



## A HISTORY OF ISLAM IN CENTRAL ASIA

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**Abstract:** Islam is the most widely practiced religion in Central Asia. The Hanafi school of thought of Sunnism is the most popular, with Shiism of Imami and Ismaili denominations predominating in the Pamir plateau and the western Tian Shan mountains (almost exclusively Ismailis), while boasting to a large minority population in the Zarafshan river valley, from Samarkand to Bukhara (almost exclusively Imamis). Islam came to Central Asia in the early part of the 8th century as part of the Muslim conquest of the region. Many well-known Islamic scientists and philosophers came from Central Asia, and several major Muslim empires, including the Timurid Empire and the Mughal Empire, originated in Central Asia. In the 20th century, severe restrictions on religious practice were enacted by the Soviet Union in Soviet Central Asia and the People's Republic of China in Xinjiang. Concerns about Islamic radicalism and religious freedom in the region persist to this day.

**Key words:** Islam, Islamic History, Islamic Civilization, Asia, Islam in Asia.

### I. Introduction

The history of Islam concerns the religion of Islam and its adherents, Muslims. Muslim is an Arabic word meaning one who submits to God. Muslims and their religion have greatly impacted the political, economic and military history of the Old World, especially the Middle East, where its roots lie. Though it is believed by non-Muslims to have originated in Mecca and Medina, Muslims believe that the religion of Islam has been present since the time of the prophet Adam. The Islamic world expanded to include people of the Islamic civilization, inclusive of non-Muslims living in that civilization. In pre-Islamic Arabia, Arab people lived on the Arabian Plate. [6] The Battle of Talas in 751 between the Abbasid Caliphate and the Chinese Tang Dynasty for control of Central Asia was the turning point initiating mass conversion into Islam in the region. Most of the Turkic khanates were converted to Islam in the 10th century [2]. The arrival in Volga Bulgaria of the of Ahmad ibn Fadlan, ambassador of the caliph of Badhdad, on 12 May 922 is celebrated as a holiday in modern-day Tatarstan. Islamisation of the region has had profound impact on the native cultures in the region moulding them as a part of Islamic civilization. Islamisation in the region has also had the effect of blending Islam into native cultures, creating new forms of Islamic practices, known as folk Islam, the most prominent proponent of which was Khoja Akhmet Yassawi who's Sufi Yeseviye sect appealed greatly to local nomads. Some have proclaimed that Yassawi was a Khwajagan, however some scholars insist that his influence on the Shi'a Alevi and Bektashi cannot be underestimated. Until the Mongol invasion of Central Asia in the 13th century, Samarkand, Bukhara and Urgench flourished as centers of Islamic learning, culture and art in the region. Mongol invasion halted the process for a half century. Other areas such as Turkistan became more strongly influenced by Shamanist elements which can still be found today [1]. Central Asian Islamic scientists and philosophers, including Al-Khwarzimi, Abu Rayhan Biruni, Farabi, and Avicenna made an important impact on the development of European science in the ensuing centuries. Turko-Mongolian tribes almost as whole were slow to accept certain Islamic tenets, such as giving up the consumption of alcohol or bathing before prayer. This is, however believed to relate more directly to their nomadic lifestyle and local tradition than their faith in God and devotion to Islamic law and text [5].

### II. Pre-Islam Era

The first people known to have occupied Central Asia were Iranian nomads who arrived from the northern grasslands of what is now Uzbekistan sometime in the first millennium B.C. At this time, cities such as Bukhara (Bukhara) and Samarqand (Samarkand) began to appear as centres of government and culture. By the fifth century B.C., the Bactrian, Soghdian, and Tokharian states dominated the region. As China began to develop its silk trade with the West, Iranian cities took advantage of this commerce by becoming centres of trade. Using an extensive network of cities and settlements in the province of Mawarannahr (a name given the region after the

Islamic victories) in Uzbekistan and farther east in what is today China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, the Soghdian intermediaries became the wealthiest of these Iranian merchants. Because of this trade on what became known as the Silk Route, Bukhoro and Samarqand eventually became extremely wealthy cities, and at times Mawarannahr was one of the most influential and powerful Persian provinces of antiquity. The dominant religion until the 6th Century in the region was Zoroastrianism, but Buddhism, and Christianity also attracted large numbers of followers. The wealth of Mawarannahr was a constant magnet for invasions from the northern steppes and from China. Numerous intraregional wars were fought between Soghdian states and the other states in Mawarannahr, and the Persians and the Chinese were in perpetual conflict over the region. Alexander the Great conquered the region in 328 B.C., bringing it briefly under the control of his Macedonian Empire [9].

### **III. The Arrival of Islam**

However it was not the wealth of the region that attracted the first Muslims to Central Asia but the drive to seek the pleasure of Allah (SWT) by conveying the message of truth - Al Islam. The opening of Central Asia and the implementation of Islam was completed in the eighth century A.D. and brought to the region a new belief and culture that until now continues to be dominant. The Muslims first entered Mawarannahr in the middle of the seventh century through raids during their conquest of Persia. The Soghdians and other Iranian peoples of Central Asia were unable to defend their land against the Khilafah because of internal divisions and the lack of strong indigenous leadership. The Muslims, on the other hand, were led by a brilliant general, Qutaybah ibn Muslim, and were highly motivated by the desire to spread the Islamic ideology. Because of these factors, and the strength of the Islamic aqeedah and the nature of the Shariah, the population of Mawarannahr was easily liberated [3]. The new way of life brought by the Muslims spread throughout the region. The native cultures were replaced in the ensuing centuries as Islam moulded the people into a single ummah - the Islamic ummah. However the destiny of Central Asia as an Islamic region was firmly established by the Khilafah's (Caliph Abu'l-Abbas) victory over the Chinese armies in 750 in a battle at the Talas River. Under Islamic rule, Central Asia was an important centre of culture and trade for centuries. The language of government, literature, and commerce, originally Persian became Arabic (however as the Abbasid Caliphate began to weaken and Arabic became neglected, the Persian language began to regain its pre-eminent role in the region as the language of literature and government). Mawarannahr continued to be an important political player in regional affairs. During the height of the Abbasid Caliphate in the eighth and the ninth centuries, Central Asia and Mawarannahr experienced a truly golden age. Bukhoro became one of the leading centres of learning, culture, and art in the Muslim world, its magnificence rivalling contemporaneous cultural centres such as Baghdad, Cairo, and Cordoba. Some of the greatest historians, scientists, and geographers in the history of Islamic culture were natives of the region, and one of the copies of the Noble Quran originally prepared in the time of Caliph Uthman is kept in Tashkent. The new Islamic spiritual and political situation in Central Asia determined a new technological and cultural progress. It marked the production of the Samarkand paper (since the 8th century under the Chinese influence the people of Samarkand learned to manufacture paper from the rags), which supplanted papyrus and parchment in the Islamic countries at the end of the 10th century. Furthermore scientists who were citizens of the Khilafah such as al-Khorezmi, Beruni, Farabi, Abu Ali ibn Sino (Avicenna) brought fame to the area all over the world, generating respect across the world, and many scientific achievements of the epoch made a great impact on the European science (it is enough to mention the astronomical tables of Samarkand astronomers from Ulughbek's observatory). During the comparatively peaceful era of Islamic rule, culture and the arts flourished in Central Asia. Jizya was imposed upon all who refused to accept Islam and the Jewish historian Benjamin of Tudela noted during his travels in 1170 the existence of a Jewish community numbering 50,000 in nearby Samarkand [8].

### **IV. Islam under the Soviet Union**

The American campaign against Afghanistan has thrust the region of Central Asia into the media spotlight. Despite the region's independence in 1991, interest in this area of the world has largely been confined to governments, academics, companies and organizations such as NATO. The article briefly examines the history of this Islamic region under the Soviet; the impact of Gorbachev and his reforms, culminating in the independence of the region in 1991[4].

### **V. Soviet Rule in Central Asia**

The Communist authorities of the Soviet Union (1917-1991) inherited Central Asia from the old Tsarist Empire which collapsed during the First World War. In spite of the political turmoil which existed within the former Tsarist Empire, heightened by the Civil War which followed, the newly created Communist regime did not allow the Central Asian region to escape its clutches. The peoples of Central Asia did not suffer repression at the hands of Soviet Communism because they were Uzbeks or Tajiks, rather, it was because they were Muslims [11]. The Communists viewed Islam with hostility and suspicion and subjected the Muslims of the Soviet Union to countless secularisation campaigns. They also tried to replace the regions Islamic identity and loyalty, with

ethnically created republics. The Soviet Union attempted to challenge Islam intellectually with Marxist dogma and suppressed any public manifestation of Islam. Throughout the history of the Soviet Union and its dealings with Islam and the people of Central Asia, outright repression through to co-optation was the mechanisms employed by the state. Islamic sentiment survived under the Soviet Union as the state after the Second World War sought to bring in certain aspects of Islam and tried to incorporate them within the state's structure. This led to a Soviet 'official Islam', sanctioned and acceptable to the regime and an 'underground Islam' which sought to keep alive pre-Soviet ideas and practices.

#### **VI. Creating the Central Asian Republics**

The Soviet Union divided the Central Asian region into separate administrative units. Stalin created Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan in 1924, Tajikistan in 1929 and Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in 1936. Shirin Akiner notes that, 'These republics were entirely new state formations with no basis in historic nation-states. They were created not in response to popular demand, but at Moscow's behest. The Soviets had clear political reasons for forming what was formerly known as Turkistan, into five new republics. The first was based upon a clear policy of divide and rule. Moscow did not desire the creation of an Islamic Turkistan to be a singular republic within the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) [1]. Moscow was particularly virulent in quashing all forms of Islamic identity that existed in the region and sought its replacement with attempts to form loyalties to the newly created republics and Marxist ideology. Martha Brill Olcott has argued that - 'Stalin drew the map of Soviet Central Asia not with an eye to consolidating the natural regions, but rather for the purpose of reducing the prospects for regional unity. Five separate republics were formed, creating national units for ethnic communities that had yet to think of themselves as distinct nationalities. Moreover, boundaries were set to insure the presence of large irredentist populations in each republic. The Muslims of Central Asia were thus subjected to living under an authority and an assumed identity which they did not adhere to in the Soviet Union. The emphasis which the Soviet's placed upon 'ethnicity' was formulated to channel the allegiance of the Muslims towards the newly created republics. While their Islamic identity was viciously suppressed [10].

#### **VII. The Impact of Gorbachev**

The resurgence of Islamic expression throughout the Soviet Union in the 1980s was a direct result of Gorbachev's policies of Perestroika and Glasnost. Such policies relaxed the Soviet Union's rigid authoritarianism and permitted a modicum of free expression to exist. Thus in republics like Uzbekistan, Islamic practices and sentiments to resurface. This is particularly noteworthy. In many other areas of the Soviet Union, such as the Baltic's and the Caucasus, the 1980s produced an upsurge in nationalist feeling. This embryonic Islamic resurgence was felt in those areas that were traditionally deeply religious, such as the Fergana Valley. For Uzbeks, Tajiks and Kyrgyz this was an extremely important development. It showed their desire to break with the Soviet Communist ideology as well as Russian and Slavic culture and a desire to reassert their own cultural identity and belief systems. There was a great upsurge in the study of Islam and Arabic, with many Central Asian youth studying Islamic courses abroad [2].

#### **VIII. The Collapse of the Soviet Union**

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the Central Asian states had independence thrust upon them. They did not actively seek it. Furthermore there were no strong nationalist movements in Central Asia seeking independence. None of the Central Asian states had a history of national existence prior to either the Soviet Union or that of the Tsarist Empire. Hence, the primary source of loyalty of Central Asian peoples under the Soviet Union was not the Communist State. Rather, a multiplicity of loyalties existed and continue to do so. These loyalties range from the clan, tribe, family, republic and to Islam, with Islam having a powerful influence on social mores and identity. Upon independence, Islam competed with peoples loyalties to the new states [11].

#### **IX. Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP):**

One of the most striking outcomes of the Gorbachev period was the formation of the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP). The IRP was officially set up in 1991. It grew out of a desire to protect the Islamic identity of the Soviet Union's Muslims during the 1980s. As such, the party gained a great deal of publicity both within the Soviet Union and amongst policy makers and academics in the West. Initially the party had some noteworthy ideas, such as raising the Islamic awareness and understanding among the Muslims of the Soviet Union, as well as representing them and co-ordinating a united stance towards the Communist regime. However, the party fragmented since it had regional branches for each republic of the USSR [5]. The IRP in Tajikistan has received a great deal of attention, primarily because of the Tajik civil war (1992 - 1997). Mistakenly, many labelled the party as 'fundamentalist'. The IRP used Islam as a vehicle to mobilise regional and clan support in the Tajik civil war, and not to try and establish an Islamic polity. The IRP began as an educational group, not a political party, hence it had limited aims and objectives. The IRP leader in Tajikistan, Akbar Turajanzode, frequently stated that the IRP was not seeking the establishment of an Islamic polity, but a secular democracy. Thus the

IRP has not tried to 'Islamize' Tajikistan. The IRP's initial importance stemmed from emphasising that Islam was more important than regional or national affiliations. However the IRP's development of regional structures undermined this. In Tajikistan, the IRP has been co-opted into the regime and fundamentally weakened by this. It has fragmented over its standing in the present Tajik coalition government. The same has happened in other countries such as Jordan, where the state actively seeks to co-opt such movements in order to weaken them and ensure they pose no threat to the regime or the status quo [4].

#### **X. Central Asian Regimes Since Independence**

The elite's of Central Asia, by and large are Soviet legacies, as are the new states. Since independence Central Asia's former Soviet elite's have clung to power ruthlessly. Many leaders used the outbreak of the Tajik civil war in 1992 to justify the outlawing of all forms of political opposition. Islam Karimov, President of Uzbekistan epitomized this trend. Beginning in 1992, Karimov clamped down upon all forms of opposition. He has reserved all his ferocity for the Islamist opposition and all Muslims '...who practice their religion beyond the tight restrictions imposed by the government...'. Since the Uzbek regime has failed decisively answer the Islamists intellectually or politically, the regime has used mass arrests and torture in order to silence its critics. All the Central Asian regimes have reverted to the policies that the Soviet Union adopted in dealing with Islam. Each regime has sponsored a particular version of Islam which the state approves of and is non-threatening to the status quo [9].

#### **XI. Problems of State Building**

Central Asian states are still embryonic and fragile. They are trying to cope with massive political, economic and social problems brought to the fore by independence. These states are extremely weak states in terms of organising principles, ideologies and institutions. The Central Asian elite's have not been able to coherently form a national identity, or form cohesive nation-states. They have adopted a top-down policy of state building. Hence there is intense competition in state's like Uzbekistan between the secular elite's and the Islamist opposition which has arisen over the course of the 1990s over the nature of the new state's their identity, and future course [7].

#### **XII. Conclusion**

The Soviet period has left a lasting legacy upon the region of Central Asia and its peoples. The present ruling elite's are a legacy of a bygone era, clinging ruthlessly to power. The political trajectories of these new states is in flux. Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were noted during the 1990s for their pro-Russian stance and orientation. However, during the late 1990s, other major powers have entered the fray, in particular the United States. In the wake of the events of September 11 the United States has furthered its political, economic and now military presence in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. These states are presenting themselves domestically as well as internationally as front-line states in American-led war against terrorism [5]. Yet the average Muslim within Central Asia has not received much respite. Many thought the collapse of the Soviet Union would permit them to return to Islam as they whole-heartedly desired. The regimes though have had other ideas. The repression the Muslims suffered at the hands of the Soviet Union, continues in a new guise under the newly independent Central Asian regimes. The war against terrorism is now permitting states like Uzbekistan to continue its campaign against Islam, albeit now with greater international backing.

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