

Religion and Politics of Terror in Central Asia

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After the end of Cold War the world has witnessed a new kind of violence which is popularly known as terrorism. This violence has too many dimensions and it has been difficult to define such a phenomenon because of the clear lack of consensus over the matter. Simply put, one can say that it signifies act(s) of violence perpetrated by a single individual or a group of individuals motivated by some ideology that may either seek to correct some perceived injustice or merely to get a hold on power. The main aim of terrorism is to propagate terror and trade in fear. The targets of terrorism, unlike in a defined war, could be the unarmed civilians apart from armed personnel of a state or group. Terrorism does not care about any human sentiments. The main aim of terrorism and terrorists is to terrorise and invoke fear in people or states perceived to be their 'enemies' and force them to toe their line.[1] We have seen the tentacles of terrorism in South Asia. However, the demolition of twin trade towers in New York on September 11, 2001 has emerged as the most haunting symbol of terror in a globalised world. This has indeed rung the alarm bells for the international community.

What is more alarming about this new wave of international terrorism is the way religion is being interwoven into the credo of terrorism in many parts of the world. People like Osama Bin Laden and Mullah Umar, who have emerged as the faces of terror, have sought to project their perverse idea of Islamic religion as a model and are trading in hatred and fear. The War on Terrorism by America and its allies might have succeeded in the initial round by pushing them out of Afghanistan but the ideology they have planted in Afghanistan and the neighbourhood may continue to grow in spite of the combing operations now under way by the joint efforts of the American and Pakistani Army in Pakistan. In whole of Central Asia, in fact, the forces of terror have managed to forge religion successfully into their political strategy and are looking for the opportune moment to strike. The basic thrust of this paper is to analyse the various factors, which have accelerated the pace of terrorism and religious fanaticism in Central Asia.

Introduction

Islamic civilisation flourished in Central Asia from the beginning of the 8th century AD to the beginning of the 14th century A.D, i.e., till the Mongol invasion.[2] The rise of Islam in Central Asia is not only a unique event in the history of Islam, but it is a strange phenomenon in human history as a whole, because the spread of Islam in this region gave birth to a highly advanced civilisation. Bokhara gave birth to the first Persian poet Rodhki, in the 10th century AD, Firdausi of Mahmud's Court wrote the greatest epic poem of all times in the 11th century AD. Professor Wambre, in his famous book "*History of Bokhara*", points out that in Bokhara and Smarkand, the seats of learning, astronomy, mathematics, algebra, geography, medicine, astrology, ethics, theology, painting, poetry and literature were established.[3] The whole Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) had thus had a flourishing socio-cultural life in the medieval period. The adventures of Timur Lane, Muhammad of Ghur and the Mughals who conquered India in 16th Century AD have passed into the folklores in the region and years of communist rule could not wipe them off from the public memory. The memories of a rich and affluent past continue to haunt the people in this area even to this day.

The collapse of Communism and the subsequent break up of the Soviet Union as a multi-ethnic empire in fact provided an opportunity for the religious revival in the region. The Communist regime had, with iron hands, suppressed even religious rituals in this region for many decades. However, the common bond of unity that Islam provided among the people of the Central Asian republics continued to unite the people at the emotional level. The surge of mosques, madrasas or religious schools in the entire area immediately after the Soviet disintegration signifies the hold of the appeal of Islam as an important item of culture in the entire Central Asian region. The sudden independence from the Soviet Empire gave a tremendous boost to the morale of Islamic groups banned during the Soviet period. The Soviet collapse brought with it a sense of assurance to the people (mostly Muslims and almost 50-55 million in number) after 70 years of coercive Soviet rule. The successor regimes in almost all the Central Asian Republics carried with them the inertial aversion towards religion. But sensing the popular craze for Islam, these rulers accorded state patronage to Islam yet sought to dissociate religion from politics after the secular tradition of the West. This had its inescapable impact on the politics in the region and the Islamists appealed to the religious sensibilities of the people at large to expand their constituency. This latent struggle for power between a secular group firmly in saddle (and unwilling to share its authority with the rising conservative elite) and the influential Islamist groups growing restive with their ambition to wrest power by hook or by crook characterised the mode of politics in the entire region. In the process one saw the rise of an assertive brand of Islamist force competing for influence in the socio-political arena. The

rise of Taliban in the immediate neighbourhood contributed to the growth, development and consolidation of these forces.

In fact, revival of Islam in the Central Asian Republics can be interpreted as a cultural, social and religious phenomenon for people publicly wanted to demonstrate their socio-cultural identity in contrast with the years of crisis of ethnic identity during the coercive Communist rule. Islam emerged as a rallying point in addition to the ethno-cultural identities the people harped on. Some external factors played important roles in strengthening the influence of Islam in the region. For example there was a big rush of money too from the neighbourhood to help the building of madrasas, dissemination of religious literature, launching of publications to boost the Islamist constituency. With the arrival of funds, Korans, literature on Islam along with *mullahs* from Saudi Arabia, Iran and Pakistan, the hold of Islam increased in these countries. This popular version differed in content and orientation from the Islam officially recognised by the leadership in power. The anti-establishment feelings of the people could easily be channelised into their support base by the counter-elite who thrived on popular craze for Islam and the resentment against the secular regime in power. The refusal of Central Asian governments to allow Islamic education in government schools resulted in the spread of unofficial Islamic schools or madrassas.[4] The continuation of this official policy by the governments in Central Asian Republics (CARs) indirectly supported the growth of terrorism and religious fanaticism in this area. Fargana valley of Uzbekistan became a hotbed and sanctuary for the terrorists in this area. It is to be noted here that first Mughal emperor of India, was also from the Fargana valley.

The Uzbek Factor

The Uzbeks are the most aggressive and influential as a race and right since the Soviet days, they exercised great influence in the region. Uzbeks are the most numerous with almost 22 million living in Uzbekistan and more than six million Uzbeks living in other CARs.[5] Uzbekistan still retains its importance in the aftermath of the Soviet disintegration. Today, Uzbekistan has emerged as the Islamic heartland and the political nerve centre of Central Asia. Geographically, Uzbekistan is the most significant of all the Central Asian Republics. Its principal cities of Samarkand and Bokhara have played host to countless civilizations. Bokhara has a long history, which stretches over 2500 years. It had become the second most important center for Islamic learning after Arabia. Medieval Bokhara contained 360 mosques and 113 madrassas and even in early 1900s, until the Soviet takeover, there were 10,000 students studying at 100 active madrassas. Apart from this, the 250-mile long Farghana valley, with its long associations with Islamic learning

and militancy such as the Bosmachis, is also the richest agricultural region in Central Asia.[6]

Mohamad Ibn Wali, a sixteenth century historian, described the early Uzbeks as ‘famous for their bad nature, swiftness, audacity and boldness’ and revealed their ‘outlaw image’.[7] Little has changed in the Uzbek desire for power and influence since then. The resurgence of Islam in the Fargana valley has turned Uzbekistan into the nucleus of all fundamentalist activity in the region. It has also become the conduit point of the terrorists. Most of the fundamentalists in Central Asia are educated and trained in the Fargana valley. The popular slogan of extremist groups operating in the region is *‘first Fargana, then Uzbekistan and then the whole Central Asia will become an Islamic state’*. [8] These radical Islamic Forces have brought about socio-economic disaster in many of the CARs by giving rise to civil wars in the entire region.[9]

Taliban and Pakistan

The happenings in Afghanistan, especially the emergence of the Taliban and Osama bin Laden and their open support to the radical extremist groups, have also played a crucial role in the ongoing fundamentalist movements in the CARs. The mentors of the radical forces from outside have actively supported their extremist agenda. For example, the Jamat-I-Islami of Pakistan has very actively supported radical Islamists in Uzbekistan. In fact, many analysts consider Pakistan responsible for spreading the communal and ethnic virus much before the downfall of the Soviet Union in the region.

Brutal violence against ethnic Russians in Dushanbe and other parts of the Tajik Republic had its roots in rapid Islamic fundamentalist orientation. Now, despite a 1997 peace agreement that formally ended the civil war, Tajikistan continues to be plagued by regular outbursts of violence.[10] The rest of the Republics also face the same threat. On August 9, 2000, about 100 armed-men crossed into southern Kyrgyzstan from Tajikistan and clashed with Kyrgyz soldiers. Another group moved into Uzbekistan. Armed Islamist militants, using the Afghan sanctuaries, had also been moving across the all five CARs. Numerous mercenaries of Chechen, Arab, Afghan and European descent were reportedly fighting side by side with Uzbeks under the command of warlord Jumbai Namangani- a *wahabi* trained in Afghanistan.[11] He was recently killed in the Afghanistan war. The capture of northern Afghanistan by the Taliban had in fact given emotional boost to the terrorists from the CARs.

Drug Money

The basic resources of these groups are the narcotic smugglings. After the downfall of Soviet Union, the CAR's have become the major route for drug-supply in European countries and the U.S. The International Narcotics Control Board is concerned about the rapid spread of illicit crop cultivation and the trafficking in and abuse of drugs, especially heroin, in the CARs. Its report says "There is now substantial evidence that countries in Central Asia are being used as transit points to transport (drugs) from east to west. Drug traffickers have taken advantage of the lack of control on the borders between CIS member states and transportation links established in Central Asia. It has been reported that heroin with a high purity level smuggled via Central Asian countries and the Russian Republics Federation, has been introduced on the illicit market in a number of European Countries.[12] Terrorist groups are taking their share in this illegal trade and using this money for their operation. The spread of various ethnic groups the CARs has facilitated the drug smuggling. The table appended below shows the spread of different ethnic groups.[13]

Ethnic Composition of Central Asian States

Ethnic groups	Kazakhasta n	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenista n	Uzbekista n
Russians	37%	22%	4%	10%	8%
Kazaks	42%	-	-	2%	4%
Kyrgyz	-	52%	1%	-	5%
Turkmen	-	-	-	73%	-
Uzbeks	2%	13%	25%	9%	71%
Total Population	17376615	4769877	6155474	4075316	2308926

The drugs-trade has sustained the radical fundamentalist agenda of the Islamists and strengthened their resolve. Various extremist groups have become so strong that they have made many assassination bids on many of the VVIPS of CARs.

Some of the Extremist organisations[14]

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) IMU was responsible for several attacks and hostage-taking on the territory of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Most regional observers agree that the IMU emerged primarily as a response to the Uzbek government's crackdown

on some Islamic institutions. The group draws support from among the young community, dissatisfied with pervasive corruption in the country, its extreme poverty, and governments, hostile stance toward non-sanctioned Islamic-institutions.

United Tajik Opposition (UTO).

The UTO began in the early 1990s as a conduit of Islamic and nationalist organisations opposing the Communist government of Tajikistan. During the Tajik civil war of 1992-97, the movement coalesced several organisations and radicalized them. This happened especially after many had been forced into exile in northern Afghanistan where they linked up with local terrorist forces. The group has been active after the 1997 peace accord with the Tajik government.

Radical Chechen Groups

Some of the fighters in Chechnya have close links to fundamentalist groups in the Middle East and a number of fighters in their ranks come from the region. The support for such groups comes from outside. But Pakistan and Afghanistan are very important among them.

Role of Pakistan and Afghanistan

Many countries in the southwest and Central Asia have been facing political developments, which are mainly being attributed to the rise of militant Islamic movements in the region. Strategic analysts consider Pakistan and Afghanistan acting as the launching pads for many of the extremist groups operating in Central Asia. This tendency got a new lease of life especially after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. It is confirmed now that Osama bin Laden, an ex- mujahideen in the Afghan Jihad, could launch his terrorist activities throughout the world with active support from Pakistan and the Taliban in Afghanistan. His organisation, Al Qaeda (the Base), is being regarded as the nerve centre for network of International terrorism which he spread in the name of safeguarding Islam. He infact gave the slogan that wherever Islam will be in danger, his organisation will take action against the oppressive regime. It is impossible to imagine the success of his network without active connivance of the Mullah Omar's Taliban in his scheme of things. It is also an open secret that the 'Taliban' was the handiwork of Pakistani intelligence, when Benazir was in power in the early 1990s(1994). With active moral and material support from Pakistan, the Taliban consolidated their position within Afghanistan and after that started stretching their tentacles to adjoining areas including Central Asian Republics. It is now well-known that Pakistan's willing embroilment in the Afghan Jihad of the 1970s and 1980s has left it high and dry. The Afghans who migrated into Pakistan during these years brought with them a culture of intolerance and the halo created around the concept of Islamic Jihad and establishment of an Islamic state in Afghanistan had inevitable fall out on the Pakistani

society. Pakistani society was Islamised and militarised as well. By conservative estimates, Pakistan is home to approximately 6,000 religious seminaries containing as many as 500,000 students, from Pakistan, West Asia, Central Asia and even from North Caucasus and even Far East.

Afghanistan became another natural sanctuary as well as the training center for the terrorists after the Taliban takeover. The porous border and weak security apparatus between Afghanistan and the Central Asian Republics have contributed to mobility of these forces and made it easier for them to operate from multiple bases. Such unguarded porosity has made terrorist operations extremely easy and effective.

The socio-political situation obtaining in the Central Asian Republics has also been very conducive for the rise of these forces. The incumbent regimes in the region—residue of the Soviet era—are growing increasingly authoritarian and unresponsive to popular demands. The rigged elections that legitimise their rules and restriction on political parties that could compete with them at the national levels have undermined the democratic alternatives and created the space for underground Islamist movements to make their bid for power as the only available political opposition. On the economic front, things are getting from bad to worse. Widespread poverty and unemployment provide a fertile recruiting base for young militants.

In view of all this, Pakistan and Taliban perhaps considered Islamic fundamentalism as the only potent force that will come to power in the future. An important strategic consideration underlined their covert support to such forces in CARs—by lending their support to such groups whose area of influence was growing day by day they will have friendly dispensations in the neighbourhood and establish their hegemony in the region. The success of Afghan Jihad might have instilled in them great confidence to attempt similar interventions with Islam as the main driving force. Pakistan facilitated the Taliban agenda in this regard. It is important to remember that like Pakistan and Afghanistan majority of the population in the Central Asian Republics were Sunni Muslims. As such the Wahabite-Sunni version of Islam preached by Osama, Mullah Omar and Mullahs of Pakistan did strike a sympathetic chord of unity among the people and Afghanistan under Taliban started emerging as the axis of Islamic fundamentalism in the entire region. But for the September attacks and the subsequent ‘War on Terrorism’, the Pakistan-Taliban nexus would have continued to the present day. The dent of this nexus can be gauged from the fact that by 1997-98, Taliban had established itself as an umbrella organisation for a pan-Islamic movement. Even Al Qaeda was relying heavily on its support and playing second fiddle to it.

It is also very important to remember that armed Islamist militants operating in the Central Asian region used the Afghan soil for their continuous attack on the present regimes in CARs. The Fargana-valley-based IMU, an extremist organisation that the US department of state ranks fourth in its list of international terrorist organisations, which became the backbone of the radical Islamic movement that threatened to sweep the region, used Afghan soil as a safe sanctuary and planned its operations there. [15] In the early months of 1999, Tahir Yuldeshev, the leader of the IMU, fled to Afghanistan. Yuldeshev is allegedly one of the masterminds behind the assassination attempt against Uzbek President Islam A. Karimov in February 1999, when six bombs in Tashkent killed 16 people and wounded 128. Later on, he established a terrorist training camp near the border. According to various reports he was also imparting training to several hundred Islamist militants from CARs as well as Uighurs from Xinjiang province of China.[16] The developments which took place after the withdrawal of the Taliban from Kabul and Mazar-e-Sharif in the wake of the 'War on Terrorism' seems to have retarded the process but still it is too early to say how this will affect the radical Islamist movements in the neighbourhood.

Chechenya Problem and Central Asia

Chechenya geographically comes in the Caucasian region. The history of the Russian conquest of the Caucasus is a sad tale of colonisation and domination. Chechens were at the receiving end of the Soviet Russian administration all throughout the years of the Soviet rule since the end of the First World War. Whenever the Chechen got an opportunity, they opposed the Soviet occupation. During Second World War, for example the Chechens had supported the Germans in their attack on Russia. When the Soviet Red Army pushed back the Nazi Army, Stalin ordered the heavy deportation of Chechens to the CARs. [17] The fall of the Soviet Union and the independence of CARs, gave an opportunity to the Chechen rebels to speed up their struggle against the Russians. The radical Chechen opposition to Russian rule crystallised along Islamic lines and the Chechens too developed good links with and drew their inspirations from the Taliban experiment and the radical Islamist movements in the neighbourhood. Radical Chechen groups have good co-ordination with IMU of Uzbekistan. The roots even go deeper. The Chechen rebels even received their training in special training camps in Pakistan and Afghanistan. It is also reported that they also received financial support from the Islamist forces [18] and drug barons in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Economic Angle and Superpower interests

The discovery of vast reserves of hydrocarbon in the Central region has added another strategic dimension to the whole issue. The region received greater attention of the West because of this. Many powerful states in the region also started taking deep interest in CARs. In fact, the hydrocarbon factor in CARs brought in the western multinational companies into the fray. The oil rich Iran and Saudi Arabia, who were already in a covert competition to extend their spheres of influence within the Islamic world were pitted against each other in Central Asia. An equally important dimension to be noted is that both Iran and Saudi Arabia also realised that the hydro carbon reserves, if exploited fully, can pose a competition to their own oil industries. Thus, Central Asia today is an even larger complex quagmire of competitive interests for its reserve of natural gas and oil. Russia, USA, Iran, Turkey, India and China are the major powers who have their economic stakes in CARs.[19]

It is very interesting to note that the economic interest of these powers have been interlinked directly or covertly with the ongoing terrorism in this area. Islamic countries are taking CARs, as their natural ally but at the same time, rivalry among them in terms of dominance in this area is going on. As has been noted earlier, the Islamic radical movements in the CARs drew their sustenance from moral and material inducements from Saudi Arab, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan and Afghanistan. This competition for influence affected the nature of politics in all the states and gave rise to the Islamist constituency.

The incumbent elite in power sought to counter such influences through establishing good diplomatic relations with the Western powers. As was seen in recent months, the present governments of CARs have provided airbase and other essential assistance to the US led coalition forces in its 'War on Terror'. The basic thrust of this assistance by the CARs has been to reduce the pace of terrorism in CARs by helping the coalition target the sponsors of Islamic fundamentalism in the region —the Taliban and Osama Bin Laden. Initial developments suggest that with the fall of the Taliban and Osama the pace of Islamic fundamentalism has received a big jolt. But at the same time, the possibility remains that a significant number of Taliban fleeing the Allied attacks might have migrated to the CARs for shelter and they could use the existing facilities established by IMU and their sister organisations to launch their operations again.

The Future Ahead

It is almost certain that the future set-up of Afghanistan, in absence of the Taliban will affect the pace of terrorism in this area. But at the same time, the governments in the CARs, government will have to develop a pluralistic and viable democratic system, under which

various ethnic and linguistic aspirations could be accommodated. The virus of terrorism and religious fanaticism cannot be eliminated only through successful security operations. They will have to concentrate hard on improving the socio-economic conditions of the common people. They have to democratise their systems of administration and allow meaningful popular participation in the processes of governance. That will go a long way in reducing the pernicious, external influences and in defeating the constituency of fundamentalism and terrorism in the region.

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