

## How "Muslim" are Central Asian Muslims?

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## How 'Muslim' are Central Asian Muslims? A Historical and Comparative Enquiry

### Abstract

The article applies an integrated theoretical framework to analyze the social, political and symbolic functions of Islam in Central Asia corresponding to the present-day states of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. It argues that throughout history Central Asians developed particular Central Asian Islam which presented a productive and fluid synergy between Islam per se and their tribal legal and customary norms and Tengrian and Zoroastrian beliefs and practices. It is characterized by a high level of doctrinal and functional adaptability to shifting political and cultural environments, the prevalence of Sufism (mystical Islam) and oral, rather than book-based, Islamic tradition. These intrinsic specifics have defined distinctive Islamic trajectories in post-Soviet Central Asia which differ significantly from those in other Muslim-majority countries and in Muslim communities in the West. At the same time, the common Eurasian space and lengthy shared political history of Central Asians and other peoples of Muslim Eurasia have accounted for considerable similarities in their Islamic trajectories.

**Key words:** Central Asia, Eurasia, Russia, Silk Road, Nomadism, Islam, Sufism, *Jihadism*

## Introduction

Central Asia<sup>1</sup> - represented by the post-Soviet republics of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan – still remains rather poorly known and understood in the West. At the policy level the region has been associated with its abundant energy resources, especially on the territory of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, and its precarious neighbourhood with war-stricken Afghanistan and unpredictable Shi'a Iran. In cultural terms, Central Asian states have been largely perceived as part of the Muslim world which were comparable to Afghanistan, Pakistan and other 'stans' in terms of their economic development, social order, ethno-linguistics and the Islamic religiosity of its population. Such a narrow and functional approach to Central Asia among Western policy-makers, NGOs and journalists has been complemented by the relative thinness and patchiness of the region's scholarly coverage. Thus, the foci of English-language Central Asian studies have been contemporary issues, especially related to regime transition, energy politics and security, drug trafficking, and the so-called Islamic revival and Islamic radicalization.

The insufficient academic understanding in the West of Central Asia and in particular the role of Islam in it has been due to a number of reasons. One has been the domination of Central

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<sup>1</sup> Here the term 'Central Asia' is used in the narrow sense, referring to the five post-Soviet states of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. In the broader sense, the term 'Central Asia' refers to a wider region, which in different historical periods also included present-day Afghanistan, northwestern Pakistan, northern Iran, southern Caucasus, northern Turkey, northern India, north western China, Tibet, Inner and Outer Mongolia, and eastern Russia. In some studies the region is also referred to as Inner Asia, or Central Eurasia. See, for example, DiCosmo 2009; Erturk 1999; Sinor 1969 and Soucek 2000.

Asian studies, as well as other regional studies, by social/political scientists who favour theoretical robustness over ‘messy’ empirics, an approach that tends to dissect selective and often policy-driven phenomena by means of established and intrinsically Eurocentric theoretical models and paradigms.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, they largely employ deductive, quantitative research methods and rely extensively on secondary, rather than primary, sources in English and, to a lesser extent in Russian. This is not to say that there have been no in-depth and primary sources-based studies on Islam in Central Asia by a relatively small number of Islamic studies scholars, historians, anthropologists, ethnographers and sociologists.<sup>3</sup> However, those have often had a narrow geographical, temporal, or thematic focus which obscured the wider picture.

A second reason has been the post-Cold War influx into Central Asian studies of ex-Sovietologists and Kremlinologists and their trainees, who consciously or unconsciously continue to view **the Central Asian region and its constituent states as objects** of powerful external political and religious impulses, rather than as self-defined and self-contained **entities with its** immanent characteristics and dynamics. A third reason has been the general decline of funding for inter-disciplinary area studies (despite the rhetorical trumpeting of inter- and multi-disciplinarianism), leading to a reduction in the number of Western scholars fluent in Central Asian and other languages of various peoples of the ex-USSR who are

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<sup>2</sup> This, and other assessments related to the state of Central Asian and other regional studies in the West, is evidently subjective but based on the author’s experience of over two decades within Western academia.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Bregel 2003; Collins 2006; Crews 2006; d’Encausse 2009; DeWeese 2012; Geiss 2003; Khalid 2007; Kugelgen 2004 and 2007; Louw 2008; Meyer 2014; Peyrouse 2012; Privratsky 2001; Reeves 2014; Satoru 2014 and Tomohiko 2014.

capable of conducting in-depth empirical research in the region. The arrival in Western universities of a notable number of students from Central Asia has not significantly altered this trend due to their largely uncritical acceptance of Eurocentric political/social science theoretical models. Yet another reason has related to the practical, logistical and political difficulties, bordering on impossibility, of conducting both historical and contemporary empirical research on Islam in present-day Central Asia - especially in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and increasingly in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan - due to the authorities' tight control over the religious sphere and the local people's apprehension about any form of engagement in externally funded research on Islam-related topics.

The aforementioned epistemological **difficulties and** inadequacies have contributed to the emergence and recycling of a series of problematic perceptions and expectations regarding the social, political and religious development of Central Asia. Thus, in the early 1990s it was expected that the region would succumb to the political, economic and religious influence of its main Muslim neighbours (Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan).<sup>4</sup> Later on, in the wake of the rising Taliban in neighbouring Afghanistan, it was expected that the region would succumb to radical Islam, **including**  *jihadism*.<sup>5</sup> In the second decade of the 2000s there appeared predictions of the region's joining in the 'Arab Spring' and undergoing violent regime change.<sup>6</sup>

This article **attempts** to counter the prevailing compartmentalization of various cultural and socio-political phenomena of Central Asia through an inter-disciplinary integrated framework. It will treat Central Asia as a historically and culturally self-sufficient region

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Hunter 2000; Rashid 2000; Yavuz 2000.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Karagiannis 2010 and Rashid 2002.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Schmitz and Walters 2012 and *Government 2011*.

with its intrinsic characteristics and dynamics. At the same time it locates Central Asia within the spatial and cultural Eurasian context<sup>7</sup> and assesses the legacy of the Soviet transformation for its relations with some other parts of the post-Soviet space and the Middle East. It argues that historically, the culture and identities of various peoples of Central Asia have been shaped by four major influences. One is associated with the ancient Sogdians, who, long before the arrival of Islam in Central Asia, created a distinctive Central Asian cultural blueprint which persisted throughout history. The second relates to the lengthy domination of Central Asia and wider Eurasia by Turco-Mongol nomads. The third is to do with the arrival of Islam in Central Asia in the seventh century AD and the region's subsequent Persianized Islamization. The fourth is linked to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian conquest, followed by Sovietization in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since the disintegration of the USSR the Islamic dynamic in Central Asia has been marginally affected by the partial re-integration of the region within the wider Islamic world and the advancing globalization and digitalization of Islam.

### **The Silk Road and the Role of the Sogdians**

The Sogdians were an Eastern Iranian people who originated from Sogdiana, an urbanized and highly developed state, which in the ancient period and the Middle Ages existed on the

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<sup>7</sup> Here, the term 'Eurasia' is used to denote a socio-cultural area, rather than the much wider geographic region of Eurasia. It also differs from Russia-centred concepts of Eurasia and Eurasian ideology pioneered in the 1920s by Nikolai Trubetskoi and other Russian émigré intellectuals and re-appropriated and instrumentalized by post-Soviet Russian and Kazakhstani political elites. See more on ideological Eurasianism in Laruelle 2012; Bassin, Glebov and Laruelle 2015; and Bassin 2016.

territory corresponding to the Samarqand- and Bukhara-centred regions of modern Uzbekistan and the Sughd region of modern Tajikistan. Later on the Arabs named this region *Mawarannahr* ('what is beyond the river,' i.e. Amu Darya - G.Y.), while the Romans called it Transoxania ('land beyond Oxus'). Throughout their over fifteen centuries-long history, it was the Sogdians, rather than the Chinese, who acted as the main agents for the export and import of luxury goods along the Silk Road<sup>8</sup> connecting China to Balkh (Bactria), India, Iran, and the Byzantine and the Hellenized Middle East, on the one side, and to the steppes of Eurasia, on the other.<sup>9</sup> The Sogdian merchants were genuine 'go-betweens,' who brought to Central Asia a diversity of music, cuisine, religions and belief systems, including Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Christianity. They also acted as facilitators for the exchange and transfer of practical and scientific knowledge and administrative skills.

In the sixth century AD the Sogdians introduced Turkic nomads of the steppes to their first alphabet, as well as their administrative infrastructure (De la Vaissiere 2011:15). In the eighth century AD they brought paper production technology to the Middle East, and subsequently to Europe by optimizing the paper-making process which they learned from Chinese prisoners, who were brought to Samarqand in the wake of the Chinese Tan Dynasty's defeat by the Arab Abbasid Caliphate in 751 AD in Talas (in modern Kyrgyzstan). The Sogdian

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<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that contemporary geopolitical economic projects of the Silk Road, known as the China-driven 'New Silk Road Economic Belt' and the US-centred 'The New Silk Road' differ significantly from their historical predecessor in terms of geography and major actors and treat Central Asia as an object or a transit territory. See more in Devonshire-Ellis 2015; Laruelle 2015; Peyrouse & Raballand 2015.

<sup>9</sup> More on the role of the Sogdians in the Silk Road see in De la Vaissiere 2004.

paper-making know-how created the basis for the world's largest library of the Middle Ages – *Bayt al-Hikma/ Dar al-Hikma* (The House of Wisdom) in Baghdad (Nurulla-Khojaeva 2016). Thus, through centuries of multi-vector trade, economic and cultural activities, the Sogdians laid the foundation for the culture of religious and ethnic pluralism and adaptability to rapidly changing political environments.

The Sogdian **cultural input** formed the cornerstone of Central Asian identity which persisted long after the demise of Sogdiana in the eight century AD in the face of the Abbasid advance and the drastic changes in the Chinese imperial economy, which were triggered by the An Lu-shan rebellion in China in 755 AD.<sup>10</sup> In the ninth and tenth centuries most Sogdians, as well as the Khorezmians, Baktrians and some other of Central Asia's sedentary people who spoke eastern Iranian dialects, were included within the Persian-dominated part of the Abbasid Caliphate and subsequently became culturally and linguistically Persianized (i.e. switched from an Eastern Iranian to a Western Iranian language).<sup>11</sup>

The Sogdian legacy shaped the political culture of the Islamized Samanids who in 819-999 AD created their state in *Mawarannahr*, **which also encompassed the territories** of present-day Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan. **The Samanid state soon** acquired *de facto* independence from its Abbasid suzerains in Baghdad. Thus, while the Samanid ruling elite was Persian-speaking and affiliated to Sunni Islam its subjects included sedentary and nomadic peoples of Persian, Turkic and other ethnic origins, who adhered to Sunni or Shi'a

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<sup>10</sup> During the An Lushan Rebellion, 755-763 AD, the Sogdians joined the anti-Tan forces (Pulleyblank 1955).

<sup>11</sup> Compared to Tajiks, Pamiris of Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakshan speak an East Iranian language (Bergne 2009: 5).



Islam, as well as Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Christianity. The Samanids, like their Sogdian predecessors, encouraged the development of sciences and arts and their capital cities of Samarqand (819-892 AD) and Bukhara (892-999AD) rivalled Baghdad in terms of their advances in philosophy, sciences, arts and Islamic theology. They produced such great thinkers of the Middle Ages as Rudaki (858-941), Al-Farabi (872-950), Ferdowsi (940-1020), Al-Biruni (973-1048) and Ibn Sina (Avicenna, 980-1037) who made major contributions to the development of medicine, pharmacology, geography, astronomy, physics, mathematics and Islamic philosophy. A powerful reminder of the historical role of the Sogdians and Samanids has been the incorporation of the Samanid lineage into the nation-building project of post-Soviet Tajikistan (Dagiev 214: 127).

### **The Steppe Factor and the Turkic-Persian Fusion**

Another constituent part of the Central Asian culture and identity developed as a result of over five centuries of nomadic Turco-Mongol domination.<sup>12</sup> In 999 AD the Samanids were defeated by the Turkic-speaking Qarakhanids who arrived from present-day southern Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and western Xinjiang, and who established in *Mawarannahr* the Qarakhanid Khanate (999-1211). In the 11<sup>th</sup> century the western part of Central Asia was conquered by the Seljuks, the Oghuz Turks who came from the Aral Sea, and became part of

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<sup>12</sup> Despite the centrality of the nomadic Turco-Mongol factor in the political and societal development of Muslim Central Asia, as well as some other parts of Eurasia, it has not received due credit in historical studies on the region, which were largely based on written sources emanating from representatives of town-centred sedentary culture. The latter tended to highlight their cultural and political superiority over their nomadic counterparts (Masanov 2007:65).

the vast Seljukid empire (1037-1194), which stretched from the Hindu Kush to eastern Anatolia and the Persian Gulf (1037-1194). The Seljuk linguistic imprint is present in Central Asia's Oghuz-speaking Turkmen, as well as contemporary Turks and Azerbaijanis. In the early 13<sup>th</sup> century Central Asia, along with most of Eurasia, was included within the enormous multi-ethnic and poly-confessional Mongol empire (1206-1368), created by Genghiz Khan (1162-1227). In the 14<sup>th</sup> century the region became part of the Timurid empire (1370-1507), created by Timur (1336-1405), a Mongol chieftain who modelled himself on Genghiz Khan.

The lengthy Genghizid and Timurid domination emphasized the Eurasian dimension of Central Asia by creating considerable structural and cultural affinities between it and other Eurasian polities under extended Genghizid/Timurid control. In the political sphere the Genghizid/Timurid legacy manifested itself in the extreme concentration of power at the centre, the merger of the ruling clan with the state and the supremacy of personal relations between a ruler and a subject over any other relations, defined by institutional, social, or ethno-national affiliation (Masanov 2007:116). It accounted for the rulers' reliance on genealogical and kinship, rather than Islamic, mechanisms of legitimization of their authority and for people's acceptance of the authority of rulers, irrespective of their policies, personal qualities and their conformity with Islamic requirements for a good ruler (Babadjanov 2010:307). It was responsible for the persistence of **predominantly tribal identities among nomads and territorized local identities among various sedentary and urbanized Central Asians**. It also channelled state formation in the region along the lines of loose poly-ethnic and poly-confessional empires with ill-defined **frontiers** compared to the formation of the national sovereign states of France, England, Spain and other **polities** in post-Westphalian Europe (1648), which had clearly defined borders. The poly-ethnic and poly-confessional composition of nomadic empires facilitated considerable inter-ethnic and inter-confessional

tolerance and the relative political insignificance of religion, ethnicity and language compared to the dichotomy between nomads and non-nomads (Masanov 2007:95). This was quite different from the centrality of religion in contemporary Europe which witnessed Crusades, the Catholic inquisition and protracted Catholic-Protestant internecine warfare.

In the economic sphere the Genghizid-Timurid legacy accounted for the tribute-redistributary model between the centre and the periphery. The nomadic practice of individual ownership of livestock, alongside collective ownership of land and water, was translated into the extreme power of the state, embodied by the ruler, and the relative weakness of both private landowners and cities, which symbolized particular rulers' power and acted as merchant hubs- *bazaars* (trade markets). This model differed from that in contemporary Western Europe, where the economic power of states/monarchs could be, and often was, challenged by the Church, regional gentry, as well as by politically and economically strong cities, which enjoyed considerable autonomy from monarchs in the form of its representative bodies - the early precursors of civil society.<sup>13</sup>

In the cultural sphere the Turco-Mongol impact is evidenced in the linguistic and demographic Turkicization of most Central Asians (with exception of Tajiks and Pamiris), while retaining the Sogdian/Samanid cultural blueprint. From the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards, due to the Sogdian/Samanid and nomadic Turkic synergy, the initial differences in the way of life, culture and cuisine between the originally nomadic Turkic peoples, who spoke different Turkic languages (Turki/Chagatay, Oghuz and Qipchak), and Persianized sedentary peoples became blurred and many Central Asians acquired dual Turkic-Persian identities and spoke both languages. A case in point are the Turkic- and Iranian-speaking sedentary Sarts (Dagiev 2014:21). On the other hand, the sedentarization of Uzbeks and some other Turkic peoples of

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<sup>13</sup> For a detailed discussion of the Genghizid legacy see Yemelianova 2002:16-35.

Central Asia occurred in parallel with their cultural Persianization along Sogdian/Samanid lines. Thus, the Uzbek **leaders**, as well as some other Turkic rulers of the region, routinely employed Persian-dominated administrations (Roy 2005: 5, 6).

The Turco-Mongol and Persian Islamic **cultural synthesis** strengthened the distinctiveness of Central Asian Islam<sup>14</sup> and further distanced it from Islam in other parts of the former Abbasid domain. In this respect the ‘making’ of Central Asian Islam was quite different from that of other versions of regional Islam, for example, in Southeast Asia, West Africa, or even in Turkey, which were never parts of Arab Caliphates and were Islamized at much later periods. From the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards Central Asian Islam acquired physical and political boundaries as a result of the consolidation of the Safavid empire (1501-1736), the Ottoman empire (1299-1923) and the Chinese empire, first under the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) and later under the Manchu dynasty (1644-1912), which sought the annexation of Muslim-dominated Xinjiang.<sup>15</sup> On the other side, many centuries of common Turkic and Genghizid tutelage interconnected the politics, economies and cultures of the nomadic and sedentary inhabitants of Central Asia and wider Eurasia, including Russia, and therefore contributed to

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<sup>14</sup> Here the term ‘Central Asian Islam’ is used to denote distinctive and integrated Central Asian Islamic dogmas, beliefs and practices, which have notable differences from *Salafi* (lit. ‘of ancestors’) interpretations of the Islamic creed and practices, which are attributed by some Islamic scholars to the period of the first four hundred years after the Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>15</sup> The borders between Central Asia and China remained undefined until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Xinjiang was finally incorporated into China. Even so, until the 1930s these boundaries remained transparent and witnessed an exodus of Kazakhs and other nomads fleeing Stalinist sedentarization, collectivization and *golodomor* (death through hunger) (Abdakimov 2003:225).

their better mutual awareness and understanding, their ethnic intermingling, as well as their substantial mutual borrowings in the field of language, design, cuisine and beliefs (Golden 2011:89; Yemelianova 2002: 27). It made for the emergence on the territory of present-day Russia of a Mongolic- and Turkic- speaking population adhering to Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Tengrism, Shamanism, Judaism and Islam.<sup>16</sup>

The Iranian and Turco-Mongol **ethno-cultural** fusion also distanced Central Asia and wider Eurasia, including Russia, from Europe. In the period between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries - i.e. when Central Asia and most of Eurasia, including proto-Russia, were parts of the Islamized Genghizid empire - European rulers were engaged in the papally-sanctioned Crusades in the Levant. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe's geographical and political disengagement from Islamic Asia was supplemented by the development of a racial superiority complex towards Asians, especially Muslim Turks and 'Tartars,' as well as Orthodox Muscovites who were perceived as being on a par with 'Tartars' (Schimmelpennick 2010:2). These attitudes were conceptualized during the Renaissance and **Enlightenment** periods, when the foundation for the modern Western ideas of liberty, progress, human rights and civic society was laid. These fundamental differences were reflected in their respective historical narratives. Thus, most Central Asian and Eurasian historiographies emphasized the Irano-Turkic and Mongol cultural core of various peoples of the region represented by

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<sup>16</sup> Among Russia's Mongolian-speakers are Buryats, Kalmyks and Tuvans, while Turkic/Qipchak-speakers include Muslim Tatars and Bashkirs of the Volga-Urals and Karachay and Balkars of the North Caucasus and Oghuz-speaking Muslim Azeris in Daghestan, as well as in the post-Soviet republic of Azerbaijan.

Sogdians, Samanids in Central Asia and Scythians<sup>17</sup> in Central Eurasia and various Turkic peoples across Eurasia (Novikov 1998). By contrast, most European historiography anchored early European civilization in the ancient Greek and Latin heritage and treated nomads and Asians as an inferior *other*.

### **The Islamic Factor**

Islam was brought to *Mawarannahr* by Arabs in the seventh century AD when Central Asia was formally included into the Arab Caliphate. However, the pace and nature of the region's ensuing Islamization were largely determined by its inherent ethno-cultural and religious pluralism shaped by the Sogdians. It defined such Central Asian Islamic perceptions as the believers' equal acceptance of God's revelation and an individual's capacity and will to act, as well as a largely cyclic and contemplative, rather than progressive and critical, worldview. By the end of the ninth century AD Islam had become the official religion of **the Samanids**.<sup>18</sup>

**The aforementioned promotion and patronage by the Samanids of scholarship and arts was conducive to the development of Islamic theology in the region. It is worth noting that two out of six authoritative compilers of *hadith*<sup>19</sup> among Sunni Muslims were natives of the region. They were Mihammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari (810-70) and Abu 'Isa Muhammad al-Tirmidhi (825-92).**

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<sup>17</sup> The Scythian empire existed in Central Eurasia between the ninth century BC and the first century AD.

<sup>18</sup> See more on the Samanids in Frye 1975.

<sup>19</sup> *Hadith* (pl. *Ahadith*) is an account of Prophet Muhammad's sayings, or actions. It is regarded as the second, after the Qur'an, most important source of Islamic jurisprudence.

Of particular significance to the making of Central Asian Islam practiced was the contribution of local Islamic jurists. Among their leading representatives was the Samarqandi Hanafi<sup>20</sup> theologian Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (853-944) who, along with the Shafi'i theologian Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari (873-935) in Iraq, created the two main schools of Sunni *kalam* (Islamic scholastic theology). The *kalam* of al-Maturidi, later known as *Al-Maturidiyya*, developed in opposition to the Basra-based Mu'tazilite Islamic theological school, which prioritized reason and rational thought, and denied the eternal nature of the Qur'an.<sup>21</sup> By comparison, *al-Maturidiyya* significantly modified the creed of Islam and Hanafite doctrine by including in them elements of both the Mu'tazilite teaching and Central Asian non-Islamic customary norms and beliefs. As a result, *Al-Maturidiyya* asserted the supremacy of God in man's acts alongside man's capacity and will to act, and thus provided a doctrinal framework for the flexibility, adaptability and syncretism in Hanafi-based Central Asian Islam (Yemelianova 2010:214).

The combination of the Sogdian-Samanid cultural matrix and *Al-Maturidiyya* paved the way for the proliferation in the region of a Persianized, rather than Arabized, understanding of Islam. The former drew on pre-Islamic Sassanid political, cultural and musical traditions and prioritized Sufi (mystical) Islam. Sufis acted as the main agents of the Islamization of the Turco-Mongol nomads of the region. Furthermore, Central Asia produced some of the leading Sufi scholars and teachers in the Islamic world. Among them was, for example, the Turkic-speaking Ahmed Yasawi (1093-1166), the founder of the *Yasawiyya tariqa* (brotherhood), who was born in the town of Sayram, today a suburb of Shymkent in southern

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<sup>20</sup> Hanafism is one of the four *madhhabs* (juridical schools) within Sunni Islam. The other *madhhabs* are Hanbalism, Shafiism and Malikism.

<sup>21</sup> See more on Mu'tazilites in Martin 1997 and Choueiri 2010:2-3.

Kazakhstan. His followers played a central role in the proliferation of Islam among the nomads of the Kazakh steppe and in the wider Turkic world. Central Asia's prominent Persian-speaking Sufis were Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi (1207-1273), a native of Balkh in present-day Afghanistan whose followers formed the *tariqa* of Mewlawiyya, and the most famous Sufi of Central Asia, Baha-ud-Din Naqshband (1318-1389), a native of Bukhara, who acquired a global following as the founder of the Naqshbandi *tariqa*.

The nomadic essence of Genghizid-Timurid ruling elites further contributed to the pluralist outlook of Central Asian Islam, which absorbed other elements of paganism, nomadic customary norms, Zoroastrian, Tengrian and Shamanist beliefs and practices, as well as Nestorian Christianity. It also defined the supremacy in it of oral and ritualistic Islamic practices over scripture-based Islamic traditions. Among such Islamized, although originally pagan, customs were, for example, the hanging of pieces of coloured fabric on trees, the kissing of grave headstones, and the rubbing of dust over one's face (Yemelianova 2010:213). The nomadic heritage of many Central Asians accounted for the strong role of female Islamic authority<sup>22</sup> in regional Islam, which was personified by *otyns* (Sultanova 2014:130). It is also symptomatic that the major popular holiday in today's Central Asia is *Nowruz* (Festival of spring),<sup>23</sup> which in terms of its popularity and the scale and length of the festivities, much exceeds the main Islamic holidays of *Kurban-Bayram* (*'Id al-Adha*) and *Uraza-Bayram* (*'Id al-Fitr*).

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<sup>22</sup> This also applies to Russia's Tatars and Bashkirs where *abystays* (female Islamic authorities) enjoy a high social status (Yemelianova 2003: 74-75).

<sup>23</sup> *Nowruz* symbolizes, the cyclic nature of life and the contemplative world view (Babadjanov 2010:640). It is also widely celebrated among Azerbaijanis, Ossetians and Georgians in the Caucasus.



## The Russian Factor

The rise of Christian Orthodox Russia<sup>24</sup> as a major Eurasian power began following Ivan the Terrible's conquest of the Muslim khanates of Kazan (1552), Astrakhan (1556) and Siberia (1582), the splinter states of the Genghizid Golden Horde, which ruled over proto-Russia between 1240 and 1480. Russia's Genghizid heritage acted as a facilitator for her eastward advance.<sup>25</sup> By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. prior to Russia's sustained advance into the Kazakh steppe and Central Asia, Russia conquered the last Genghizid remnants – the Nogay and the Crimean Khanates and became involved in the geopolitical and military rivalry with the Ottoman and Safavid empires. **On the other side,** this rivalry was accompanied by their mutual trade, cultural borrowing, territorial delimitation and exchange of population, which were conducted on level terms. This contrasted with the nature of Europe's engagement with Asia, which from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards had been framed in Eurocentric and civilizational terms and accompanied by Christian missionary activism.

In the case of Russia, the introduction of some elements of civilizational discourse in her relations with her Asian neighbours occurred much later and was prompted by the drive by Peter the Great (1672-1725) towards Russia's symbolic Europeanization. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century civilizational attitudes towards non-Russian natives were particularly prominent in St. Petersburg's policies towards Central Asia, which were shaped by Russia's Great Game

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<sup>24</sup> In 988 AD *kniaz* (prince) Vladimir chose Orthodox Christianity as the official religion of Rus in order to juxtapose it with his major rivals Judaist Khazar Khaganate in the east and the Islamic Abbasid Caliphate in the south.

<sup>25</sup> On the implications of Russia's Eurasian expansion for the ensuing development of her polity and society see Yemelianova 2002:1-27.

with Britain.<sup>26</sup> Russia's Central Asian expansion received an impetus as a result of her defeat in the Crimean war (1853-56), which curtailed her territorial ambitions in the Middle East. In the 1860s Russia subjugated the Khanate of Kokand and transformed it into the Ferghana province of Russian Turkestan, which was established in 1867 with its centre in Tashkent. By comparison, St Petersburg chose to preserve the territorial integrity of most of the Bukhara Emirate and the Khiva Khanate as Russian protectorates, which were modelled on British and French treaties with various princely states in India and North Africa respectively (Khalid 1998: 15).

Russia's Eurocentric attitudes and policies towards and in Central Asia were largely of a superficial nature and did not override her inherent Eurasianism and her appreciation of the shared historical and cultural heritage of Russia and Central Asia (Schimmelpennick 2010: 239). It is symptomatic that even the Voltaire-influenced Catherine the Great had a profound respect for Islam as a civilizational force and chose to draw on the Ottoman *millet* system in her approach towards Russia's Muslims. In 1788 she introduced the institution of the muftiate in Orenburg as the agency of state management and control over Muslim subjects and encouraged the Islamic proselytizing activities of Tatars among 'unruly' and religiously syncretic Kazakh and Kyrgyz nomads (Mati 2012:37). In the longer term, Catherine the Great's Islamic policy, which combined Islam's legalization and 'nationalization,' cooptation and depoliticization, became the model of the Russian state-Muslim relations.

Overall, due to Russia's **intrinsic** Eurasianism, as well as her predominantly military and political (rather than social and cultural) domination over Central Asia, Central Asian Islam

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<sup>26</sup> For a detailed analysis of the Great Game and its political and cultural implications for the region see Horkirk 1992 and Sergeev 2013.

retained most of its key characteristics especially among the majority of Iranian-speaking Tajiks and Turkic-speaking Sarts/Uzbeks of the Bukhara Emirate and the Khiva Khanate. The Kazakh and Kyrgyz nomads remained Muslims in a socio-cultural rather than in a religious sense and continued to associate **mullas** with misfortune and disaster (Masanov 2007:121). However, Russian rule **facilitated**, especially through the medium of Russo-Native schools, the development among a small fraction of the Turkestani and Bukhara Muslim elite of a Central Asian version of *jadidism* (Islamic reformism),<sup>27</sup> whose leading proponents were Mahmud Khoja Behbudi (1874-1919), Abdurauf Fitrat (1886-1938) and Munawwar Qari (1878-1931).<sup>28</sup>

It is also important to bear in mind that Russia's exclusively Eurasian territorial expansion and her non-involvement in the European colonization of the Islamic Middle East, driven by Britain, France and some other European powers, accounted for the development there of divergent popular perceptions of Russia and Western Europe. They were particularly influenced by the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) between Britain and France, which divided the Ottoman Middle East according to their political and economic interests (access

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<sup>27</sup> *Jadidism* was a specific Russian Islamic phenomenon. It was pioneered by the Tatar Muslim elite in the 1880s in response to Russia's modernization initiated by Alexander II (1818-1881). It had some similarities with the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Islamic reformism of Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani (1838-97), Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), Rashid Rida (1865-1935) and Mirza Malkum Khan (1833-1908), which, however, developed as a reaction to modernity emanating from outside. See more on Tatar-centred *Jadidism* in Yemelianova 1997.

<sup>28</sup> See more on Central Asian *jadidism* in Khalid 1998.

to oil reserves), rather than along ethno-cultural and religious lines, as well as by the British-sponsored Balfour Declaration (1917), which laid the foundation for the creation of the Jewish homeland in Palestine, and subsequently, the state of Israel.

### **The Soviet Factor**

Although the Soviet period in the history of Central Asia has received comparatively more attention in Western scholarship,<sup>29</sup> it still remains to some extent a *terra incognita*. It has suffered more than other periods in the history of the region from a Moscow-centred perspective, which treats the Soviet Union as an empire and Central Asia as its colony.<sup>30</sup> This approach is responsible for a considerable misreading of Central Asia's internal and external dynamics,<sup>31</sup> which were largely congruent with the developmental trajectories identified earlier. Because of this congruence the Bolsheviks managed to secure their position in Muslim Central Asia and in other parts of the Russian empire by instrumentalizing patterns of power relations, social mobilization and cultural awareness which had been reproduced throughout history across the whole of Eurasia, even if they

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<sup>29</sup> Among in-depth studies of some aspects of Sovietization of Central Asia are Bennigsen and Wimbush 1985; Brower 2003; Fierman 1991; Kamp 2006; Ro'i 2000.

<sup>30</sup> On the critique of the Eurocentric approach towards Central Asia see, for example, Frank 1999 and Nurulla-Hodjaeva 2016.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Bennigsen and Wimbush 1985; and Rywkin 1982.

framed them now in Marxist terms.<sup>32</sup> Equally, they continued with Catherine the Great's model of state-Muslim relations and even developed it further.

Nevertheless, the pluralistic and adaptable nature of Central Asian Islam ensured its survival under conditions of state atheism. It acquired different forms and became dissolved within Sovietized national cultures. For example, some *chaykhonas* (tea-houses), bakeries, *doma kul'tury* (houses of culture), or other non-religious public places turned into undercover mosques with improvised *mihirabs* (a niche in the wall directed towards the Kaaba in Mecca). Muslims continued to conduct *ziirats* (visitations) to their Sufi *mazars* (shrines) now disguised as secular historical sites (Abashin 2015: 498-548; Salmorbekova and Yemelianova 2010: 216).

The effects of Sovietization varied among different Central Asian Muslims. In the case of sedentary Tajiks and Uzbeks, the Bolshevik assault on Muslim clergy<sup>33</sup> and Islamic infrastructure, as well as the change of alphabet from Arabic to Latin and finally to Cyrillic which occurred between 1925 and 1943, undermined the Persianized and Sufi-centred Islamic literary tradition and forced its bearers deep underground. Its transmission was secured by the efforts of a small number of surviving *'ulama* and *ishans*, who embodied

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<sup>32</sup> It could be argued that the absence of such patterns in Europe was one of the reasons for the failure of socialist revolutions in Germany in 1918 and Hungary in 1919.

<sup>33</sup> Given that unlike Christianity, Islam does not require an institutionalized hierarchy the article uses the Christian term 'clergy' in relation to *'ulama* (Islamic scholars), *qazi-qolons* (supreme Islamic judges), *shaykhs-ul-Islam* (supreme Islamic authorities), muftis, mullas, shaykhs, *ishans* (Sufi masters) and other representatives of Islamic authority for the sake of utility and simplicity only.

‘unofficial,’ or ‘parallel’ Islam.<sup>34</sup> They defied the Soviet authorities and ‘official’ Islam, represented by the muftiate of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM), which was established by Stalin in 1943,<sup>35</sup> and continued to teach Al-Maturidi’s version of Hanafi Islam in *hujras* (underground Islamic cells), which functioned across historical *Mawarannahr*. Their leading authority was Muhammadjon Rustamov, known as Hajjee Domla (Professor) Hindustoni (1892-1989) (Babadzhanov, Muminov and von Kugelgen 2007: 20).

Sovietization was especially detrimental for the Islamic identity of nomadic Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and Turkmen because of its organic intertwining with nomadism, which was destroyed in the 1930s as part of the wider process of sedentarization associated with Soviet land reform and collectivization (Masanov 2007:108; Khalid 2007:96). In the case of the Kazakhs, an aggravating factor was a huge influx into northern Kazakhstan of Russian and Ukrainian settlers during the 1954 Khrushchev Virgin Lands campaign. As a result, by the late 1930s the Kazakhs turned into an ethno-confessional minority in their republic.<sup>36</sup> All these factors led to the transformation of tribal genealogy into the key marker of the ex-

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<sup>34</sup> On complex relationship between representatives of ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ Islam see Babadzhanov, Muminov and von Kugelgen 2007; DeWeese 2002.

<sup>35</sup> The other three muftiates were the Ufa-centred muftiate which oversaw the Tatar and Bashkir Sunni Muslims of the European part of Russia; the Buynaksk-based muftiate which dealt with the Sunni Muslims of the North Caucasus; and the Baku-centred muftiate which administered the Shi’a and Sunni Muslims of Azerbaijan. For a detailed discussion of Soviet muftiates, see Ro’i 2000.

<sup>36</sup> According to the 1939 census, the Kazakhs made up 37.8 percent of the population of Kazakhstan (*Vsesoyuznii Perepis*’ 2016).

nomads' identity while weakening their Muslim-ness. Their oral Islamic tradition was irreversibly damaged as a result of the Bolshevik eradication of Sufis, who were the main transmitters of Islam among them, and their higher level of susceptibility, compared to sedentary Uzbeks and Tajiks, to the version of Islam promoted by the Tashkent-based SADUM.<sup>37</sup>

The theological position of SADUM<sup>38</sup> was ambiguous, however. On the one hand, its first mufti was Eshon Bobokhon ibn Abdulmajidkhon (1858-1957), a Naqshbandi<sup>39</sup> shaykh from Tashkent, and some other senior Islamic clergy claimed their adherence to Central Asian Islamic tradition. On the other hand, Moscow's particular hostility towards Sufism was conducive to the strengthening within SADUM of the pro-*Jadidist* and pro-*Salafi* lobby, who were influenced by the teaching of Shami Domullo al-Tarablusi (d. 1932), who came to Central Asia in 1919 from Lebanon via Eastern Turkestan (Safarov 2016). Al-Tarablusi introduced elements of Hanbali *madhhab* in his teaching. He gathered around himself a group of followers, known as *Ahl-i Hadith* (People of *Hadith*), who refuted Central Asian Islam as *bid'a* (sinful innovation) and called for the return to the Islam of Prophet Muhammad and the four righteous Caliphs and the use of *rai* (opinion) and *qiyas* (analogy)

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<sup>37</sup> Since the 1970s SADUM acted as the main Soviet muftiate which was the exclusive provider of Islamic secondary and higher education through its overseeing of the *Mir-i Arab madrasa* (secondary Islamic school) in Bukhara and the Imam al-Bukhari Islamic Institute in Tashkent. It also acted as an agency of Soviet ideological and cultural influence in the Middle East and other countries of the Muslim world (Eickelman 1993:7).

<sup>38</sup> Between 1943 and 1989 the SADUM was controlled by the Bobokhon family.

<sup>39</sup> According to some sources, he belonged to Yasawiyya *tariqa*. See, for example, Naumkin 2005: 39.

in the interpretation of *hadiths*. Among the adepts of Shami Domullo's ideas were mufti Ziyovuddinkhon ibn Eshon Bobokhon (1908-1982), who succeeded his father in 1957, and members of his close circle (Muminov 2007:254-6; Naumkin 2005:40-3).<sup>40</sup>

Overall, despite the historically relatively short time frame, the Sovietization of Central Asia, as well as of other parts of the USSR, due to its in-depth and comprehensive nature, radically transformed Central Asian politics and societies. It created the political, national, institutional, ideational and societal templates which maintain their validity a quarter of a century after the demise of the USSR. It further strengthened the Eurasian dimension of identity of Central Asians and turned them into the Central Asian type of *Homo Sovieticus Islamicus*, who largely subscribed to a secularized version of Central Asian Islam, and distanced them even more from their co-religionists in historical Eurasia, encompassing Xinjiang, Afghanistan, northern Iran and Turkey, and from Muslims in the Middle East.

The transformative and enduring impact of Sovietization on Central Asia (and on most of post-Soviet Eurasia) suggests that the Soviet Union was a unique historical and geopolitical phenomenon which could not be conceptualized entirely along the same lines as the British, French and other Europe-centred overseas empires. Although there were a number of features which superficially resembled those of European empires (e.g. the coercive

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<sup>40</sup> SADUM's pro-*Salafi* leaning was reflected in the curricula of the Bukhara *madrasa* and Tashkent Islamic Institute, which instead of the study of *al-Maturidiyya* and other medieval commentaries on *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) in Persian, focused on intensive training in Arabic, *tajwid* (the recitation of the Qur'an), *tafsir* (the explication of the Qur'an) and *hadiths* from Arabic primary sources (Khalid 2007:112).



sedentarization of the Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Turkmen, or the cotton mono-culture in Uzbekistan) the USSR substantially differed from them in terms of its much higher investment in Central Asia, the involvement of Central Asians in the central political and economic bodies of power and its promotion of national political infrastructures and cultures, as well as the inclusion of Central Asians in the nation-wide comprehensive and free secondary and higher education and health care. These major differences shed some light on why, unlike the British, French, or Portuguese empires, which fell apart as a result of sometimes lengthy and often bloody national-liberation movements in their colonies (e.g. India, 1757-1947; Algeria, 1954-62; Kenya, 1952-60; South Yemen, 1963-67; Mozambique, 1964-1974 and Angola, 1956-1975), the dismantling of the USSR, which occurred largely from above, was unwelcome to all five Central Asian republics at both the public and private levels.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Thus, publicly at the nation-wide referendum on the preservation of the USSR as a ‘reformed federation of equal and sovereign states’ in March 1991, Kazakhstan voted 94% in favour of the preservation of the USSR; Kyrgyzstan 96.4% in favour; Uzbekistan 93.7% in favour; Tajikistan 95.2% in favour and Turkmenistan 97% in favour (‘Ob itogakh’ 1991). Those results were largely congruent with the pro-Union position of the vast majority of ordinary Central Asians compared with their elites. (The author’s research findings within the Nuffield Foundation (UK)- funded project on ‘Islamic Radicalism in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, 2002-2005, and within the British Council-funded INSPIRE project on ‘Innovative Research and Teaching through the Academic Partnership between the University of Birmingham (UK) and the Kazakh-British Technical University (Kazakhstan), 2010-2013).

## **The Factors of Independence and Globalization**

The sudden dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 faced the elites of the five Central Asian republics with a difficult dilemma. They had to preserve social and political order and to create nation-states within borders which were imposed from above and which often cut across homogeneous ethnic communities. More importantly, at least for them, in order to stay in power they needed to generate a new legitimizing ideology that would replace the supra-national Communist and Soviet ideology. It is remarkable that four out of the five Central Asian leaders managed to achieve this, though with different degrees of success. Thus, the Communist Party's first secretaries Islam Karimov, (1938-2016), Nursultan Nazarbayev, (b.1940), Qahhor Mahkamov, (1932-2016) and Saparmuratov Niyazov (1940-2006) retained their top jobs by repackaging themselves as the Presidents of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan respectively and the leaders of ruling parties that were created overnight. They rhetorically denounced the Soviet past, while in fact preserving the Sovietized version of the Eurasian political and economic model. Saparmuratov Niyazov went even further by first self-appointing himself as Turkmenbashi - the leader of Turkmen - in 1992, life-time president in 1999 and in 2002 as *de facto* prophet who had received God's latest revelation in the form of *Ruhmana -The Book of the Soul* – while at the same time drastically reducing the role of the legislative and judicial powers (Peyrouse 2012:72; 82; 93).

In parallel, Absamat Masaliyev (1933-2004), the Communist Party's first secretary of Kyrgyzstan, was ousted from office by Askar Akayev (b.1944), a non-*apparatchik* and ex-president of the Academy of Sciences of Kyrgyzstan who aspired to break away from Soviet/Eurasian authoritarianism in favour of Western political liberalism, to advance the

development of civil society and civic, rather than ethnicity-based, citizenship. This political experiment was short-lived, however, and from 2005 onwards the political process in Kyrgyzstan has been increasingly defined by the Eurasian model, which received a further boost as a result of Kyrgyzstan's joining of the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015.<sup>42</sup>

Across the region the vertical executive power structures have been safeguarded, as in the Soviet time, by powerful national security forces, successors of the KGB, which have ignored the new states' proclaimed principles of people's sovereignty, the division of powers and government accountability.<sup>43</sup> Such structural political continuity has been accompanied by a radical change in the ideological discourse from supra-national Soviet nationhood to de facto primordial ethno-nationalism of the titular ethnic group which has been camouflaged by the constitutionally endorsed principles of civic nationalism. Epistemologically, this discourse, however, has been informed by Yulian Bromley's theory of *ethnos*.<sup>44</sup> In accordance with Bromley's notion of a nation the post-Soviet Central Asian leaders have mobilized archaeologists, historians and ethnographers to provide 'academic historical evidence' for their 'legitimate' claims to their post-Soviet territories

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<sup>42</sup> Following the 'Tulip Revolution' in 2005 Askar Akayev was ousted from office and fled to Moscow, where he reverted to his academic career as professor of mathematics at Moscow State University.

<sup>43</sup> See more on the post-Soviet transition in Central Asia in Cummings 2012; Olcott 2005; and Luong 2002.

<sup>44</sup> Academician Yulian Bromley (1921-90) was the leading Soviet ethnologist, the founder of the Soviet theory of ethnicity and nationalism, which emphasized ethnic, rather than civic, consciousness as the core element of nation-building (Bromley 2008).

and have imposed political, administrative and information barriers between ethnically and religiously closely related peoples of historical *Mawarannahr*.

The five new historical narratives have clashed over particular national ‘ownership’ of major political and cultural figures of the past. Thus, both the Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan leaderships have claimed the Genghizid roots of their respective nations with the Uzbekistani elite emphasizing their Timurid, rather than Shaybanid Uzbek origins,<sup>45</sup> while the Tajikistan leadership (since 1992 under Emomali Rahmon, b.1952) asserted the Sogdian/Samanid origins of present-day Tajiks (Dagiev 2014:72). The Kyrgyz elite has chosen heroes of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Kyrgyz epic *Manas* as their ethnic forebears (Sultanova 2014: 22), while the Turkmen elite opted for the heroes of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century epic *Koroghlu* (Peyrouse, 2012: 59). It is significant that all post-Soviet Central Asian political elites have derived their historical legitimacy from their pre-Islamic or semi-Islamic nomadic, or urbanized ancestors, rather than from major Islamic figures associated with the region’s Islamicization by Arabs in the seventh century AD and its subsequent inclusion within Arab Islamic Caliphates, centred in Medina (632-662), Damascus (661-750) and Baghdad (750-1258). By contrast, famous Central Asian Islamic thinkers, e.g. Al-Bukhari, Al-Farabi, or great Sufi teachers - e.g. Khoja Ahmed Yasawi and Baha-ud-Din Naqshband

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<sup>45</sup> Between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries the nomadic Shaybanid Turco-Mongol Persianized empire existed on the territory of present-day Central Asia and parts of Afghanistan and Iran. Shaybanids were the first to assume the name of Uzbeks after Uzbek Khan (1282-1341), the longest reigning khan of the Golden Horde. In the 1460s the Shaybanid empire split into two parts as a result of the rebellion of Janybek Khan (d.1480) against Abu Khayr Khan (1412-1468) (Soucek 2000:149-161; Masanov 2007:98-100).

- have been turned into cultural, rather than Islamic, national symbols (Yemelianova 2014: 292).

In general, the relationship with Islam of both the post-Soviet Central Asian elites and the wider public has been unhappy. On the surface it appears that all the Central Asian republics, like other post-Soviet Muslim-majority regions, have experienced an Islamic revival which was triggered by the end of official atheism and the restoration of their links with the wider Islamic world. Islamic symbols have been integrated in the five nationalizing discourses to ensure a cultural break from historically Orthodox Christian Russia. The republics witnessed an unprecedented Islamic building boom, resulting in the emergence of many hundreds of mosques, *madrasas*, as well as Islamic and Islamo-national political parties and social organizations. In the first years of independence Central Asian parliaments, except in Turkmenistan, adopted new and liberal religious laws which provided a framework for various Islam-related activities, including a many-fold increase in the number of *hajjees* (pilgrims) to Mecca and Medina. They also welcomed the activities of foreign Islamic funds, preachers and teachers from Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Egypt, Turkey and other Muslim countries. The leaders of the republics endorsed the formation of national muftiates which split from the Soviet era Tashkent-based SADUM and secured membership of their respective states in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).<sup>46</sup>

It could be argued, however, that the Islamic revival has been more symbolic than genuine in nature. In practice, and especially from the mid-1990s onwards, official policies towards

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<sup>46</sup> See more on Islamic trajectories in post-Soviet Central Asia in Sagdeev and Eisenhower 2000; Naumkin 2005; Khalid 2007 and Yemelianova 2010.

Islam and Muslims have been congruent with the imperial Russian/Soviet approach outlined earlier.<sup>47</sup> The geographical closeness of Central Asia to Taliban-infiltrated Afghanistan has been behind the particularly tough state crackdown on political Islam and other forms of ‘unofficial Islam.’ Among the main government targets have been members and sympathizers of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and its successor the Islamic Movement of Turkestan (IMT), *Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islamii* (Party of Islamic Liberation, HT), the *Jund al-Khalifat* (Soldiers of Caliphate, JK) and the Islamic state of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) which were banned in all five republics.<sup>48</sup> At the societal level, Central Asian Muslims at large have remained aloof from the global jihadist mobilization message and maintained their allegiance to the Soviet-era legacy of secularism, intertwined with Central Asian Islam, important features of which have been disengagement from politics, the merger with Genghizid *adats* (customary norms), Zoroastrian and Tengrian beliefs and rituals and strong oral Sufi and musical traditions intertwined with shamanism.<sup>49</sup> This resilience of

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<sup>47</sup> This is confirmed by the author’s comparative analysis of Islamic trajectories in post-Soviet Islamic space. See Yemelianova 2010.

<sup>48</sup> For more on these organizations, see in Karagiannis 2010; Naumkin 2005; Rashid 2002; Tuckers 2016 and Karin 2016.

<sup>49</sup> This conclusion is based on my field-work findings in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in the period between 1999 and 2014, as well as findings of other scholars who conducted empirical research in the region (Heathershaw and Montgomery 2014; Khamidov 2013; Louw 2008; Montgomery 2007; Rasanayagam 2011; Salmorbekova&Yemelianova 2010).

Central Asian Islam has been under-emphasized because of the focus of Western scholarship and media on Central Asian Islamists.<sup>50</sup>

However, Central Asia has not been entirely immune to Islamic radicalism, as evidenced by IRPT, IMU, IMT, HT, JK and the ISIL *Khorasan Vilayet* (Khorasan Province), which numbers between several hundreds and a few thousands.<sup>51</sup> There have been a few Islamist enclaves in the Ferghana valley, as well as in western Kazakhstan. However, the factors of Islamic radicalization, as well as the mobilizing narratives that have been employed there, have differed significantly from those in both the Middle East and the West. They have been determined primarily by domestic issues, such as economic hardship, lack of opportunities, the pervasive corruption of local authorities, and the heavy-handedness of the police and security services. My findings have also revealed that most local Islamists and their sympathizers were not seriously concerned with major radicalizing issues among Muslims in the Middle East and the West, such as the Western policies in the Middle East, including the Western support of Israel against the Palestinians, or the perceived cultural offence and discrimination related to Islamic dress, or the mocking/ caricaturing of the Prophet Muhammad in publicly available publications, arts exhibitions and theatre

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<sup>50</sup> For a critique of the Western academic preoccupation with Islamic radicalism and *jihadism* in Central Asia see Heathershaw and Montgomery 2014.

<sup>51</sup> According to the data of the CSCE in Europe, in 2015 among ISIL fighters there were 500 Uzbeks, 360 Turkmen, 250 Kazakhs and 100 Kyrgyz (Hearing 2015:43). Other sources suggest that in 2015 the total number of Central Asian ISIL fighters was around 4,000 (Malashenko 2015 and Tucker 2016).

(Yemelianova 2010:239-240). This is not to say that there has been no Central Asian *jihadists* who did embrace the global *jihadist* message. However, the number of those was limited. Some of them were trained in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border zone by *jihadist* instructors, many of whom originated from Muslim communities in Europe, while some others had predominantly a virtual existence.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, in relative terms, the number of Central Asians fighting within ISIL has been much lower than the number of European *jihadists*. Thus, out of around 25,000 foreign ISIL fighters Central Asian *jihadists* constitute only a tiny minority of the total Muslim population. Even if we accept the highest possible estimate of around 4,000 Central Asian *jihadists* fighting in Syria and Iraq, this will make up around 0.006 % of the total population of Muslim Central Asia of 66 million.<sup>53</sup> This is incomparably lower than the number of Western European *jihadists* who joined ISIL. For example, Belgium-born ISIL fighters constitute around 0.9% of the total Muslim population of Belgium of 672,000; ISIL fighters coming from Sweden constitute 0.06 % of the total Muslim population of Sweden of 0.5m;

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<sup>52</sup> Among the latter were, for example, members of so called the *Kazakh Islamic Jihad*, the *Jaysh al-Mahdi* (Army of Mahdi), *Jamaat Ansarullah* (Community of Supporters of Allah), *Imam Bukhari Jamaat* (Community of Imam Bukhari), *Sabiri Jamaat* (Sabiri Community).

See Karin 2016: 84, 133,142,153.

<sup>53</sup> For comparison, the number of Russia's Muslims (mainly of Caucasian and Tatar origins) fighting for ISIL is estimated to be between 4,000 and 7,000 out of a total Muslim population of around 20 m; the number of Azerbaijani *jihadists* is around 500 out of a total Muslim population of 9 m and the number of Georgia's *jihadists* (mainly Chechens from the Pankisi gorge) is around 400 out of a total Muslim population of 0.3m (Burchuladze 2015; Yarlykapov 2015).



French-born ISIL fighters make up 0.03% of the total Muslim population of France of 4.5m; and UK-born *jihadists* also constitute 0.03% of the total UK Muslim population of 2.7m (*Number of Fighters* 2016). Also, many Central Asian ISIL fighters, with the exception of Kazakhs (ISIS 2014; Karin 2016), came not from Central Asia per se, but from Central Asian immigrant communities in non-Muslim regions. The cases in point are some Uzbek, Tajik and other Central Asian labour migrants in the Russian-majority Urals<sup>54</sup> who became radicalized as a result of their socio-cultural segregation and discrimination which was not dissimilar to that among various Muslim migrants in the West.

## **Conclusion**

Central Asian Islam was shaped by the Sogdian/Samanid-Genghizid- *Al-Muturidiyya* cultural and Islamic influences. It has been characterized by the predominance in it of the Sufi tradition, its intertwining with pre-Islamic Shamanist, Zoroastrian and Tengrian beliefs, Islamized Sasanid rituals and Genghizid *adats*, as well as by its apolitical, flexible and adaptable nature. For this reason, compared to Islam in the Islamic heartland with its centres in Mecca, Medina, Damascus and Baghdad, it has not played the key role in the legitimization of political authority of Central Asian rulers, who prioritized genealogy over Islamic law, and it has only rarely served as a mobilizing political ideology (for example, as in the Basmachi movement in the 1920s and 1930s) in Central Asians' numerous conflicts with external invaders.

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<sup>54</sup> On Islamic radicalization of Central Asian labour migrants in the Urals see Malashenko and Starostin 2015.

The shared Genghizid legacy smoothed the governance of Central Asia by imperial and Bolshevik Russia and enabled the later to extrapolate to Central Asia the Russian model of state-Muslim relations, created by Catherine the Great. It included the promotion of state-sponsored apolitical ‘official’ Islam, the suppression of any other forms of ‘unofficial’ Islam and the segregation of home Muslims from their co-religionists abroad. This model has maintained its centrality after the dissolution of the USSR, although ‘official’ Islam has been widely rebranded as ‘traditional’ Islam, and ‘unofficial’ Islam as ‘untraditional’ Islam. Since the late 1990s, and especially in the wake of 9/11, the Central Asian official discourse on ‘untraditional’ Islam has been securitized and criminalized along the same lines as the Russian official discourse, which arguably has been of considerable influence across Muslim Eurasia.

Along the same lines, Central Asian Islam has largely retained its disengagement from Islamist trajectories in both the Middle East and the West, though its historical disengagement from politics has been increasingly challenged by the continuing socio-economic hardships and political repression within particular Central Asian republics, as well as by the greater digital exposure of young Central Asians to Islamic messages emanating from outside the region. Particularly susceptible to these messages have been Uzbek and Tajik labour migrants in Russia and other non Muslim-majority countries, as well as Kazakhs and Kyrgyz within their respective republics whose Islamic identity was destroyed, or at least severely undermined, by their Soviet sedentarization. This also explains a larger number of conversions among them to Protestantism (Pentecostalism, Evangelical Christianity, Baptism, Methodism, etc), compared to that among the Uzbeks

and Tajiks.<sup>55</sup> In the long term, the perpetuation of distinctive Central Asian Islam will be determined by the ability of Central Asian political elites to ensure the viable social, economic and political development of their respective countries, to overcome nationalist isolationism and to restore a full-fledged societal and political interaction across Central Asia and the wider post-Genghizid Eurasia. As for scholarship, I am arguing that an adequate understanding of contemporary Central Asian Islam and Muslims must be informed by an approach that avoids mono-theoretical compartmentalization and recognizes the significance of their historical, theological and Eurasian contextualization.

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