TAJIKISTAN I. STATUS OF ISLAM SINCE 1917
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TAJIKISTAN

i. Status of Islam Since 1917

Tajikistan, an independent Central Asian state since the end of 1991, was formerly part of the Soviet Union. Tajikistan's population, which numbered slightly more than six million in the year 2000, consists overwhelmingly of ethnic groups which have historically been Muslim, primarily the Tajiks (roughly 80 percent of the population) and the Uzbeks (roughly 15 percent; News.somoni.com). The vast majority of the Muslim peoples of Central Asia have traditionally followed the Hanafite legal school of Sunni Islam. The largest non-Sunni Muslim minority in Tajikistan consists of Pamiri peoples (speakers of various Eastern Iranian languages), most of whom have historically been Ismaʿilis; they probably constitute about 5 percent of the country's population, although the census counts them as Tajiks (Roy, p. 143).

At the start of the Soviet era (late 1917) and for the seven following years, the lands that would become Tajikistan were divided between two jurisdictions: Turkestan, an administrative unit inherited from the tsarist empire, and the emirate of Bukhara, an autonomous protectorate of Russia. After 1917, Turkestan was at least nominally part of Soviet Russia and subject to the new regime's revolutionary policies, although that position was tempered by the weaknesses of the new regime, especially the civil war which followed the Bolshevik Revolution. Bukhara was initially resistant to the kinds of radical changes that were attempted in Turkestan. Even after the overthrow of the emir in 1920 and the establishment of a revolutionary regime, in which Jadidists (see Spuler) figured prominently, little changed in eastern Bukhara, the core of the future Tajikistan and, during the civil war, one of the strongholds of armed opposition to the revolution.

In Turkestan, the Tashkent Soviet launched attempts to undermine Islam. These were part of a broader set of measures intended to transform society. Intended changes included confiscating *waqf*s and banning both *maktab*s and *šariʿa* courts. Such measures proved unpopular among Central Asians and drove more people into armed resistance to the new regime. Moreover, the comprehensive replacement of schools and courts with new, secular alternatives was beyond the means of the Soviets (Keller, pp. 36-38, 40-41; Saidbaev, p. 142). There were some instances of mullahs and other indigenous inhabitants of what would become Tajikistan cooperating actively with the Soviets, but they constituted a minority of the population (Nal’skiĭ, p. 2; Khudoiberdiev, p. 3; “My muzhali,” p. 2). By the early 1920s, the Soviets retreated from the most aggressively anti-Islamic policies. In the next few years, they co-opted some reform-minded Islamic figures in Tajikistan. Yet opposition to change remained strong, especially among the rural majority in Tajikistan. Religious figures encouraged that opposition (Jahangiri, p. 33). The Red Army added eastern Bukhara to the territory under Soviet control between 1922 and 1926. In 1924, as part of a region-wide redrawing of borders, eastern Bukhara became the Tajikistan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the new Uzbekistan Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1929, Khudzhand (Ḵojand) and other territories were added to Tajikistan, which was elevated to the status of a Soviet Socialist Republic.

The period from 1927 to the end of the 1930s was one of upheaval for the Soviet Union as a whole. In Tajikistan, as elsewhere in Central Asia, the forced collectivization of agriculture and destruction of any potential political opposition was accompanied by measures directed against Islam. Muslim religious figures were harassed, arrested, and in many instances, killed (Malashenko, p. 54). Religious schools were closed, mosques closed or converted to secular use, *waqf*s confiscated, and *šariʿa* courts discontinued (Saidbaev, pp. 164-65, 176-77). A drive to end the veiling and seclusion of women as well as polygamy began (Keller, p. 115). Some inhabitants of

Tajikistan reacted by fleeing abroad, to China or Afghanistan (Abdullaev, p. 4). A short-lived resumption of armed conflict flared up in 1931. The pilgrimage to Mecca (*ḥajj*), one of the core obligations for Muslims, was banned in 1928, although, in the post-Stalin era, small numbers of carefully selected Muslims were allowed to make the *ḥajj* (Ro'i, pp. 171-72, 173-75).

The inter-war years also saw the end of the use of the Arabic alphabet for written Tajik in the schools, press, and all public purposes. The initial alphabet shift was to the Latin script in 1928; the Cyrillic script was introduced in 1940 and has remained in use ever since. There was some talk of reviving the use of the Arabic alphabet in the final years of the Soviet era and the first few months of 1992, but the change was not implemented (Tadjbakhsh, 1994, pp. 203-4; Olimpur, p. 6). With the passage of time, few people were left who could read books, including those on religious subjects, that were written in the Arabic alphabet and had survived the book-burning campaigns of the inter-war years. There were instances of the Soviets prosecuting people in Tajikistan who gave private instruction in the Arabic alphabet on the grounds that this was religious proselytizing (S. Olimova and M. Olimov, pp. 96-97). Korans, in any alphabet or language, were scarce in Tajikistan for most of the Soviet period (Atkin, 1989b, p. 607). In 1991, a Tajik translation, based on a Persian translation, was published in Tajikistan (*Javononi Tojikiston*, p. 4).The Soviet system created a legal and administrative environment that was deliberately hostile to religions, including Islam. Although the most aggressive aspects of the anti-religious policies of the inter-war years were suspended during World War II, new waves of coercion occurred during Stalin's last years (1947-53) and under Khrushchev (1958-64). An increase in anti-Islamic propaganda characterized much of the 1980s, although the enforcement of anti-Islamic measures in that period was uneven (Atkin, 1989b, pp. 616-17).

Soviet law not only separated religion from the state, but also, as of 1921, prohibited the religious instruction of minors. The constitutions of 1936 and 1977 recognized Soviet citizens' right to profess a religion but outlawed religious proselytizing (Hazard, pp. 157, 159-60). Laws enacted in all the Soviet Socialist Republics in 1929 required that groups of adult believers with more than twenty members register with local government authorities in order to function legally. All houses of worship were confiscated (Keller, pp. 188-90). Eventually, the disproportionately small number of legally recognized congregations were allowed the use of some mosques. In 1943, the Soviets established four regionally based "Muslim Spiritual Administrations," one of which had jurisdiction over Central Asia; its headquarters were in Tashkent. Each of these Spiritual Administrations had considerable control over the finances and religious figures of registered congregations. Each Administration, as well as Soviet officials, exerted strict control over what religious figures preached in mosques (Ro'i, pp. 107-8, 123, 128, Malashenko, p. 55). In the late 1940s and for long thereafter, Tajikistan had only four legally recognized mosques; by the 1980s, that number had increased to seven (Ro'i, pp. 187-88, n. 29, Kholiqzoda, p. 103). By comparison, pre-Soviet Khudzhand, the most populous part of what would later become Tajikistan, had roughly 200 mosques in 1897 (Yakh'iaev and Saifiddinov, p. 63).

Soviet life-cycle ceremonies were created to supplant Islamic ones. The Ramadan fast was a target of the regime's public criticism for many years. Atheist propaganda was supposed to take place in schools, places of employment, and other public venues. For much of the Gorbachev era (1985-91), the new climate of reform was taken to mean more effective, less overtly antagonistic anti-Islamic propaganda, rather than acceptance of Islam (Atkin, 1989a, pp. 48-50, Kholiqzoda, p. 103, "Za aktivnuiu politiku," p. 3).

The Soviet regime sharply restricted access to the study of Islam. The anti-religious campaign which began in the late 1920s included efforts to end *maktab* and *madrasa* education (Saidbaev, p. 176). After World War II, there were two legally recognized Islamic schools for the Soviet Union as a whole; both were located in Uzbekistan: the Mir-i Arab (Mir-e ʿArab) madrasa in Bukhara (opened, 1946) and the Ismail al-Bukhari (Esmāʿil al-Boḵāri) Institute in Tashkent (opened, 1971), both of which taught small numbers of students. A few Soviet citizens were permitted to go abroad for further Islamic study, to countries such as Egypt, Syria, Libya, and Jordan (Utorbaev, p. 2). For example, the highest-ranking official of the "Muslim Spiritual Administration" in Tajikistan from 1988 to 1993, the chief qadi, Akbar Turajonzoda, was a graduate of the institutions in Bukhara and Tashkent as well as the Department of Islamic Law of the University of Jordan. Many of the legally recognized Islamic figures in Tajikistan did not attend either of the institutions in Uzbekistan or study abroad (Ro'i, p. 163). The close of the Soviet era saw some concessions to Muslims in Tajikistan. In 1991, Ramadan and ʿId-e qorbān became legal holidays there. The president of Tajikistan and other officials attended a ceremony to mark the departure of pilgrims to Mecca (Alimov, p. 1). It became possible to increase the number of legally registered mosques. By 1991, Tajikistan had 126 Friday mosques and 2,800 smaller ones (Rotar', p. 3).

The qadiate opened the Imam al-Termidhi (Emam al-Termiḏi) Islamic Institute in Dushanbe in 1990 (Lyubimenko, p. 1).

Despite the Soviet regime's efforts to eliminate religion from the public's consciousness, some measure of Islamic practice and belief survived among the indigenous inhabitants of Tajikistan. Given the political constraints, there are no reliable public opinion surveys that show how many people considered themselves Muslims or the degree to which they were observant. Still, some people continued to pray, observe the Ramadan fast at least partially, celebrate major religious holidays, and perform life-cycle rituals (Atkin, 1989a, p. 25). Even though there were few legal mosques in the republic, people contributed money to build unregistered ones. They adapted other buildings, such as teahouses and clubhouses, for use as mosques, sometimes festooning them with photographs of Soviet leaders and placards bearing Soviet slogans to camouflage the places' religious function (Atkin, 1989a, pp. 13-15). By the early 1980s, there were said to be more than 1,000 covert mosques in Tajikistan. Believers also went to pray at saints' tombs and numerous natural settings that had a popular reputation as holy places. Pilgrimages to religious sites converted to secular use by the Soviets could be disguised as tourism (Atkin, 1989b, p. 615). Family dwellings provided a venue in which unregistered Islamic figures conducted ceremonies and preached (Atkin, 1989b, p. 612). Folk Islamic practices, including Sufism, played an important role in sustaining religion among ordinary people (Atkin, 1989a, pp. 23-24).

Covert religious instruction existed apart from the two legally recognized facilities in Uzbekistan. Families were an essential venue for passing on knowledge of Islam from generation to generation. Some families managed to preserve religious books despite Soviet campaigns to destroy them and used these in the religious instruction of their children (Subhon, p. 4; Atkin, 1989a, p. 32). Family-based instruction usually covered the central tenets of the faith, some prayers, and the rites associated with the main holy days. In addition to the dissemination of religous information within families, mullahs taught small groups of local children in underground schools (Atkin, 1989b, p. 612). Religious figures received training in secret schools in Tajikistan's capital, Dushanbe, some of the republic's provinces, and Uzbekistan (Nazirov, p. 3). A few elderly men who had received their religious education before the revolution or abroad in the interwar years and survived the Stalin terror taught small numbers of students in post-World War II Tajikistan. Individuals who had a reputation for religious learning taught their sons and a few others in secret. Some unregistered religious figure were the sons of men who also fulfilled that function (Atkin, 1989b, pp. 609-10). Two leaders of the Islamic Rebirth Party of Tajikistan (see below), Sayyid Abdullo Nuri and Muḥammad Šarif Himmatzoda, studied with Nuri's father, who had a reputation for Islamic learning, in a village in southern Tajikistan. Then the two young men went to Dushanbe, where they studied in a secret madrasa run by Qori Muḥammadjon Hindustoni (also known as Muḥammad Rustamov) in the 1960s. Hindustani (1892-1989) had studied at Deoband before World War II. Upon returning to the Soviet Union, he spent fifteen years in Siberian exile. After his release, he went to Dushanbe and began teaching in secret (Roy, p. 154; Turajonzoda, p. 4; Ayubzod, p. 236).

In the opinion of leading figures in the Islamic revival of the 1990s, including Nuri, most of the Muslims in Tajikistan knew little about the substance of their faith (Nuri, p. 108). Some of the revivalists, Nuri among them, were critical of their fellow countrymen on the grounds that the folk Islam they practiced was contaminated by distortions of doctrine and superstitions ("Oškorbayonī baroi kist? "p. 2).

Since the early 1990s, Islam has been intertwined with politics. This reflects not only the efforts of some groups to increase the role of Islam in Tajikistan's public life but also the habit of dominant political factions of stigmatizing their opponents as advocating the creation of a radical Islamic state (Radio Dushanbe, p. 70). During the 1990s, the main Islamic political organization was the Islamic Rebirth Party of Tajikistan. Its core membership derived from a secret religious revival movement around Nuri dating from the late 1970s ("Millat," p. 4). In 1990, these people became affiliated with the newly established Islamic Rebirth Party of the Soviet Union, founded in that year by members of various historically Muslim ethnic groups, especially Tatars. Republic-level authorities declared the Tajikistan branch of the party illegal, but reversed their stance and allowed the party to register late in 1991, as the Soviet system neared collapse ("Postanovlenie," p. 1; Olimova, p. 137). At about the same time, the Tajikistan branch separated from the Soviet-wide party and became an independent entity, the Islamic Rebirth Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) ("Millat," p. 4). It drew members from several different regions of the country (Bushkov and Mikul'skiĭ, p. 25). Several Sufi *išān*s and their followers from the southeast of the country joined, swelling the party's ranks (Olimova, p. 135).In 1991, with Soviet power in decline, a political power struggle developed in Tajikistan between two diverse coalitions. The IRPT and Qadi Turajonzoda were allied with secular groups which advocated political and economic reforms. Opposing them were a cluster of factions which sought to preserve a Soviet-style monopoly of power for a ruling elite. The confrontation between the two camps escalated into civil war in mid-1992. The fighting was at its peak from then until early 1993 and continued on a lesser scale until the conclusion of a peace agreement in 1997. The reformist coalition was defeated, but the peace agreement enabled the IRPT to participate in the political process. The victors in the civil war banned the IRPT in 1993, but restored its legal standing in accordance with the peace agreement. A few members of the IRPT received government positions, at least briefly. In addition, Himmatzoda became a member of the legislature. Turajonzoda, became a first deputy prime minister; he ceased to be a member of the IRPT in 1999.

The civil war pitted members of Tajikistan's Muslim community against each other. For example, Haidar Šarifov/Šarifzoda, the imam of the registered Friday mosque in the province of Kulob, where support for the anti-reformist coalition was strong, broke away from the Dushanbe qadiate in 1992 and formed a separate, albeit short-lived, one in that province ("R. Nabiev," p. 1). Pamiris came under attack, not for being Ismaʿilis, but because a number of them played an active role in the reformist coalition. The IRPT and a Pamiri party, Laʿli Badak̲šon, were allies in that coalition, but the avowedly secular anti-reformists persecuted Pamiris for advocating change (Tadjbakhsh, 1993, p. 28). Many in Tajikistan's Uzbek minority sided with the anti-reformists, encouraged perhaps by rumors that the reformers wanted to expel Uzbeks from the country (Mirzorak̲matov, p. 1).

In post-civil war Tajikistan, the IRPT has had little political power. It garnered fractionally less than eight percent of the votes in the legislative elections of 2000. Among the explanations suggested for the IRPT's poor showing is public disenchantment with it. Having agreed to cooperate with the government, in keeping with the peace agreement, it no longer offered an alternative for those who opposed the status quo. The horrors of the civil war, which cost unknown tens of thousands of lives and displaced an even larger number of people, alienated Tajikistanis from the IRPT because of its role in the conflict (International Crisis Group, 2003b, p. 7). In any event, the elections in 2000 may not be best measure of public attitudes toward the IRPT, since the vote did not meet international standards for freedom and fairness (Human Rights Watch, pp. 1-2).

In the opening years of the 21st century, other, more radical Islamic parties appeared to be operating in Tajikistan, although the clandestine nature of their existence and the political motivation for government statements about them makes it difficult to assess them accurately. The best known of these groups is Hizb ut-Tahrir (*Ḥezb al-Taḥrir*), which may have garnered some support in northern Tajikistan, especially among Uzbeks there (International Crisis Group, 2003a, pp. 21).

Independent Tajikistan adopted a system of state control over Islamic institutions that owed much to Soviet practice. The Spiritual Administration in Tashkent broke apart with the collapse of the Soviet Union, but Tajikistan created its own institutions. The Council of Ulama and government officials chose those who served as imams in mosques. Mosques still had to be registered with the state. As of 2003, Tajikistan had 251 registered Friday mosques and 3,000 smaller ones, as well as an unknown number of unregistered ones ((International Crisis Group, 2003a, pp. 14-16). The Emam al-Termiḏi Islamic Institute continued to teach students in Dushanbe, but the number enrolled dwindled. Madrasas operated in several cities around the country, although the government shut a few of them in the mid-1990s (International Crisis Group, 2003a, p. 17; "Interview," p. 10). The quality of religious instruction was questionable, because so many of the teachers in religious schools had themselves received a limited, clandestine education during the Soviet era. In the first decade of Tajikistan's independence, more than 1,000 Tajikistanis went abroad for their religious education, to countries such as Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, as well as to other formerly Soviet republics. However, by early in the 21st century, Tajikistan's government curtailed this practice (International Crisis Group, 2003a, p. 18). Many people still received whatever religious education they had, if any, through unofficial, local arrangements, especially from relatives (International Crisis Group, 2003b, p. 4).

Attempts to gauge the level of religiosity among the inhabitants of Tajikistan in the early 21st century were necessarily problematical because of the continued political sensitivity of the issue. One notable attempt was a survey conducted by a non-governmental organization in 2003 among 800 residents of diverse regions within the country. The survey found that 95.3 percent of the respondents considered themselves Muslims, but there were substantial differences among these professed believers in the degree to which they were observant (International Crisis Group, 2003b, p. 4)

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