

Islam's Civil War and Greater Central Asia

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Two Versions of the Truth

As with so many things, the answer to questions about mainstream Sunni and radical Islam in Central Asia depends on whom you ask. Predictably, there exists a variety of views, but they can be roughly grouped under two headings.

The first is the view of national leaders and the principal Muslim clerics in the region. In spite of stunning differences among them in other areas, they all insist that Islam, as practiced in their region for a millennium, is moderate and tolerant in outlook and far removed from the intra-confessional fighting that often defines the faith today. They acknowledge that Islam in their region is deeply committed to what Americans would call "traditional values," and yet remind us also that the Muslims of Central Asia were for centuries the bearers of a great intellectual and scientific tradition based on free enquiry and openness to the world of ideas.

Arrayed against this region-wide religious community, in the view of Central Asia's political and mainstream religious leaders, are various currents of Muslim extremism. Where indigenous Islam offers moderation and tolerance, the radical Islamists present fanatical intolerance. Lacking serious intellectual underpinnings, they are at the same time contemptuous of the simple piety of the region's believers, considering their faith, with its cult of saints, to be a crude distortion of "true Islam." Worse, the leaders continue, these extremist notions are being

imposed with help from abroad, notably from Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, and Pakistan. Some groups, like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, call for armed violence against the *status quo*. Others, including the London-based Hizb-ut-Tahrir ("Party of Liberation"), claim to be nonviolent but espouse an odious and fanatical intolerance of misguided Muslims and non-believers. The Turkey-based movement of Fethullah Gulen opens modern schools across Central Asia but is in reality a front for bringing about an Islamic state.

According to these political and religious leaders, their governments and communities of Muslim believers are up against powerful, externally-funded organizations that exploit religion for political ends. Echoing the words of the Sufi leader Hashim Kabbani, they speak of a "civil war" within Islam, and consider their opponents to be very serious indeed. The common goal of all these groups, they claim, is to destroy the secular governments that have been introduced in recent decades and replace them with Islamist rule based on Shari'a law, and to impose that law on the entire community of the faithful. This view has been explicitly advanced by rulers of all five former Soviet states of Central Asia, by President Karzai in Afghanistan, and by senior officials in neighboring Russia, China, and India. During the past two decades governments of most western countries, including the European Union (EU) and U.S., have also embraced part or all of this interpretation.

The second interpretation of the same evidence is offered by a diverse group of individuals and organizations in both the region itself and in the West. These observers acknowledge the existence of radical Islam within the region but deny that it is a foreign import. Rather, they insist, it is the natural and inevitable consequence of the repressive policies of the governments themselves, i.e., of the very people whose view we have just summarized. While a few are committed to violence, most are merely “especially pious Muslims” who are dissatisfied with what they consider the deeply compromised official clerics. Whatever foreign support the radical forces may receive pales in comparison with the support the governments themselves receive from the West or which, in the case of China, Russia, and India, they can mobilize against pious believers from their own ample resources.

Local oppositionists point to the near-impossibility of registering non-confirming religious groups and to the governments’ fiercely oppressive tactics directed against “the especially pious.” Capricious arrests and brutal prison conditions, they argue, belie the governments’ claims of fairness and lead directly to the further radicalization of peaceful Muslims. The problem, they conclude, is the governments themselves, and all those who would support their systematic war against the legitimate rights of their citizens.

Many in the West support this interpretation. European and American nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working in the human rights field have effectively championed it, and a large body of legislation in both the EU and U.S. is built upon it. Congress has charged the State Department to report regularly on the status of human rights and of religious freedoms in all the countries in question, the Helsinki Commission holds frequent hearings on the subject, and the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor issues its own detailed reports on a country-by-country basis. These have in turn led to the imposition of various penalties and punishments against the governments in question.

It is tempting at this point to try to adjudicate between these seemingly incompatible views. Certainly, the champions of each would prefer a clean decision in their favor and against the opposite camp. But if such an outcome has the advantage of clarity, it would also grossly simplify the complex reality. Worse, such an “either-or” approach, by ignoring both inconvenient details and the broader context, virtually guarantees that policies built upon it will be erratic, flawed, and ineffective. This has in fact been the case. It is therefore necessary to look more deeply into the matter.

A deeper look: What is “Central Asia” and why does it count?

First, what is the region with which we are concerned? Is it in any way distinct or is it simply a distant and peripheral part of the Muslim world? After the collapse of the USSR the U.S. viewed Central Asia as consisting of only the five former Soviet republics: Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Muslim unrest in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region soon reminded us that this western-most province of China had also been a cultural part of Central Asia for 2,000 years. The defeat of the Taliban in 2002 posed an even more fundamental question: Was not Afghanistan, too, a part of this region, and over the past three millennia had it not been considered its very heart?

By ignoring this larger region, U.S. policy was quick to subsume Islam in Central Asia either under a “post Soviet” rubric or under some vague notion of a larger and undifferentiated Muslim community based in the Middle East. Both views led to our considering Central Asian Islam as something peripheral, and certainly not as a distinctive center in its own right.

This sharply contradicts the view held by nearly everyone in the region since at least the ninth century. While conceding the Arab and Middle Eastern origins of the Muslim faith, Central Asians remind us that Islam was codified and given many of its most distinctive fea-

tures by Central Asians, not Arabs. Here the sayings (hadiths) of the Prophet were codified by the ninth century scholar from what is now Uzbekistan, al Bukhari; his work is second in importance only to the Koran in the Muslim world. Beginning around 1,000 AD Central Asians also launched the enormously important currents of Sufism, a form of Muslim mysticism that drew on Jewish, Hindu, and Christian traditions and eventually spread throughout the Muslim world. Here, too, appeared the first madrassa schools. Invented as a means of suppressing heresy and instilling orthodoxy, these eventually spread throughout the world of Islam. It was from Afghanistan and Central Asia, not from the Middle East directly, that Islam reached India. The great Moghul state that produced the Taj Mahal sprang from what is now Uzbekistan. The most moderate of the four main interpretations of Muslim law (Shari'a), the Hanafi school, was codified in Central Asia and spread thence to both India in the East and Ottoman Turkey in the West. All of the other three traditions, so-called Hanbali, Shafii, and Malaki, are more narrow in their orthodoxy and resort more quickly to harsh punishment. Central Asia's Muslim pilgrims, of course, go to Mecca, but they also pay their respects to the shrines of Daniel, Solomon, and many other Old Testament prophets, not to mention hundreds of local saints, all of which are to be found in Central Asia itself.

It is no wonder that Central Asians view their region not as a peripheral zone of Islam but its heartland, and that they consider themselves the true bearers of the faith, in need of instruction from no one. Against this background, it is not surprising that they react indignantly to other Muslims who dare teach them about Islam, let alone to non-Muslims who offer advice on how governments should treat their Muslim citizens.

Two further factors reinforce this view of Central Asia as a heartland of the Muslim world. First, it was here, no less than in the Arabic lands to the west, that many of the greatest scientists, scholars, poets, and writers of Islam's Golden

Age (800-1,100) were born. Because they often wrote in Arabic, we wrongly assumed they were Arabs. Ibn Sino (Avicenna), who single-handedly created modern medicine in both the West and India, came from Uzbekistan/Afghanistan; among his other achievements, he championed the view that other worlds besides ours may exist—five hundred years before Giordano Bruno. Ibn Sino's friend, the geographer Biruni, calculated the circumference of the earth more accurately than anyone before the 18th century and for good measure came up with an evolutionary alternative to creationist geology. Al Khorezmi, who invented algorithms and gave algebra its name, sprang from the border between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan a millennium ago. Farabi, from whom Thomas Aquinas learned about Aristotle, was born in what is now Kazakhstan. The list goes on and on. Even the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad, which saw the greatest assembly of genius between the fall of Rome and the Renaissance, was formed, staffed, and defended by Central Asians.

Related to this is the tradition of secular rule in a Muslim society. After the death of Mohammed and his immediate companions, religion and the state were increasingly separated. This tradition found its earliest and fullest expression in Central Asia. Beginning with the illustrious Samanid dynasty of present-day Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, rulers were expected to be pious and defend the faith, but without being themselves spiritual leaders. This tradition was reinforced by the appearance of a series of huge Turkic empires (the Karakanids, Ghaznivids, Seljuks, etc.) based in Central Asia. Newly converted, these former nomad leaders were content to protect whatever was considered at the time to be Islamic orthodoxy, but not to define it.

Today, the states of Central Asia, including Afghanistan and also Turkic Azerbaijan, across the Caspian, present the world's largest concentration of *secular* governments in predominantly Muslim societies. Afghanistan may call itself an Islamic Republic but its laws and institutions are overwhelmingly secular. Since 1923

the model of Muslim secularism has been Turkey. But at a time when Turkey appears to be moving inexorably towards becoming a more Muslim state, purging the civil service and police of anyone not considered sufficiently pious, the mantle of Muslim secularism has shifted decisively to Central Asia.

Stated differently, for all their shortcomings, the governments of this region remain for now the best laboratories for the development of secular states in Muslim societies, and of Muslim societies that fully embrace modern knowledge. Their populations are more literate and more numerate than any other Muslim societies, and they are more open to modern secular education and learning. Much is riding on their success. Conversely, their failure would discredit the secular state/Muslim society model everywhere.

Are both of those interpretations right?

Returning to our question, are both of those interpretations true? The starting point for any sensible U.S. approach to the issue of Islam in this vast region lies, first, in accepting that both views contain elements of truth and, second, that even together they do not provide a sufficient basis for policy.

Mainstream Sunni Islam in Central Asia *is* moderate. The Hanafi school of Muslim law is less harsh overall than the schools which prevail in Arabia, North Africa and Southeast Asia, but also the most accepting of worldly activity in commerce and business. True, the establishment of Shiism as the state religion of Persia in the sixteenth century put Central Asian Sunnis on the defensive and they reacted with ideological passion, but this zeal soon burned out. For centuries now, a solid traditionalism has prevailed, giving meaning to the main events of people's lives but otherwise coexisting comfortably not only with neighbors of different religions but also with modern knowledge. It is also true that the region is heir to an extraordinary intellectual tradition, of which every school child in the region is aware.

At the same time, the same currents of Islamic fundamentalism that are felt elsewhere are spreading here with the help of money and missionaries from abroad. Suffice it to say that thousands of Central Asian families have been induced to send their sons to the Gulf for religious study by the lure of free tuition, room and board, and also generous payments to the family for lost labor. Religious-based groups mounted a civil war in Tajikistan in the 1990s, as well as armed conflicts in Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and 2000, Kazakhstan in 2000, and Uzbekistan in half a dozen major incidents between 1992 and 2005. It is well and good for the State Department and NGOs to demand that regional governments lift their ban on groups like Hizb-ut-Tahrir. But local leaders reject the claims of these groups to be nonviolent, and point to the fact that Hizb-ut-Tahrir has been banned not only in all Arab countries but also in Germany.

At the same time, it is undeniable that all governments in the region have reacted to these confrontations and other perceived threats with what westerners and many locals consider undue force. Washington pundits have been quick to draw distinctions between what they consider the special brutality of Uzbekistan's policies towards fundamentalism and other forms of religious dissent and the purportedly milder responses of other countries in the region. But the distinction between Uzbekistan's actions and the actual practices of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan, and even Afghanistan is more of degree than of kind. Such harsh responses surely help polarize the situation and may lead to further radicalization. Acknowledging this, however, it is by no means clear that a more accepting approach would avoid conflict and cause the extremist movements to join the system or wither away. Central Asian countries have studied closely the recent tragedy in Mumbai and concluded that India's relatively open democracy proved no match for committed extremists and terrorists.

The U.S.: AWOL in Greater Central Asia

Even if one accepts that both interpretations contain important elements of truth, this provides no basis for a coherent policy. Quite the contrary. For more than a decade U.S. policy has veered between cooperating with regional governments and censuring them, between aid and finger-pointing, between collaboration and hectoring, between carrots and sticks. Often the two approaches have been pursued at the same time. The result has been a constantly shifting and utterly unpredictable non-policy from Washington. This, at any rate, is how regional governments view Washington's approach under both Republican and Democratic administrations. Faced with such a mercurial partner, the governments of the region proceed with extreme wariness, preferring to strengthen their ties with their neighbors who preach less, China and Russia, and, no less, with the two other democratic powers that are active in the region, Japan and the European Union. America's judgmental and manipulative approach to the religious issue in Central Asia has not worked. Just when the U.S. is realizing that Afghanistan must be approached as a regional issue, the U.S. is finding that it has failed to build the kind of relationships across Central Asia that would make such an approach possible.

It is worth noting that whereas Japan, the European Union, China, and Russia have all created high level and region-wide consultative bodies to manage their relations in Central Asia, the U.S. has failed to do so. Leading these bodies are the national presidents or prime ministers of the above-mentioned major powers, who regularly visit the region and preside over meetings there. Not surprisingly, the presidents, prime ministers and principal ministers of the Central Asian countries reciprocate this high-level attention by participating actively in Japan's "Japan Plus Central Asia," China's Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Russia's Eurasec and common defense organization, and the EU's new consultative bodies in economics and security.

By contrast, the U.S. has no region-wide consultative body in Central Asia and no U.S. president has ever visited the region. Poorly arranged visits by Secretaries of State under both Democrats and Republicans have sowed bewilderment and confusion, which numerous delegations from Congress have failed to dispel.

The Missing Element: Strategy

Unsettling though this may be, it is all more a symptom of America's confusion than its cause. The deeper problem that is reflected in America's handling of religious issues in Central Asia is that the U.S. has no overall goals for the region and no strategy for achieving them. In the absence of a broader strategic framework, important issues like the civil war of Islam tend to bump back and forth between opposite extremes of policy. Before 9/11 Washington viewed Central Asia as a subset of its Russian policy and not as a subject in its own right. Yet at the same time the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) bombarded Central Asian countries with projects, many of them ill-conceived and almost all of them benefiting Washington Beltway contractors more than the local societies. Worse, the U.S. utterly ignored Afghanistan: Madeleine Albright, when asked what to do about that country, advised "Build a fence around it and forget about it."

After 9/11 the U.S. focused all its attention on Afghanistan, cutting back assistance to the rest of Central Asia except to the extent that it helped support the Afghan effort. China and Russia moved quickly to fill the vacuum that was created by Washington's neglect, as later did Japan and the EU. The fact that the U.S.' stated goals in the region were essentially negative—the destruction of al Qaeda and the Taliban—caused all regional governments (and even most Afghans) to distance themselves from the U.S. project, even as they quietly wanted it to succeed.

Even if the U.S. were to focus once more on Central Asia as a whole, does it have a strategy

that will succeed? To some extent, it does. To the extent that U.S. assistance alleviates poverty and fosters economic development it is addressing the social context of religious extremism. It is worth remembering that even in the supposedly prosperous Soviet times sheer desperation drove more than 200 women in the Fergana Valley to immolate themselves. This occurred in precisely those areas of Uzbekistan that later gave rise to radical Islamic cells. Successful economic and social development may be the best way to “drain the swamp,” to recall a phrase from the immediate post-9/11 era.

Beyond this, the U.S. needs to embrace the implications of its own thesis that repressive governments exacerbate social alienation and fan the religious opposition they seek to contain. Here the choice is simple: Either the U.S. supports groups that seek to overthrow the governments and replace them with supposedly better rulers, or it works with the existing governments to foster gradual reform. Following the U.S.’s very public support for what turned out to be the feckless “Tulip Revolution” in Kyrgyzstan, governments across the region view the U.S.’ intentions with deep suspicion. In the past two years U.S. relations in Central Asia have somewhat improved, but the old suspicions remain. And to this day the U.S. has no strategy for working *with*, rather than *on* the governments in question.

It is a fact that nearly all repressive actions by governments in Central Asia (including Afghanistan) arise from the ministries of Internal Affairs. All local officials, including the police, fall under these ministries, as do most jails, penal colonies, etc. In every country in the region, including Afghanistan, the Ministry of Internal Affairs has its own armed forces, which are used to quell civil unrest. It is no exaggeration to say that, for most Central Asians most of the time, their national Ministry of Internal Affairs *is* the government. In every government, this ministry has more power than any other agency to curtail the free practice of religion, restrict human rights, suppress dissent, limit

democracy, thwart the development of market economies, and foster corruption. Conversely, reforms in these centrally-important ministries are the surest steps to real improvement in all of these vital areas.

Regarding the rights of religious groups and individuals, the U.S. has engaged in extensive discussions with ministries of religious affairs, religious dissidents, grand muftis, human rights advocates, and national presidents. All, including the presidencies, are beside the point if there is no serious contact with the ministries of internal affairs. But U.S. policy has considered these ministries to be the “bad guys.” As if fearing contamination, the State Department and other U.S. agencies have studiously avoided contact with the ministries of internal affairs. Typically, it worked successfully through NATO’s Partnership for Peace to reform the ministries of defense, but did nothing to retrain and reform the armed forces under the ministries of internal affairs. Not surprisingly, it is these forces, rather than the regular army, that have invariably been used against civilian demonstrators, whether religious or secular.

Local sympathy for religious extremists has many causes but above all it arises from utter frustration with the civil authorities. This refrain is heard across Central Asia and in every region of Afghanistan. It is a reasonable if desperate response to the reality on the ground. Local civil servants are uneducated and undertrained. The miserably low salaries they receive all but guarantee that they will become corrupt. National budgets focus on the needs of the region’s burgeoning cities but ignore the countryside and the civil servants toiling there.

U.S. and western policy has ignored the local civil services, preferring instead to work through NGOs that work outside the government and often against it. The presence in provincial towns of the sons and daughters of the national elites, driving Land Cruisers and receiving salaries from foreign-funded NGOs that are three times higher than what the local governors receive, further embitters local

authorities. Given all this, it is quite understandable that they take out their anger on the citizenry, and in so doing cultivate the soil in which religious extremism can flourish.

To summarize, if it really wishes to address the issue of religious extremism in Central Asia/Afghanistan, the U.S. must choose between working with governments across the region or against them, between engaging in the messy and long-term task of real reform or disengagement, which will inevitably isolate the U.S. and render its presence in Central Asia unwanted and irrelevant. Real engagement will require patience and tenacity, since the kind of institutions that citizens can trust are not built quickly. Instead of showering judgments on regional governments, the U.S. will have to take a more strategic approach, muting its criticism and focusing instead on training, communications, and the financial processes without which a professional and honest civil service is impossible. All this is as true for Afghanistan as for any other country in the region.

To bring civil service salaries to a level that will attract and retain competent people, the regional governments must acquire a reliable income stream. This problem is most acute in the mountain states of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and especially Afghanistan, where the U.S. is currently paying all civil service salaries. The best hope of these countries lies in the renewal of continental trade, which will enable farmers and mountain folk to get goods to market and enable governments to levy tariffs on long-distance shippers crossing their territories. This may seem a far cry from the issue of religious extremism but it is an essential component of any program to reduce its appeal in the region.

Equally important is to lend support to the modern sectors of education, culture, and information in the region. National, regional, and international sports, educational exchanges, school parings, sister city programs, theater, dance, contemporary pop music, and the burgeoning world of communications are all elements of the modern world that have

been denied to nearly all residents of Greater Central Asia outside the national capitals. With only limited access to these accoutrements of modernity, local young people are more readily tempted by extremist ideologies. The U.S. could do much more than it does to support such activities. This, along with the improvement of governmental services, would show mainstream Sunni Muslim residents of Central Asia that the modern world offers them possibilities that were heretofore beyond reach, and that participation in that world can bring rewards and satisfactions far beyond those held out by backwards-looking fundamentalists and the political forces through which they operate.

Such an approach would be the most strategic and most effective way of dealing with the problem of terrorism. Immediately after 9/11 there was much talk about "draining the swamp." This approach will do precisely that. It is an approach which plays on America's strengths, which lie above all in the area of effective governance and in the spheres of culture and education. It is not a substitute for the military effort in Afghanistan but an essential accompanying program. Acknowledging the importance of these measures, does America have to "go it alone" on this front? The answer is that America can and must rely on active participation by a host of open and democratic countries, including members of the EU (especially those who have refused to take an active military role through NATO), Japan, and India.

Three other countries present more complicated pictures. China is pursuing an extremely active policy in the entire region, but is not notable for it has contributed nothing to governance, education or culture there. The same must be said of Russia, which will demand a role in everything connected with the "war on terror" on the dubious ground that it knows the Afghans, but will not have earned it in the specific areas in question. Pakistan's modern sector could play a positive role, but only when its government is perceived in the region as no longer sponsoring armed Islamists. In short,

neither China, Russia, nor Pakistan should figure in the above program, at last in the first period of its existence. However, all three will have an interest in the program's success, even

if they choose to criticize it. The U.S. should proceed without them, but be willing to consider their participation whenever it considers the time to be ripe.