

Islam, Islamism, and Terrorism in the Northern Caucasus and Central Asia: A Critical Assessment

The beginning of the 21st century has witnessed a significant increase in acts of Islamist terrorism around the world. Post-Soviet Eurasia, i.e. the successor states and regions of the former USSR, has not been spared this phenomenon, although 70 years of intensive secularization there had been thought to have made the region immune to (militant) Islamism. Terrorist or diversionary-terrorist attacks in the Northern Caucasus, in central Russia, and in Central Asia have been and are being carried out by groups whose motives and ideological backgrounds, subject to the peculiarities of local developments, are quite diverse. At the same time, the unifying element of the newly established terrorist groups is the fact that they legitimize their various political demands using the same ideological trappings – the religion of Islam.

It must be noted, though, that the threat of Islamist extremism has also become a rhetorical instrument for the implementation of so-called anti-terrorist policies that are intended to stabilize and cement the positions of particular power cliques in the various political systems. This study is an attempt to distinguish among the most hotly debated Islamist groups in both regions and analyse their destabilization potential, as well as the threat they pose to contemporary policies and regimes. The conclusion suggests possible alternative solutions to these problems and outlines certain tendencies to be expected in the future.

The Northern Caucasus

The expansion of Islam to the Caucasus dates back to the seventh and eighth centuries C.E. During this period, Arab troops conquered – in addition to a vast territory south of the ridges of the Great Caucasus – the ancient city of Derbent in Dagestan, considered the “Gate to the Caucasus” and a key to the Caspian Sea. Despite early successes, the penetration of Islam into the interior of the Northern Caucasus proceeded quite slowly. This was due to the difficult terrain, which prevented close contact between various parts of the region, as well as the fact that there had never been powerful centralized states, whose rulers were in a position to embrace Islam (or Christianity) as a state religion and impose it on their subjects. The consequence of that has been that North Caucasian Islam – in contrast to Islam in Central Asia – has never been formally institutionalized, except for a number of religious brotherhoods and societies or various “Muslim committees” created by St. Petersburg and,

later, by Moscow, which have never been very popular with the majority of believers.¹

A number of ethnic groups in the region had also previously been influenced by (Orthodox) Christianity, which was introduced in the fifth and sixth centuries by Georgian and Armenian missionaries. Thus, the expansion of Islam extended over twelve centuries. It was more successful in the lowlands and foothills of the Northern Caucasus, which were either conquered or under the influence of the Ottoman Empire or its vassal state, the Crimean Khanate, or, later on, the Kabardian and Dagestani (Kumyk) princes. The definitive Islamization of the North Caucasian peoples was not completed until the 19th century.² Among the important factors contributing to this development were the preaching of “Sheikh-warrior” Ushurma Mansur, two Dagestani Imams (Ghazi Mollah a.k.a. Ghazi Mohammed and Gamzat-bek) and, most notably, of the legendary Imam Shamil, the third Imam of Dagestan (and Chechnya), who managed to create a functioning military-theocratic state that lasted for over two decades (1834-1859) and successfully withstood the attacks of Russian armies. During the so-called Caucasian Wars in the 18th and 19th centuries, Islam became the unifying factor of the national liberation struggle of some North Caucasian peoples against the Tsarist expansion.³ However, the relics and traditions of pagan cults, including the traditional, customary law (*adat*), continued to play an important part in the life of North Caucasian nations.

Islam in the Northern Caucasus within the Russian/Soviet State

Since the mid-19th century, when the Northern Caucasus was definitively conquered by St. Petersburg, the relationship of the colonial power towards Islam has never been warm. Russian authorities immediately identified Islam as a potentially influential ideology, the only one capable under local conditions of uniting the ethnically and linguistically diverse tribes of the Northern Caucasus. Hence, they regarded all Muslim clerics, and Muslim communities in general, with suspicion; interestingly, Russians have never created a centralized authority to deal specifically with matters involving North Caucasian

1 Cf. Dmitriy Arapov, *Islam v Rossiyskoy imperii* [Islam in the Russian Empire], Moscow, 2001; cf. also Yaacov Ro'i, *Islam and the Soviet Union*, Columbia University Press 2000.

2 The vast majority of North Caucasian Muslims are Sunnis of various types, adhering to either the Shafii (a significant majority of Dagestani peoples) or the Hanafi (mostly Chechens, Ingush, peoples of the north-western Caucasus such as Nogay, North Ossetians, and Kumyks) *madhhabs* (legal schools of thought). In the Northern Caucasus, especially in its eastern part (Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia), Sufi Islam is widespread, represented by four *tariqas* (paths or ways) – *naqshbandiyya*, *qadiriyya*, *jazuliyya*, and *shizaliyya*. The “non-Islamic” exceptions are the Mozdok Kabardians and the majority of North Ossetians, who profess Orthodox Christianity.

3 For more details see, for example, Nicholas Griffin, *Caucasus: Mountain Men and Holy Wars*, Boston 2003.

Muslims.⁴ Nevertheless, one can say that, during the last years of the empire, the region witnessed a period of mutual tolerance between the authorities and local Muslims.

To some extent, the same was true of Soviet times. The initial courting of mullahs in the early years of the Soviet state for strategic considerations,⁵ was soon replaced by severe repression of believers and churches of all kinds – as it was throughout the empire, where state-sponsored atheism sometime took a very aggressive form. The 1920s and 1930s witnessed the mass repression of Muslim (and Christian) clerics throughout the USSR; mosques and madrasas (religious schools) were closed and the (public) practice of Islam provoked sanctions from the authorities. As a result, the basis of Islam in the region was shattered, though not eradicated.

Islam survived in the Northern Caucasus in the form of a local folk Islam – a peculiar syncretic mixture of pagan cults and Muslim theology. In the north-east of the Caucasus, this was also strongly influenced by Islamic mysticism (Sufism). This symbiosis caused Islam to become an indispensable part of the (ethnic) identity of the North Caucasian nations. The ban on praying in mosques and studying Islam resulted in a notable decline in Islamic education and a significant secularization of the local people, particularly in towns and lowlands. However the religion was definitely not uprooted.⁶ It moved underground and functioned on the basis of semi-legal or illegal groupings, brotherhoods (Sufi *virds*) and societies (village *jamaats*).

This situation remained broadly the same until the second half of 1970s, and only began to change sharply during the 1980s, when the Soviet Union began to experience a degree of social liberalization.

Islamic Revivalism of the Late Soviet and Early Post-Soviet Era

As in other areas of Soviet society, glasnost and perestroika also brought more freedom to the realm of ideas. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Northern Caucasus witnessed a religious (as well as a national) renaissance. The peculiar “religious deficit” of the Soviet era was soon replaced by its

4 Similarly, the environment of the traditionalist North Caucasian Muslims, who, given the non-industrialized nature of the region, were the dominant part of society, was notoriously hostile to anything that came from Russia, including new tendencies within Islam. This could be the reason for the reserve of North Caucasians towards Jadidism – a liberal concept of Islam that attracted crowds of followers in the more developed Muslim parts of the Russian Empire.

5 The Bolsheviks needed to secure the support of North Caucasian Muslims in battles with the White Guard troops located in the region during the years of the Civil War in Russia (1918-1920), against which the highlanders waged guerrilla warfare. A popular slogan, whose author was perhaps Joseph Stalin himself (responsible for ethnic policy at that period), went: “For Sharia! For Soviet rule!”

6 A kind of ethnic traditionalism, including the influence of Islam, was strongly enhanced by Stalinist deportations (1944). The hardest hit people in Northern Caucasus were Chechens, Ingushs, Karachays, and Balkars. All these nations – including the peoples of Dagestan – are the most fervent followers of Islam in the region.

very opposite: This period witnessed a near-frenetic return of Islam from the semi-illegal realm of family circles and religious societies to the forefront of public life.

In addition to the fact that Islamic education was historically strong in Dagestan and in Chechnya, the appeal of Islam was also powerful due to the ever-present threat of Russian invasion. These processes were much more pronounced in the north-eastern Caucasus than in the largely Russified ethnic autonomies of the north-western Caucasus. In the early 1990s, in particular, the region experienced a steep increase in the number of (pseudo-) Islamic societies and organizations, which, however, often had very little to do with Islam and were established by individuals with very questionable pasts or presents; the adjective “Islamic” in the name of an organization was supposed to increase prestige and give more legitimacy to the “owners” in the eyes of their countrymen. Numerous Islamic *jamaats* (communities) and charitable organizations were established, old mosques were reconstructed, new ones built, etc. In Dagestan alone, a country of only 2.5 million inhabitants, the number of mosques increased from 27 (in 1987) to 1,429 (in 1999); in addition, some 1,700 new *jamaats*, 178 madrasas, and 15 Islamic colleges were created.⁷

It was in the early 1990s that radical and extremist streams of Islam started taking root in the region; initially they penetrated the area of western (upland) Dagestan. Local youths would travel to Middle-Eastern countries to acquire Islamic education and would come back after few years influenced by ideology of “pure Islam” – “Wahhabism”, or rather Salafism.⁸

7 The statistics of the Directory for Religious Affairs of the Dagestan Republic from 1999, see *Dagestankaya pravda*, 10 February 2000.

8 “Wahhabism”, a movement to purify Islamic teaching, originated in the mid-18th century in Arabia as part of an influential purification movement associated with Muhammad Abd ibn al-Wahhab ibn Suleiman at-Tamimi (1703–1791) of Nejd. Inspired by texts written by a scholar named Ibn Taimiyyah (1263–1328), this religious reformer and his disciples called for a return to the purity of early Islam, *as-salaf as-salih*, or the Islam of “the (pious, honourable, virtuous) forefathers”; it adheres to the strictest Hanbali *madhhab*. Incidentally, the followers of Wahhab themselves refuse to refer to themselves as “Wahhabis”, partly because this term has had a negative connotation since the days of the Ottoman Empire, but mainly because of the prohibition against identifying oneself with the name of a man, which would be committing the sin of idolatry. They call themselves *mu-wahhidun* (“those accepting and worshipping the only God in existence”) or *salafiyyun* (“followers of the paths of pious, honourable, or virtuous predecessors”).

The extremist form of Salafism propagating armed *jihād* is also called Jihadism. *jihād*’s main targets – besides Shiites – are those considered unbelievers (*kafir*, pl. *kuffar*, *kafrun*, or *kafara*) and those who have defected from the faith (*murtadd*, pl. *murtaddun*) or those whose faith is deceitful or hypocritical (*munafiq*, pl. *munafiqun*). Since all who do not agree with the Salafi concept of “pure Islam” are regarded as *kuffar*, war is waged primarily against them.

The goal of the “Wahhabis”, and adherents of Salafism in general, has been the purging of pagan elements (*jahiliya*, which also included the *adat*) as well as newer heretical elements of late Islamic origin (*bid’a* in Arabic) that the faith had taken on as early as during Islam’s territorial expansion after the Prophet Muhammad’s death.

In order to differentiate the radical and militant branches of practitioners of Salafism from its relatively moderate adherents, the terms Jihadist Salafism, Jihadism, or extremist Salafism will be used.

The region also experienced a dramatic influx of members of Middle Eastern humanitarian and public education organizations, many of them openly distributing the propaganda of Salafism. Initially, the authorities treated the Salafi societies rather leniently; the revival of Islam was seen as a desirable return to the region's spiritual roots and very few people could actually understand the theological subtleties. The absence of integrated state policies, both in Makhachkala and Moscow, as well as the readiness of some Dagestani believers to protest, fuelled by country's thorny socio-economic situation, made "Wahhabism" a strong social force in the early 1990s. In the second part of the 1990s, it was the Chechen factor which started playing a major role.

The Russian-Chechen War and Territorial-Ideological Fixation of Islamic Extremism

The *de facto* victory of the Chechens in the First Russian-Chechen War (1994-1996) and the subsequent short period of peace (1996-1999) provided Jihadism with a major boost. In the war-ruined country, which was suffering nearly total unemployment, the powerful Chechen nationalism that had helped to mobilize the people to fight off the powerful Russian army transformed practically overnight back into the traditional Chechen world of clan distrust and hostility. The rule of the strongest, enhanced by post-war cynicism, again became the law of the country; members of the weaker clans that experienced bullying and attacks from the stronger clans naturally disliked this situation. Hence, young men from some of the weaker clans became more susceptible to the teachings of Salafism, which call for social equality, the need for spiritual purification of oneself and society in general, and the commencement of *jihad* against a wide range of "infidels". Membership of Salafi *jamaats* established by Arabic volunteer warriors or "enlightened" Chechens appeared to be a way to ensure security in an atmosphere of utter anarchy; however, militarization of the *jamaats* was necessary for this purpose. Many youths entered the ranks of the militants in order to protect themselves from "clan warfare". The strict clan hierarchy and corruption of local (Sufi) clergy, as well as the Salafi requirement to worship only one God and to denounce Sufi saints and clan leaders, enabled them to escape the complicated web of loyalties to kin and clan, giving them a semblance of individual freedom and a holy mission.

No less important was the fact that *jihadi* rhetoric was adopted by the part of Chechen military-political elite opposing the regime of Aslan Maskhadov – mostly because of his hunger for power – which was then seeking to enhance *its* power base. Maskhadov's regime quickly came to be seen by many as "heretical" and therefore illegitimate. Soon the more numerous followers of traditional (Sufi) Islam began to clash in Chechnya with the less numerous but better organized and armed jihadists, who were supported by

jihadi funds from abroad. The disrespect shown by the Salafists towards the shrines of Sufi Islam – such as the *zijas* (tombs) of Sufi saints – greatly offended all traditionalists. Similar processes followed in neighbouring Dagestan, where the initial indifference of the government was, in the light of numerous clashes between Sufists (traditionalists) and Salafis, replaced by a merciless witch-hunt of real and alleged “Wahhabis”. Between 1997 and 1999, a significant number of Dagestani Salafis escaped to Chechnya, where they were warmly welcomed by their co-religionists.

The originally secular regime of President Maskhadov began, under pressure, to transform itself into an Islamic regime, using religion as an ideology that could unite the divided Chechen society. But it was already too late. In 1998, the armed clashes between units loyal to Maskhadov and the jihadists began. In this situation, when the usually reserved Chechen president called upon his fellow countrymen to drive out the “Wahhabis” from their villages, everything seemed to indicate that the country was sliding towards full-scale civil war. At this decisive moment, the jihadists (Arabs, Chechens, Dagestani, etc.) and some field commanders sympathetic to them (for instance, Shamil Basaev) decided to wage an attack on the western region of Dagestan, where local Dagestani in several of the mountainous villages had proclaimed an independent Islamic state. This attack was meant to spark a great Dagestani and, consequently, an all-North Caucasian revolt aimed at liberating the region from “Russian oppression”. There was also an important intra-Chechen aspect to it: The initiation of this “small-scale victorious war” that was apparently very popular among Chechens, was part of the effort to shatter Maskhadov’s power base. However, the attack, which was launched in August 1999, failed fairly rapidly, due to the unexpected resistance of the vast majority of Dagestani, hundreds of whom fought side by side with the federal forces against the invaders, who were considered religious fanatics and occupiers rather than liberators. Instead of all-Caucasian revolt, this attack sparked a new, even more catastrophic, war that has not yet ended.⁹

The Contemporary Phase: Radicalization and Regionalization

The invasion of Dagestan, the start of the Second Russian-Chechen War, the attacks on Washington and New York on 11 September 2001 and, most notably, the bloody terrorist attacks in other parts of Russia, including the events in a school in Beslan, North Ossetia (September 2004), opened a new chapter in the history of Islam in the Northern Caucasus. The Muslim religion, associated in the minds of many ordinary people with terrorism, began to be considered a (potential) threat to the security of Russia and its territorial integrity. Realizing this, Russian enforcement authorities radically changed their

9 For more detailed information on this issue, see Emil Souleimanov, Chechnya, Wahhabism, and the Invasion of Dagestan, in: *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 4/2005, at <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2005/issue4/jv9no4a4.html>.

attitude towards Muslims. Since this time, anybody practising Islam “too vigorously” has automatically been considered suspicious. The local regimes in the North Caucasian republics have used the opportunity provided by current security trends and employ the word “Wahhabis” to discredit their political adversaries, whether they are adherents of “Wahhabism” or not.

One must, however, bear in mind that the terrorist attacks in Russian cities and towns were carried out by groups with a clear political (ethno-separatist) goal, entirely unrelated to Islam: withdrawal of Russian armies from Chechnya and the initiation of peace talks with the separatists, both of which have been repeatedly rejected by the Kremlin. Islamic rhetoric was generally only used by separatists to justify their actions. However, this has not prevented the fight against the hated “Wahhabis” – often merely practising Muslims – from gaining massive momentum.

There is a wide range of local specifics in this process that deserve greater attention. There has been a significant generation shift in Chechnya in the last few years: Instead of (ethnic Chechen) secular ex-Soviet officers, who remembered the years of peaceful existence with Russians within a single state and, until recently, formed the core of Chechen army, we see the emergence of a young “Kalashnikov generation” consisting mostly of uneducated men brought up in wartime and blinded by the most primitive forms of jihadist ideology. These young warriors consider the Russians to be a monolithic ethnic and – in extreme cases – religious group, the fight against which (and against “collaborators” from their own ranks) can justify any actions, however cruel. The brutal behaviour of federal troops (and pro-Moscow Chechen militia) in the republic, who did not discriminate between separatists, their relatives, and non-combatants, – permanent “*zachistkas*”, mass abductions and the subsequent “disappearance” of the victims, the torture and humiliation of those kept in filtration camps – is further strengthening the case of the young militants.¹⁰

In Ingushetia, the situation started deteriorating after its president, General Ruslan Aushev, who had effectively shielded his country from being dragged into the conflict either by Chechen separatists or Russian generals, had to resign from office. He was replaced in 2002 by Putin’s former colleague from the Federal Security Service (FSB), Murat Zyazikov, whose loyalty to the Kremlin is beyond doubt. Zyazikov agreed to the stationing of Russian forces in this small republic to the west of Chechnya. Soon, even here, the Russian and Ingush soldiers, police and secret services started employing the brutal methods used in neighbouring Chechnya.¹¹ In response, the

10 Cf. Svante Cornell, Russia’s Gridlock in Chechnya: “Normalization” or Deterioration? In: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2004*, Baden-Baden 2005, pp. 251-259.

11 Cf. *The Situation in Chechnya and Ingushetia Deteriorates. New Evidence of Enforced Disappearances, Rape, Torture, and Extrajudicial Executions*, Joint Statement by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, and Memorial, 8 April 2004, at: <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/04/07/russia8408.htm>.

Ingush youth became extremely radical and sympathetic to Chechen resistance. One consequence was a massive attack by guerrillas of the so-called Ingush *Jamaat* on the main Ingush towns (June 2004), in which more than 80, mostly Ingush policemen, lost their lives. Dagestan has been experiencing similar problems since the late 1990s because of the “quiet warfare” between the members of radical *jamaats* and law enforcement authorities, the intensity of which is perhaps even greater than in the neighbouring Chechnya.

Until recently, it seemed as if the troubles of the north-eastern Caucasus were not strongly influencing developments in the ethnic republics of the north-west of the region (Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Adygea), which are culturally and historically distinct, separated as they are from Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Dagestan by the predominantly orthodox North Ossetia, and have a greater percentage of Russian inhabitants. However, even here, the terrorist attacks served as a *carte blanche* for law enforcement agencies to carry out a preventive “pacification” of *jamaats*. The frequency of acts of repression against practising Muslims, generally characterized as “Wahhabis”, has increased. The police and the FSB have carried out mass arrests and employed humiliating and brutal interrogation techniques. Those closely following the teachings of Islam have lost their jobs; mosques have also been closed.¹²

In response to governmental oppression, the *jamaats* in this part of the region (and by far not all of them had originally been Salafi-oriented) began to grow increasingly radical. A complex set of internal socio-economic problems has also enhanced the ongoing radicalization, among them poverty, unemployment, corruption of local elites and “official” clergy, dissatisfaction with Russian rule and “russification” attempts, the latter being generally blamed for the moral decay of Caucasian society. In response to all this, certain members of the Kabardino-Balkarian *jamaat*, established in the early 1990s, founded an extremist (non-Salafi) splinter group in 2002 called *jamaat* Yarmuk, which focuses on social affairs.¹³ Yarmuk endeavours to “protect Islam” and fight the “wicked” regime. In doing so, Yarmuk employs all sorts of instruments, including armed struggle. So far, the worst atrocity committed by this group was a massive attack on Nalchik, the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria (October 2005), which resulted in hundreds of deaths. Yarmuk is just one of many such organizations in the region.

Throughout the Northern Caucasus, much as in Chechnya, individual “avengers” may also join armed groups to strengthen their armed capacities and fulfil their personal missions. In other words, the behaviour of such groups is not always determined by ideology. Membership in an expansive

12 Cf. report by Memorial, *Conflict Spill-Over Outside the Chechen Republic in 2004-2005 (Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkariya)*, 2 March 2006, at: <http://www.memo.ru/hr/hotpoints/caucas1/msg/2006/03/m53212.htm>.

13 The Kabardino-Balkarian *jamaat* assisted young people in difficult life situations, such as alcoholism or drug addiction, run charities, support inter-generational dialogue and public resistance to racketeering and corrupt business practices.

jamaat, or close co-operation with one, can be a desirable alternative to being a lone-wolf. An individual man has very little chance of surviving a blood feud against powerful enemies, let alone achieving his goal. Truly, in a society respecting and honouring blood feuds¹⁴ and in which the principle of collective responsibility is employed both by the state and by those who fight against the state or its individual representatives, a conflict can spread with the speed of a forest fire. The motto is: “You offend my brother (father, son, mother, sister, grandfather, uncle, or cousin) – regardless of whether we are talking about members of the *jamaat* or not – and I will do anything to take revenge on you, the whole of your family, and all your colleagues and friends.” It is obvious that in spite of expectations, neither the deaths of secularist or traditionalist leaders such as Aslan Maskhadov and his slain successor Abdul-Khalim Sadulaev, nor the liquidation of important jihadists such as Khattab, Abu al-Walid, Abu al-Saif, and Shamil Basaev in recent years, have led to the collapse of the armed resistance. This is a key argument suggesting that, regardless of changes in command, the resistance is unlikely to falter since it is driven by factors that are specifically local in nature, as mentioned above.

This principle, however, does not preclude a change in the world-view of individual avengers (not necessarily motivated by ideological or political reasons) towards the militant version of Islam (jihadism), which calls for regional (North Caucasian) solidarity. Its influence is becoming stronger and stronger among warriors from various parts of the Northern Caucasus. Together with the geometrically expanding conflict, these factors could, in a few years, produce a very combustible mixture which would seriously threaten the stability of the region.

The “Chechen factor” is also playing a role: Igniting and supporting armed resistance in North Caucasian republics became an integral part of the policy of Abdul-Khalim Sadulaev, as well as his newest successor Doku Umarov, who is trying in this way to broaden his power base and force Moscow into a peace deal.¹⁵

Central Asia

The development of Central Asian countries after the dissolution of the Soviet Union exemplified similar processes and problems to those in Middle Eastern Muslim countries, even though this region has its own specificities stemming from the long-period of Soviet rule (lower religious fervour, the

14 That applies practically to the whole of the north-eastern Caucasus and the mountainous regions of the north-western Caucasus.

15 For more detailed information see Emil Souleimanov, *An Endless War: The Russian-Chechen Conflict in Perspective*, Frankfurt am Main 2006.

strong influence of the Russian language, etc.).¹⁶ The countries are struggling with high population growth and poverty. An additional factor in the mix is the revival of traditional social institutions, both in everyday life and in the ideologies of the states, since 1991.

The region has also opened up to the influence of the Middle East. A prominent feature of this process is the proliferation of Islam and, in particular, an Islam based on radical ideology. Although radical Islam has become popular with certain parts of the population in Central Asia, it is still considered a marginal issue, since the majority still prefers the traditional moderate version of Islam. The risk of “green terrorism” is often misused by governmental authorities (especially in Uzbekistan) to justify persecution of the opposition.

The Traditional Understanding of Islam in Central Asia

Islam is well rooted in those regions of Central Asia where the population is settled. Nomadic tribes have also often adopted Islam, but their lives are still dominated by traditional rules and laws.¹⁷

On the other hand, in the classical Central Asian states (the Bukhara Emirat, and the Khanates of Khiva and Kokand), Islam was a foundation stone of the local social system. The Emir of Bukhara, for instance, maintained the cult of Saint Bukhara (*Bukhoroi sharif*) and considered himself the leader of true believers (*amir al-mu'minin*). Nevertheless, even here, the Sunni Muslims considered the *khalifa*, the Ottoman sultan, to be their supreme lord, although they understood little of the modernization processes in the Ottoman Empire, about which they had heard very little.¹⁸ Apart from official Islam, Central Asia has experienced a significant proliferation of folk Islam related to the teachings of famous Central-Asian Sufis (*naqshbandiyya*, *yasawiyya*, *kubrawiyya*). However, weaker contacts with the wider Muslim world enabled the survival of a strong conservatism, which was one of the major reasons why local states lagged behind. The ideas of revivalist movements, such as *jadidism*, that called for the modernization of Islam throughout the entire territory of Russia, based on Russian education standards, first began penetrating the region around 1900.¹⁹

Islam in Soviet Central Asia went through a phase of resistance immediately following the Bolshevik revolution (*Basmachi* movement) and suf-

16 For further explanation, see the article by Pauline Jones Luong, The Middle Easternization of Central Asia, in: *Current History* 10/2003, pp. 333-340.

17 The Islamization of Kazakh and Kyrgyz tribes was strongly influenced by the policies of Catherine II in the 18th century. In 1789, she sanctioned the establishment of a *muftiat* under the leadership of the Kazan (Volga) Tatars.

18 Cf. Arminius Vambery, *Travels in Central Asia*, London 1865.

19 The traditionalism of a local clergy that had only basic knowledge of the Koran and of selected *hadiths* – something that would not change even after Russian colonization – was a thorn in the side of the revivalist groups. Cf., for example, Sadridin Ayin, [Memories], Moscow 1956.

ferred near total liquidation in the 1930s. Later, in the following decade, an official Islam was created that was meant to keep religious life within an acceptable framework at the level of folklore.²⁰

On the other hand, an unofficial version of Islam started gaining ground in the 1960s and especially in the 1970s through the work of “domestic theologians” spreading Islamic lore in households or at gatherings of friends (so-called *hujr*) in *chaikhanas* (tea houses).²¹ At the same time, radical elements on the margin of urban and rural society began to call for a violent purification of what they saw as heretical official Islamic clergy.²² Moreover, the first unofficial Islamic structures and movements, often founded by students of the *hujr*, were created at this time.

Hence, despite all atheistic propaganda, Islam had not disappeared from ordinary life. Specifically, in certain parts of Uzbek and Tajik society, prayer remained at the core of everyday life and usually inaugurated significant events such as weddings, the birth of a child, funerals, etc. Traditional pilgrim sites never ceased to attract people, who often went there on officially sanctioned “sightseeing” tours with their work collectives.²³

The occupation of Afghanistan had a profound influence on the situation of Islam in Central Asia. Recruits from Islamized nations of Central Asia were used extensively during the operations in Afghanistan, playing the role of “fellow Muslim brothers”. The veterans came home with good contacts with their Afghan fellows and many learned a lot more about Islam, albeit only about the very traditional version practised in Afghanistan.

Further outside influences (especially Wahhabist literature) started penetrating Central-Asian Islamic practices after the introduction of Gorbachev’s perestroika. Simultaneously, a row broke out between the majority traditional Hanafis and a marginal group of radical Muslims, followers of imported ideas of Wahhabist provenance. Building and reconstruction of mosques led to an influx of financial resources from traditional Muslim countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

At the end of the 1980s, the liberalization of the Soviet system paved the way for the institutionalization of existing Islamic structures, the peak of which was the creation of the USSR Islamic Revival Party in 1990, which, however, soon broke into national sub-groups (Uzbek and Tajik). The rows between various nationalities, as well as arguments over religious dogma, left the Islamic movement weakened to the extent that it was not able to seize the

20 For background information on Soviet Islam see, e.g., Shoshana Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca. The Soviet Campaign Against Islam in Central Asia, 1917-1941*, London 2001.

21 Cf. Bakhtiyar Babadzhanov/Ashirbek K. Muminov/Martha Brill Olcott, *Muhammadjon Hindustoni (1892-1989) i religioznaya sreda ego epokhi* [Ammadzhan Hindustoni and the Religious Environment of his Time], in: *Vostok-Oriens*. 5/2004, pp. 43-59.

22 The Anthropologists Bushkov and Mikulski call these groups fundamentalists; see Valentin I. Bushkov/Dmitri V. Mikulski, *Istorija grazhdanskoy vojny v Tadjikistane* [History of the Civil War in Tajikistan], Moscow 1999, p. 110.

23 For analysis of Islam in Soviet Central Asia, see, e.g., Muriel Atkin, *Islam in Tajikistan*, Philadelphia, 1989.

opportunities opened to new parties and political groups. Moreover, in 1991 the Islamic Revival Party, or more precisely its national fractions, was forbidden in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Apart from that party, other political organizations were created in various Central Asian regions. Among the more important ones was the *Adolat* (Justice) party established in the Fergana Valley. Some of its members later founded the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).²⁴ Smaller parties include *Hizbullah* of Uzbekistan and the Islamic and national movement *Alash* in Kazakhstan.

However, there was only limited public support for the founding of a popular Islamic movement in Central Asia. Although some Muslims, mainly the younger ones, were inclined towards the radical forms of Islam, these tendencies had no strong historical basis. The reason why the Soviet era contributed to a proliferation of radical Islam in Central Asia can be seen predominantly in the ideological vacuum of Soviet era Islam, which the aggressively imported ideologies of certain groups started to fill in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in part through the provision of significant material support. The frustration resulting from the political, economic, and social chaos in the post-Soviet space further contributed to the growing attractiveness of radical forms of Islam among the less critical, mostly young, segments of the population.

Transformation of Political Islam after the Break-up of the Soviet Union

The majority of Islamic groups that were involved in political parties and movements in the late 1980s in Central Asia did not survive the repression and the struggle with the local officially secular regimes. These groups were mostly forced into illegality; the Islamic Revival Party in Tajikistan, however, was allowed by the authorities to linger on the margins of the political spectrum.

In Uzbekistan, the members of the Islamic Revival Party of Uzbekistan, the *Adolat* Movement and some other Islamic organizations were persecuted, discredited or, as in the case of “disloyal clergy”, even suffered outright physical liquidation. In reaction to these practices, the followers of radical schools of thought started gaining ground in the Islamic movement. Nevertheless, ideology was not always the most powerful tool for attracting follow-

24 The *Adolat* movement gained great respect in the Fergana Valley in 1991-1992 by securing public order, reducing speculation and crime, fighting corruption and alcoholism, and so on. Petty thefts were punished harshly in accordance with the Islamic law of *Shari'a* by beating with a stick. Women were forced to wear scarves and people were severely punished even for skipping their prayers. A case has been brought up, when a Russian girl accused her brother of alcoholism before the activists. Members of *Adolat* beat him up so he would “forget the bottle”. Cf. Sanobar Shermetova, *Islamskiy faktor v rukakh politicheskikh elit* [The Islamic Factor in the Hands of the Political Elite], in: Aleksei V. Malashenko/Martha Brill Olcott (eds.), *Islam na postsovetском prostranstve* [Islam in post-Soviet Space], Moscow 2001, at: <http://www.carnegie.ru>, 29 October 2002.

ers; financial resources, access to education, as well as anti-regime and populist rhetoric were magnetic for many young people. On the other hand, “recruitment” was not always voluntary, as was evident from the abductions carried out in the Fergana Valley.²⁵ Such practices were typical of the IMU, in particular.²⁶

In Tajikistan, at the beginning of a conflict among the Tajik regions, the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) seized the governmental office in Dushanbe for half a year (May–November 1992). In the subsequent civil war (1992–1997), the party managed to gain the support of the Tajik regions that had traditionally been deprived of influence in the state. Later, the peace treaty gave it considerable political power. On the other hand, the party’s role in the peace deal prompted the secession of the most radical elements. Coupled with the inclusion of former IRPT fighters in the official forces, the secession virtually deprived the party of all real instruments of power, which resulted in a decline in popularity until it eventually diminished into political insignificance. For the official Tajik regime, the party served well as a tool to demonstrate the democratization of the country and as a scapegoat for occasional attacks on Islamic extremism.²⁷

In the other republics of Central Asia, popular sentiment towards Islam is more lukewarm and the activities of Islamic organizations have not found significant support. The Turkmen regime did not permit the establishment of any political movement, including Islamic movements. Islamic parties would also have posed a threat to the personal cult of the president, Saparmurat Niyazov, known as Turkmenbashi. Although under President Askar Akaev Kyrgyzstan enjoyed the most liberal environment, relatively speaking, for the creation of political parties of all stripes, the Islamic movement did not achieve any significant success there, which was also true in the case of Kazakhstan.

Hence, at the end of the 1990s, it was the IMU, led by drug baron and military leader, Juma Namangani, and its ideologist Tohir Yoldash that was declared to be the most significant security threat.²⁸ The movement was the only one in Central Asia that managed to demonstrate its strength, supplemented by aid from its foreign donors (including the Taliban²⁹), in the two

25 Cf. *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, 12 October 1999.

26 Cf. Vitaliy Ponomarev, *Islam v sisteme gosudarstvennoy politiki Uzbekistana i Turkmenistana* [Islam in the System of State Policy of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan], in: M.V. Jordan/R.G. Kuzeev/R.G. Chervonnaya, *Islam v Evrazii* [Islam in Eurasia], Moscow 2001, pp. 339–355.

27 Representatives of the Tajik regime still consider the IRPT today to be an ally of *al-Qaida* and IMU. The IRPT is also suspected of attempts to create an Islamic state. Cf. Vitaliy Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia, Between Pen and Rifle*, London 2005, pp. 246–248.

28 According to some sources, this group controlled up to 70 per cent of all drug trade in east Tajikistan and in the Fergana Valley. Cf. M. Gerasimov, *Religiozniy narkotrafic* [Religious Drug Traffic], in: *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 3 November 1999, p. 5.

29 Cf. Wahid Mozhdeh, *Afghanistan wa panj sale-e solte-ye Taleban* [Afghanistan and Five Years of Taliban Rule], in: *Neshrani*, Teheran, No. 1382 (2002/2003), pp. 74–81.

so-called Batken Wars in 1999 and 2000. However, arrangements for a third campaign of this kind were postponed due to the higher priority placed on preparations for the September 11 attacks in the USA. It is likely that Namangani died in the subsequent military intervention in Afghanistan, thus strongly reducing the capabilities of the movement to pose a public threat. Simultaneously, the name of the movement disappeared from the newspapers' front pages and official reports.

Besides the IMU, the authorities' attention has also focused since the late 1990s on a global movement, *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, which has operated in Central Asia since the early 1990s.³⁰ However, the movement's name had not appeared in the news before the trial of the alleged organizers of the assassination attempt on Uzbek President Islam Karimov in February 1999. After the withdrawal of the IMU from the political scene, *Hizb ut-Tahrir* became the movement to be blamed for all terrorist attacks from 2001 on. Although, the organization displays features typical of a fundamentalist movement, its leaflets and literature do not indicate systematic terrorist ambitions.

The non-violent promotion of *Hizb ut-Tahrir's* ideas, especially of economic equality and internationalism, is in sharp contrast to the economic failures and corruption of most Central Asian states, namely Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.³¹ For the official local clergy, who tend to view Islam through a nationalist prism, the movement also represents a significant threat.

Although infiltration by militant elements (such as former IMU fighters) cannot be entirely ruled out, given the strict hierarchy of the movement, the proclamations referring to an armed wing of the movement are rather a product of the wishful thinking of the local "anti-terrorist regimes".³²

Islamism in Contemporary Central Asia: A Critical Assessment of the "Terrorist Threat"

In 2004-2005, Central Asia, and above all Uzbekistan, was shaken by the threat of alleged terrorist attacks that were, according to the official version of Uzbek leadership, executed by *al-Qaida* cells in Central Asia, i.e. by *Hizb ut-Tahrir*. Although involvement of terrorist groups with Islamic ideology in the spring 2004 attacks cannot be ruled out, judgment about the perpetrators must be made with greater care.³³ Despite the fact that certain members or

30 Cf. Naumkin, cited above (Note 27), pp. 139-140.

31 In Turkmenistan, the movement's development has been stifled by the local autarchic regime; in the case of Kazakhstan, the movement's appeal is weak due to the relatively good economic situation, which is the best in the region.

32 For more information on the movement's structure cf. Naumkin, cited above (Note 27), p. 144.

33 The explosions in spring 2004 in Uzbekistan were claimed by the previously unknown Islamic Group of *Jihad*. According to the official Uzbek version, the atrocities were committed by *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and *al-Qaida*. It should be noted, though, that at that time the US was considering withdrawal of aid to Uzbekistan in connection with the government's record on human rights violations. See *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 19 April 2004.

individual cells of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* might have been involved, they are not representative of the whole movement and it would not be wise to generalize in this case.

The events in Andijan in 2005 have thus far been the peak of a largely virtual anti-terrorist struggle on the part of the Uzbek regime.³⁴ The “victim” was a splinter group, *Akromiya*, not well known prior to then, which had succeeded *Hizb ut-Tahrir* in the 1990s and tried to adapt its ideology to local conditions. Although it is virtually impossible to track down all the ins and outs of the operation, both those of the so-called Islamists and those of the governmental forces, the event had serious consequences for the whole of Uzbekistan. In terms of geopolitics, President Karimov changed the orientation of his foreign policy from the USA to Russia. With respect to the internal dynamics of the country, the regime showed its current strength (although it is questionable how long the regime can last). It also became clear that “Islamic extremism” is the main ideological antipode of the regime. Given the absence of a functioning governmental system under Karimov’s rule, any weakening of the regime could possibly lead to instability or even an armed conflict, in which Islamic ideology, especially its most radical forms, could become a deadly instrument. On the other hand, neither the events in Andijan nor the revolution in Kyrgyzstan the previous March created a real threat to the Uzbek regime. Thus, although Central Asia has a potential for Islamic fundamentalism, significantly “boosted” by the character of local regimes (especially in Uzbekistan), the threat of Islamic extremism is still quite weak in this region.

Conclusion

In the Northern Caucasus and Central Asia, governments facing complex security threats prefer, for political reasons, to set their anti-terrorist rhetoric *a priori* in the context of the so-called war on terror, disregarding specific local conditions and developments. Hence, the governments themselves, through their attitudes and activities, have become a major cause of the proliferation of radical Islam in the region. Similarly, the Kremlin’s attempts to portray the conflict with Chechen separatists as a struggle against Islamic terrorism imported from the outside are part of a broader strategy to discredit the Chechen resistance movement at home, and, most importantly, abroad.

34 For background see, e.g., M. M. Meyer (ed.), *Srednyaya Aziya: andizhanskiy stsenariy?* [Central Asia: The Andijan Scenario?], Moscow 2005; Andrea Berg, All Eyes on Central Asia: Disintegration in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, in: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2005*, Baden-Baden 2006, pp. 163-176. A version more in conformity with the regime’s was presented by Shirin Akiner, *Violence in Andijan, 13 May 2005: An Independent Assessment*, Uppsala 2005.

Moscow's aim is to get *carte blanche* for the definitive suppression of the revolt.

For the same reasons, the Central Asian and North Caucasian regimes use the label "Islamist" or "Islamic terrorist" for anybody who is in political opposition. At present, there are thousands of prisoners in the countries of Central Asia accused of membership of Islamic groups aiming to overthrow the ruling secular regimes. Similar processes, albeit in a more limited fashion, can be observed in the Northern Caucasus. Central Asian and Russian elites (local and, to a lesser extent, also national) have, for political reasons, long since given up distinguishing between political Islam or Islamic fundamentalism, on the one hand, and militant Islamism or terrorism, on the other. Nevertheless, despite this biased attitude of the governing elites, the reality in Chechnya and, to a limited extent, in the Fergana Valley is strongly influenced by increasingly more powerful groups that profess militant Islam and use terrorist methods with growing ferocity as a part of their armed struggle.

The movements supporting such a strategy can rely on ever-increasing disappointment with the governing regimes (especially in Central Asia) and unsatisfied economic needs. Hence, it is again the governing elites themselves, who, by their corruption, incompetence, and lack of will to provide for the basic social and economic needs of their citizens, drive their people to radical opposition under green banners. On the other hand, none of these movements could guarantee stability for any of the regions observed. In the regions where there has already been an open confrontation between official regimes and Islamic movements (Chechnya, Tajikistan), political Islam – including its radical forms – has discredited itself to such an extent that the local population considers the governing regimes a "lesser evil".

Although an explosion of Islamic extremism in Central Asia arising entirely from local factors is unlikely, a conflict situation may arise if, for various reasons, one or more external actors – especially from the Islamic world, Russia, the USA, or China – has an interest in the destabilization of the region.

The threat of fanning the flames of violence that could even get out of control of the "managing power" is also a good means of applying pressure on Central Asian states, and especially on those in which there is a danger of similar developments, i.e. especially in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, or Kyrgyzstan.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that political Islam and Islamic terrorism in the Northern Caucasus and Central Asia is not a merely hypothetical threat. In the short- and mid-term both regions represent very fertile soil for the proliferation of various extremist movements that are, or will be, capable of destabilizing the regions. Attention should certainly be given to Islamic threats able to cause violent upheaval in either area. On the other hand, the local regimes (such as Kyrgyzstan) are fully capable of bringing the catastrophe on themselves without the destabilizing influence of Islamic radic-

alism. The local regimes try too hard to suppress indiscriminately any opposition movements and groups that might undermine their authority, and this also involves oppression of otherwise moderate groups. This vicious circle sows frustration, which can be harvested by the most radical groups.