central Asia and Kazakhstan was the most important. Ro'i argues that '[T]hose areas where religious practice was intense in the past have retained this inclination since independence, and areas where the practice was less intense have remained the same.' (Ro'i, 12-3) He gives the example of the Fergana Valley in Uzbekistan and the south of Kyrgyzstan. Different Soviet experiences also contributed to the different post-Soviet Islamic outcomes in Dagestan and Tatarstan: 'In contrast to Tatarstan, where popular Sufi-affiliated Islam was undermined by the purges of the 1930s, in Dagestan unofficial Islam has been at the forefront of political and social life.' (Pilkington and Yemelianova, 270)

But history alone does not explain the diversity of contemporary Islam in Central Asia. Particular socioeconomic and political contexts matter. In comparing the influence of Islam on the policy-making process in Dagestan with Tatarstan, Yemelianova points to 'the substantially higher level of religiosity of the population; another has been the much deeper economic crisis, aggravated by Dagestan's close proximity to war-stricken and intensively Islamicized Chechnia.' (Pilkington and Yemelianova, 87-8) The strength or weakness of competing identities also explains the attraction of Islam. Rashid cites the weakness of Tajik national identity as one reason why Islam has been attractive: 'Tajikistan had no historical national roots because the Tajiks were scattered across Central Asia and the collectivization of agriculture had fragmented the clan structure.' (Rashid, 96) Various authors make the important point, however, that some Islamic practices now observed are perceived by the population not as an expression of their religious identity but rather as a form of social conservatism. In some settings, multiple identities are accommodated, as Shaffer underscores in relation to ethnic Azerbaijanis in Iran. Shaffer groundbreakingly demonstrates that Azerbaijanis have managed to

maintain a sense of collective Azerbaijani identity; this partly explains why Azerbaijanis in Iran are not predominantly more religious than their northern brethren in the Republic of Azerbaijan, because of the strong secularism at the core of Azerbaijani collective identity: '[W]hile there are certainly religious Azerbaijanis, as the vast number of Azerbaijanis in Iran's clerical elite shows, since the second half of the nineteenth century Azerbaijanis have also been in the forefront of Muslims who advocate a secular Muslim identity.' (Shaffer, 209) Azerbaijanis have also often advocated 'ideologies that bridge Shi'i and Sunni Islam, such as pan-Islam.' (Shaffer, 209) Shaffer's argument that Azerbaijanis have maintained a collective identity in Iran in her view challenges the mainstream view of contemporary Iranian studies which sees Azerbaijanis as a well-integrated minority in Iran and demands a separate assessment of Azerbaijani ethnic identity.

Islam and Politics

Ro'i and Rashid concentrate on the relationship between Islam and politics. Ro'i explains how until the 1970s Islam in the Soviet Union had been largely depoliticised. The Islamic Revolution in Iran and the civil war that broke out as a result of the mujahidin's counteroffensive against the Marxist regime which took power in Afghanistan in 1978 made the Soviet regime fear that Islam might become both an ideological competitor to Marxism-Leninism and a conduit for general socioeconomic and political grievances. By the mid-1980s the primary threat was perceived as emanating from Wahhabism rather than Sufism. First identified publicly in Tajikistan, Wahhabism was dubbed as both nationalist and reactionary.

Similarly today's regimes fear Islam might be used as a platform to voice general grievances. This fear has led to a wholesale condemnation of anti-establishment Islamic movements, and has often been used as an excuse to repress opposition or religious movements more generally. As both Ro'i and Pilkington and Yemelianova point out, only in Dagestan is there a genuine link with Wahhabism - even if the Wahhabis themselves prefer to call themselves Salafis. The role of politicized Islam, argues Ro'i, has been relatively small due to the general lack of charismatic leadership, divisions between the various groups and a non-committal national intelligentsia. Like Pilkington and Yemelianova, Ro'i states that Dagestan was generally considered the most Islamic of all the Russian Federation's republics and regions, but the Muslim organizations were unable to unite, their large number testifying to 'their fundamental weakness, their inability to consolidate the ranks of their target audience.' (Ro'i, 44). These divisions intensified with the growth of Wahhabism by the mid-1990s. The two regions where political Islam has played a role, however, have been Chechnya and Tajikistan, and Ro'i argues that 'Islam's politicization has emanated directly from the heritage of Soviet policy.' (Ro'i, 39) He adds that a third possible area is the Fergana Valley, but whereas in Chechnya and Tajikistan Islam has operated partly also within government, in Uzbekistan it remained in opposition. He argues that where Islam is found only in opposition, it is in a weaker position to influence the status quo.

Rashid discusses three militant Islamist movements that have appeared in Central Asia since the collapse of communism and explores how they emerged and how they gained legitimacy among parts of the Central Asian populations. In relation to the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), Rashid argues that the 'Tajik Islamicists - heirs to the Basmachis - are unique amongst militant Central Asian Islamic groups' because they combine various elements of Central Asian Islam which gives them greater legitimacy than 'other extreme radical groups' (Rashid, 95). The origins of the IRP go back to its all-Union parent, which Ro'i calls the most significant Islamic organization in the late USSR. (Ro'i, 28) The all-Union IRP had been established in June 1990 in Astrakhan, Russia, largely by Tatar intellectuals who sought to organize Muslims within the Soviet Union.



Under Gorbachev's *glasnost* the IRP registered as a political party but was then banned in the Central Asian republics and only the Tajik IRP continued to operate. The IRP became the focal opposition movement in the early days of the civil war, prompting Rashid to conclude that '[N]o other Islamic movement in Central Asia has ever been given such a chance at mass contact as Tajikistan's IRP was in those years.' (Rashid, 100) After the peace settlement of 1997 the influence of the IRP declined dramatically and Rashid concludes that by 2001 'Tajikistan had gone back to being fairly secular'. (Rashid, 112) The losses incurred by the IRP during the civil war had been too great for the party to retain its appeal or credibility.

Rashid secondly explains the puzzle that is posed by the Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami (popularly known as the Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT)). Despite its roots being in the Middle East, HT has the largest support base of any Central Asian Islamist movement – even if, as Ro'i cautions, the level of support of any of these movements is hard to gauge. Rashid claims that 'the HT's aims are probably the most esoteric and anachronistic of all the radical Islamic movements in the world today.' (Rashid, 115) Founded in Saudi Arabia and Jordan in 1953 by diasporic Palestinians, it aims to establish the caliphate. Rashid explains, however, that HT leaders he interviewed in Central Asia insisted that their methods are non-violent and have as their primary aim to win mass support through conviction and education. That the HT is alien to this region is further illustrated by its rejection of Sufism which is popular in Central Asia and its anti-Shia stance, thereby alienating the Shia communities in southern Uzbekistan and eastern Tajikistan. Rashid explains HT's allure (especially in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) in terms of its peaceful aims, organisational abilities, and criticisms of the region's governments who are perceived as unable to deliver socioeconomic stability and welfare.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) shares HT's aims, 'but the ways to achieve it are different, like one doctor uses surgery and the other uses herbs.' (Rashid, 132). Unlike the HT, IMU was born in Central Asia, and unlike the HT, its primary method is violence, its aim being to overthrow the Uzbek government. It began in the small town of Namangan in the heart of the Fergana Valley, led by two men in their early twenties, Tohir Abdouhalilovitch Yuldeshev and Jumaboi Ahmadzhanovitch Khojaev, who later adopted the name of his hometown and became Juma Namangani. Like HT, IMU has 'no respect for official Islam, no patience with tradition, and no fear of the political regime'. (Rashid, 139) Tajikistan's Tavildara Valley remains the IMU's most important base in Central Asia. The renewed Uzbek government crackdown in 1997 led to another exodus of Uzbek militants from the Fergana Valley. IMU also increased its links with international terrorist organisations, and U.S. officials subsequently claimed that Osama bin Laden was a primary financier behind the establishment of the IMU. The apparent attempt to assassinate Uzbekistani president Islam Karimov on 16 February 1999 in Tashkent, in which six bombs killed 13 and injured 128, provoked other Central Asian leaders to crack down on Islamic militants. "If my child chose such a path, I myself would rip off his head," (Rashid, 150), Karimov warned. Both Ro'i and Rashid give detailed accounts of the subsequent 1999 and 2000 IMU campaigns.

Rashid blames 'the rise of Islamic militancy' on imported ideologies. The multiplicity of outcomes in Central Asia alone, and in the CIS more widely, impresses that militarism is not inevitable. The relationships between politics and Islam have varied. Heads of state have used Islam to legitimize their rule; for example, they have made the *hajj* or at least visited Mecca and taken their oath of office on the Qur'an, while Muslim festivals have become state holidays. The main aim behind legal regulation, however, has been to restrict or prevent 'political organization on the basis of Islam.' (Ro'i, 54) Uzbekistan and Dagestan have been among the most repressive in this regard. Like Ro'i, Rashid holds the governments of this region accountable. To prevent the further radicalisation of movements like the IMU, he urges these governments to allow pluralism, even if he

understands that the regimes fear that the opposition this would generate might threaten their own power. Ro'i similarly argues that Islam in the CIS is a force but not a threat. That threat is likely to come from continued suppression of civil society, which stifles the channels of expression and is likely to radicalise Islam. The HT, states Rashid, should be legalized to discourage it from allying with more violent Islamic groups. He also places hope in Western governments: 'If the U.S.-led alliance succeeds in removing the threat of the IMU, the international community will be in a position to insist that the Central Asian regimes conduct themselves in line with international standards of democracy building, economic development and social responsibility.' (Rashid, 244) As elsewhere, then, one question remains: is radical Islam a consequence of socio-economic dissatisfaction (and thus can be mitigated through development) or is it defined by its existential aims (and thus cannot be satisfied through material change). The five works in any case provide a very convincing case for the profound need to examine Islam in its context if we are to begin to come any closer to an understanding of its various global manifestations.