

**ISLAMIC EXTREMISM IN CENTRAL ASIA: WESTERN MYTH  
OR ASIAN REALITY?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **ISLAMIC EXTREMISM IN CENTRAL ASIA: WESTERN MYTH OR ASIAN REALITY?**

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On the threshold of a new century the problem of international security and stability remains one of the fundamental problems of the contemporary world. The single difference is that instead of remnants and setbacks of the Cold War, international terrorism and extremism, aggressive nationalism and separatism occupy the proscenium as dangerous detonators undermining peace and stability.

Unfortunately, Central Asia is suffering of them more than any other place on the globe. In the past the communist ideology cut short any attempts at sorting out the role religion played in the world under an assumption that it was nothing more than a remnant of the past. There were no practical religious studies that every state badly needs to pursue a correct domestic and foreign policy. Today, wars, conflicts and confrontations which sustain in the certain region or state in the course of time, and this is re-affirmed by the life itself, without fail go beyond these bounds and acquire cross-border and transnational character, dragging into crucible of these conflicts more and more new territories and powers.

One can witness this in the example of the Central Asian region which is at present becoming a target for expansion and aggression of the forces of international terrorism and extremism, nurturing the far-reaching ends aimed at reversing the states of this region from the ultimately chosen road of democratic and secular development as well as at establishing in their place the clerical and despotic regimes.

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Many of the problems looming large in Central Asia today are rooted in its Muslim and Soviet past. The region is still affected by continued opposition and cooperation of the two civilizations born, among other things, by its geopolitical location between Russia and the Muslim East. One can detect there a complicated pattern of a symbiosis of unfinished modernization along Western lines and the reviving elements of national culture and local traditions intimately connected with Islam. Religion and a mounting interest in it directly affect political choice there.

Revived Islam attracts interest in the West and in post-Soviet countries yet and present tendency to confuse Islamic fundamentalism and Islamic extremism evident in political studies is wrong. Fundamentalism is not an exclusively Islamic feature, it can be found in other confessions, too, and is a product of contradictions between conservative mass consciousness and rapid changes in the world. Christian fundamentalism is obvious in the Evangelical and Orthodox churches. Islamic extremism, a product of Islamic fundamentalism, never shuns terror and violence when building up Islamic order.

The term "Renaissance" can be hardly applied to an increased Islamic influence in the world. It seems that re-Islamization describes the process much better while Renaissance has been already reserved for a definite period in West European history when man liberated himself from all sorts of dogmas, religious dogmas in the first place.

Pre-Soviet Islamic models or different forms of Islam existing in other Muslim states are ill-suited for Central Asia. The Central Asian Islam needs modernization to fit the post-industrial realities of the 21st century. The region is awash with revived ethnic

awareness and religious feelings, the factors that complement one another to a great extent. One should not forget that religion and ethnic traditions have been in existence there for many centuries open to common historical, economic, military and geopolitical influences. Now, the countries also share a geopolitical factor that betrays itself in intertwined political, economic, ethnic and religious processes. One has to add that religious confrontation has started disintegration.

Today, like in the seventies, the world is demonstrating a profound interest in Islam kindled by the new independent states that sprang into being in the Asian heartland and immediately attracted attention of political scientists. There was no shortage of forecasts of their future “pan-Islamism” or even Islamic extremism and fundamentalism.

Radical Islam is a new phenomenon in Central Asia and it constitutes a challenge not only to the political leaderships and the traditional clergy but also to society as a whole. There is a risk that radical Islam may bring conflict and divisions to these societies in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

The Tashkent bomb explosion and the hostage crisis in Batken (Kyrgyzstan) last year made religious extremism in Central Asia both a hot topic for discussion and compelling instigator for action. The experts are busy writing papers and holding conferences, governments are busy setting up anti-terrorist, anti-separatist, anti-extremist alliances, strengthening borders, and shaping up the military, the intelligence services are busy exchanging information and sharing experiences, and the militants are reportedly busy getting ready for another major attack. All that flurry of activity caused by the incidents, with the involvement of such heavyweights as Russia and the United States, is

a phenomenon in itself, showing that Central Asia is perceived as a strategically important region both on the regional and global level.

What happened and what is happening in Central Asia? In this thesis I will try to analyze the recent events that received most coverage and gave the concept of the “threat of religious extremism in Central Asia” a ringing value. As threat of religious extremism in Central Asia is taking place and interpreting by western analysts and scholars as a reply to internal policy of authorities, I will try to clarify the main causal factors of its appearance and in a comparative analysis consider these factors. Finally, I will try to draw the conclusion of this comparative analysis with full understanding that the situation is developing.

## **II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF ISLAMIC EXTREMISM EXPLANATION**

Although radical Islam has so far constituted a relatively limited phenomenon in Eurasia, its role is growing. In Central Asia a process of Islamic extremism and fundamentalism was initiated during “perestroika” in the 1980s. This process accelerated after the break-up of the Soviet Union as the societies in this region searched for their roots and for identity, norms and values. As a result Islam has become an important political factor.

Fundamentalism is defined as an approach idealizing the golden past of Islam, calling for a return to “pure and original Islam”<sup>1</sup> and the construction of an Islamic state. It is a philosophical approach; a fundamentalist can be a law-abiding citizen throughout his life. He defines Islamism as the political practice of creating an Islamic state. Islamism can be radical/extremist or moderate. In most cases its followers consider the ruling political leadership to be illegitimate.

Islamic extremism has a number of different faces. A crucial question for the future of these areas is the potential for Islamic extremism to develop into a factor of conflict and instability. Extremism is just one of the faces of political Islam, but it is the one that gives rise to most concern. In August 1999 the threat of radical Islamism received the attention of international media as Islamists took up arms in Central Asia. In

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<sup>1</sup> Pure and original Islam – saying from Koran, which means that Islamic law calls for equality between the people.

southern Kyrgyzstan ethnic Uzbek Islamists tried to force their way to Uzbekistan from Tajikistan over Kyrgyz territory to continue their struggle for an Uzbek Islamic republic.

These events arose from very specific circumstances, in which Islam was not the main issue but was used as an instrument in a political struggle. Still, these groups can be considered offshoots of a broader trend of re-Islamization.

The governments of Central Asia unanimously claim that those responsible for the accidents are religious extremists, fanatics and terrorists supported by evil forces from abroad. But how accurate is the picture? And who are these people with guns and bombs, the ones roaming the mountains between Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and the ones currently in jail on various charges, but collectively called “Wahhabis”<sup>2</sup> and religious extremists? How did they appear, and what do they want?

Zbigniew Brzezinski has said that Islam is pressing to the North thus turning back the geopolitical movement of the last two centuries<sup>3</sup>. This became a banality. The Islamists have never tried to conceal their intentions. Jelaliddin al-Farsi, one of the ideologists of the revolution in Iran, has openly admitted: “We have performed an Islamic revolution in Iran and we believe that we have to turn it into a worldwide Islamic revolution. What we need is an Islamic revolution in the entire Sunni Afghanistan. It will give an impetus to a genuine worldwide Islamic revolution. It will be more powerful than

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<sup>2</sup> Wahhabism – movement in Islam from mid-18th century, calling for a renewal of the Muslim spirit, with cleansing of the moral, and removal of all innovations to Islam. Wahhabism is known for its conservative regulations, which have impact on all aspects of life. The movement has played an important role in the founding of Saudi Arabia.

<sup>3</sup>Mr.Brzezinski, national security advisor to President Carter, is counselor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1979.

the French and all other revolutions. We shall inspire a third Islamic revolution in Central Asia”.<sup>4</sup>

Religious extremists skillfully use destructive social passions that have been concentrating in the Central Asian countries in the last decade. They are bringing together religion and politics to heat the situation up to the civil war.

Central Asian governments has probably woken up to the fact that fundamentalism is one of the radical forms of protest against economic disorder and direct and indirect pressing. The first steps toward eliminating the social and economic factors of popularity of fundamentalist ideas kindle hope. One has to recognize, however, that many mistakes have been already made - the fundamentalists of the Central Asian region have not yet exhausted the political and extremist potential.

The turning to Islam by the establishment has a complex and controversial character. On the one hand, all the Central Asian states are secular in accordance with their constitutions. Religion is separated from politics. In response to a question on whether Central Asian states correspond to “the standards of the Muslim world”, its governments said a categorical “no”: “We are out of keeping with the Muslim standards because we are a secular state”.<sup>5</sup>

However, the social reasons for politicizing Islam lie in the general crisis of the system, the difficulties of economic rebuilding of society and the lowering of the status of

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<sup>4</sup> Jelaliddin al-Farsi, one of the ideologists of the revolution in Iran, 1980.

<sup>5</sup> Islam Karimov – President of Uzbekistan (after signing the security pact with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), Astana, 2000

entire social strata – this leads to persistent disaffection among the people and spurs them to look for a way out of the current situation via the authentic ethnic and religious values, which were lost in the Soviet era and have not been reconstructed in the post-Soviet period. We speak of a search for an “Islamic alternative”. While this seems to be a Utopia, more and more people from many different sectors of society are turning to it.<sup>6</sup>

This tendency is based on the desire to restore social justice backed by strong authoritarian rule and directly connected with direct appeals to the “genuine” Islamic tradition of the Prophet’s era in which, Muslims believe, social justice and strong religious and political authorities are inseparable.

There is a threat of blending the Islamists’ aggressiveness with remnants of the anomalous forms of consciousness and behavior, which are often seen in people unable to embrace from the bottom of their hearts kindness, the ideals of justice and other moral values.

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<sup>6</sup> G.Saidazimova, “Islam and the West: is dialog of civilization is possible?”, 1999.

### **III. VIEWS OF CENTRAL ASIAN ISLAM AND CURRENT SITUATION IN THE REGION**

In the late 70s, Central Asia avoided the Islamic boom that shook the post-colonial East: Central Asia had never been part of the Caliphate and its population had never been subjected to Islamic political influences. In Central Asia Islam has developed into a religious-philosophical rather than a political system. Moreover, the population should never forget the atheistic Soviet period when cultural traditions were mercilessly uprooted under a pretext of combating pan-Islamism<sup>7</sup> and pan-Turkism<sup>8</sup>. Decrees were enforced by the full weight of the central state apparatus. Soviet Institutes of Scientific Atheism commanded larger staffs than the Moslem Spiritual Boards, also established by the state to control all religious activity. The duties of the Institutes of Scientific Atheism concentrated on persuading the populace to replace religion with Marxist-Leninist

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<sup>7</sup> Pan-Islamism had made its first appearance in Ottoman policy at the Treaty of Kucuk Kaynarca (1774) with Russia, when the Ottoman sultan had made claims to religious jurisdiction over Muslims outside his territories, particularly those in the Crimea.

<sup>8</sup> Pan-Turkism - political movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which had as its goal the political union of all Turkish-speaking peoples in the Ottoman Empire, Russia, China, Iran, and Afghanistan.

doctrine.<sup>9</sup> As one result, the new generations grew up in almost total ignorance of the religious precepts.

However, now Central Asia can be described as a breeding ground for a new generation of Islamic extremists, taking advantage of increasing dissatisfaction. The diversity of Central Asia countries, with more than 100 ethnic groups, makes the threat of Islamic fundamentalism seem remote.

The regional authorities did not anticipate the immediate post-independence threats that plagued the Central Asian republics. Apart for Tajikistan, all-out civil war has not been considered to be a threat for the Central Asian states. Fears that an external power would attempt to invade the region were, and continue to be unrealistic. Instead, Central Asian security is increasingly threatened by what has been referred to as 'non-traditional' security threats. More specifically, the states of this region are confronted with ethnic and religious extremism, terrorism and organized crime.

Developments in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and southern Kyrgyzstan since independence have clearly demonstrated that Islamic radicals have emerged as an important force in Central Asia and have a stronghold in the Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan. Islamic movements are developing from Ferghana but can also be found in Tajikistan. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan meet in the Ferghana Valley, which means that radical Islam may easily be spread. The ethnic factor adds to the complexity of the situation. Kyrgyzstan and also southern Kazakhstan have problems with Islamists within their Uzbek minorities.

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917-1923* (Harvard,

Many of the factors that explain the growth of Islamist movements will be around for many years to come. The deep socio-economic crisis and the lack of purpose and direction in society guarantee that people will search for an “Islamic alternative” to the existing regime and for the “true Islam”. As a result, last recent years a war has been waging in the southern regions of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. This war has an impact on the whole of Central Asia. Mainly by bandit groups, who fled Uzbekistan and then became involved with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)<sup>10</sup>, whose goal is to build an Islamic state in the Ferghana valley initiated it.

Fears of growing religious extremism and the subsequent rise of terrorism are compounded by the close proximity of Afghanistan and the role it plays in the arena of Islamic fundamentalism. Given that the Taleban<sup>11</sup> and opposition forces have been fighting close to the Tajik border in the past few months, Central Asian authorities have voiced increasing concerns that the Taleban may cross into their territory. Apart from fearing a Taleban offensive, Afghanistan has harbored terrorist groups active in Central Asia - notably the IMU who were responsible for the 1999 Batken crisis, and who have taken responsibility for the incursions in the region. Also, as the world's largest heroin producer, Afghanistan has given various groups in Central Asia access to a considerable financial base through the trafficking of illicit narcotics.

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1954).

<sup>10</sup> Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan - is the religion extremists' coalition of Islamic militants from Uzbekistan and other Central Asian states opposed to the secular government of the Republic of Uzbekistan and wants to set up an Islamic republic in the valley, which straddles Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The U.S. State Department last year put the group on its list of officially recognized terrorist organizations.

<sup>11</sup> Taleban - radical Islamic movement mysteriously appear into the Afghan political scene from Pakistan in 1994.

Meanwhile other groups of IMU have twice broken into southern Kyrgyzstan from mountain bases on the Tajik side of the border. But this upsurge in activity in the southern border of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)<sup>12</sup> also coincides with a major “Taleban” offensive against the opposite forces in northern Afghanistan. Evidence pointing to significant external support afforded to Central Asia's radical Islamic groups in recent years by the “Taleban”, among other international Islamic organizations, suggests the recent activity may be more than mere coincidence.

At the same time, many of the most fundamental questions remain hotly disputed: How powerful are Islamic radicals in this area? What are the sources, both internal and external, from which they are drawing support? Since there is clearly no monolithic Islamic movement in Central Asia, what are the divisions between these groups? And, finally, what are the goals that these groups hope to achieve? In Central Asia the answers given to these questions are very heavily influenced by the political objectives that are providing the answers. In other words, it may appear to outside observers that those who assess the power of political Islam to be the strongest are those.

Various radical Islamic groups began emerging in Uzbekistan back in 1991, just as the Soviet Union was disintegrating. In the Ferghana valley, one of the most populous and religiously fervent regions of Uzbekistan, Islamic groups such as Tavba (Repentance), Adolat (Justice), Islom Lashkarlary (Fighters of Islam) and the Islamic Revival Party of Uzbekistan began to gather support. But these groups did not develop spontaneously. Foreign religious movements promoted and encouraged their growth, offering financial support and religious and political guidance. It is clear, that without such foreign backing

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<sup>12</sup> Commonwealth of Independent States - Union of 12 former Soviet republics

these groups would have withered on the vine. In early 1992 missionary groups from Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Pakistan illegally entered the Ferghana region, something of a center for the embryonic fundamentalist movements. Secret negotiations with local religious leaders led to the foundation of the Islamic Revival Party with the aim of establishing an Islamic republic in the Ferghana region. The new republic was to be called FANO after the four provinces it would incorporate - Ferghana, Andijan and Namangan in eastern Uzbekistan and Osh in Kyrgyzstan.

But in 1992 the Uzbek authorities banned radical Islamic parties, forcing the groups underground. The leaders left for neighboring Tajikistan and Afghanistan. In 1995, the Uzbek religious groups from the Ferghana region founded the Islamic Revival Movement of Uzbekistan, which shared all the hallmarks of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan, then engaged in a civil war against the Tajik government.

IMU generates funds through two channels - foreign sponsorship and its own, largely illegal, activities such as drugs trafficking. But foreign donors also play a significant part. The World Fund for Jihad, founded by Saudi millionaire Osama bin Laden<sup>13</sup>, has provided money and men to the IMU in the past, security sources claim. During last year's failed attempt to enter Uzbekistan from Batken in Kyrgyzstan, bin Laden's organization sent troops to aid the insurgents.

The IMU guerrillas appear to be trying to specifically destabilize the CIS's southern frontiers in order to reinforce the success of the Taleban's wider offensive against anti-Taleban Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. The Taleban has already captured

strategically important supply routes into Northern Alliance's forces, particularly via Tajikistan. Should the IMU guerrillas succeed in disrupting or destroying supply routes through Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan as well, this would help the Taleban in their current offensive.

Their goals are quite apparent - boundaries reduction, control over financial flows, creation of long-term hotbeds in the regions of optimum transit transportation of resources. The major instrument is destabilization of weakened or objectively non-viable political regimes. The special role belongs to the acts of terrorism aimed against great power - making, at first glance, no sense acts against population. These acts are to destabilize an enemy, on one hand, and to intimidate him, draw off his attention, make him to delay the revenge, to emphasize terrorists own significance in the eyes of the eyes of the "enemy".

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<sup>13</sup> Osama bin Laden - the most dangerous non-state terrorist in the world bin Laden, an exiled Saudi

#### **IV. POSSIBLE EXPLANATION OF THE PROCESS**

Faced with this difficult challenge of confronting a relatively powerful Islamic extremism, what are the Central Asian governments to do? Comparative politics teaches us that there are at least two different responses, all of which may be employed at one time or another – and occasionally in combination. Actually analysts discussing the subject make preferences to two following aspects. The “democratic” aspect gives general introduction that ruling out democracy results in militant Islamic opposition. Another one is that a new “Grate Game”<sup>14</sup> in Central Asia has just started. Its geopolitical outlines are coming out; good directors are looming behind the actors armed with machine guns.

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national who now enjoys the protection of Afghanistan’s hard-line Taleban regime

Theories of modern comparative politics that explore the relationship between economic, social, political and religious factors may hold the key to explaining this seeming paradox. Beginning beyond political developments in Muslim countries, theorists from Max Weber<sup>15</sup> to Theda Skocpol<sup>16</sup> have examined the role of the state in shaping underlying state-societal and inter-societal relations. Particularly where the state is very strong – and this is undoubtedly the case in Uzbekistan and pre-civil war Tajikistan, as well as in the predecessor republics – there is a fundamental Islamic opposition, which tries to control over state power. Even if those controlling central power might feel the need to share some power in order to maintain control over the state, this is usually done in an asymmetrical way, with the lion's share of the benefits of state largesse going to the region, class or ethnicity in charge of the state. And even when those who have lost central power do not suffer direct economic deprivation, there may well be an issue of the perception of being relatively worse off, and of a lack of control over basic decisions affecting their status and importance. In other words, the strong state, particularly when it can penetrate to the sub-national and local level, creates “losers” who feel disenfranchised by the process.<sup>17</sup>

This is particularly true where an ageing strongman controls the state, or where there is some very direct challenge to the top leadership. In such case, while the opposition can not control state power, it may recruit the help of an outside power or powers. These help ranges from direct intervention by the foreign state or organization to

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<sup>14</sup> Grate Game – the Anglo-Russian competition for land and influence across Asia, was played in two adjacent arenas – Turkistan-Afghanistan and Caucasus.

<sup>15</sup> Max Weber (1864-1920) is the real founder of sociology and the sociology of religion. His conceptions, analyses and constructs have a universal significance in the history of science.

<sup>16</sup> Professor Skocpol is a sociologist and political scientist who uses historical and comparative methods to address questions about states, societies, and public policies.

financial, military and political support. At the same time, opposition may make an appeal to universal values, like: democratic values, Islam, or nationalism, where it argues that the central power cannot govern due to its autocratic or bureaucratic system.

One more aspect should be considered more properly - the appearance of newly independent states of Central Asia significantly changed the political map of the world, but it is still geopolitical frail due to "power vacuum", weakness of internal links of the five states.

But energy is clearly a factor - all of this suggests the so-called Silk Road strategy: trying to establish a zone of U.S. influence that would minimize the influence of Russia and Iran. One of the real reasons is gas and oil. Central Asia has more of these resources than Persian Gulf. About 40 billion barrels of proven oil reserves have been found beneath the Caspian Sea and adjoining countries. Up to 200 billion more barrels of oil have yet to be discovered along with huge deposits of natural gas.<sup>18</sup>

The problem is that although they are rich in natural resources, all of Central Asia's republics suffer poverty and rising unemployment of their 55 million people. This has spawned crime, arms and drug smuggling from Afghanistan and a variety of Islamic guerrilla movements, both homegrown and imported.

This is important and deserves special discussion. Why did analysts speak about a possible Islamic extremism expansion? Did they believe that the local population was deeply religious? Did they overestimate outside influences? Is it result the lack of

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<sup>17</sup> M.Heper, "Islam and Politics in the Modern Middle East", London, 1994.

<sup>18</sup> The Economist, February 1998.

democracy in region? Certainly each of these aspects needs serious consideration and we can estimate these approaches properly, as many analysts more often underline them.

#### A.) RULING OUT DEMOCRACY RESULTS IN MILITANT ISLAMIC OPOSITION?

As was mentioned above many analysts and US Congress voice great concern that no Central Asia state has become a truly democratic one after reforms. Authoritarianism appears to be the basic political system here. However, the intrinsic authoritarian components vary from country to country. Moreover, while admitting that at a definite stage authoritarianism as a system of government is capable to address some problems that society is facing, it is also necessary to bear in mind the most important thing: the direction in which the authoritarian system is moving and what is going on as a result of its genesis - whether it is getting more and more repressive, or it creates the conditions necessary for further progressive evolution.<sup>19</sup>

According to some opinions for 10 years the region's leaders have ruled out democracy. The result is an increasingly militant underground Islamic opposition. Such bluntness is just the latest measure of the crisis in Central Asia. Not one of Central Asian leaders allows political opposition. By forcing all opposition underground into increasingly extremist positions, the autocratic leaders have fostered an environment, in which the population has begun to embrace a volatile force - Islamic militancy.

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<sup>19</sup> US Congressional debates on Res. 397 at the House of Representatives, 2000

What is that cycle of violence? What we have is people who are demoralized by the fact that there is no democratic alternative in these Central Asian republics turning to radicalism. In that situation some people are forced to turn to these radical if they are given no alternative. Of course, Islamic fundamentalists are going to find that their ranks are bolstered with volunteers when they have governments like this.

That is why analysts conclude that sometimes Central Asian government's actions have tended to exacerbate these internal and external threats by domestic repression, which has left few outlets for individuals and groups to vent grievances or otherwise participate legally in the political process. It was very dangerous that several leaders and governments in Central Asia have crushed nascent political parties, or refused to register opposition parties, and have imprisoned and used violence against, or exiled, opposition figures. As a result recent years fighting has erupted between government troops of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan and members of the extremist Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, analysts admitting the Central Asian governments have the right to defend themselves from internal and external threats posed by insurgents, radical religious groups, which employ violence, they appeal the Central Asian states to stick they have committed themselves to build, consolidate, and strengthen democracy as the only system of government, and are obligated to hold free elections, to respect the right of citizens to seek political or public office without discrimination, to respect the right of

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<sup>20</sup> US Congressional debates, op. cit.

individuals and groups to establish in full freedom their own political parties, to participate in the electoral process and access to the media on a nondiscriminatory basis.

## B.) RELIGIOUS FACTOR AS THE CARD OF POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC GAMES

The analysts who follow the situation in Central Asia underline the second aspect that internal terrains of Asia were always perceived as a remote periphery and, at the same time, as a place of concentration of steppe hordes capable of sweeping over the main centers of human civilization. Geopolitically, Central Asia is an area that separates vital centers of two nuclear powers – Russia and China - and the place of intersection of major geopolitical massifs – the Eurasian, Islamic, Chinese, Indian and United States as well. The fate of Asia at large depends on whether any new, synthesizing Asian model of order will eventually take shape here. The equilibrium of propensities and balances of the regional countries is incomplete; hence one can expect potential clashes of global interests of great powers for domination in the region.

Actually, Central Asia has no access to the great oceans, and its communications with world markets relate to inland transport and energy routes. This makes countries of the region dependent upon stability of their relationship with adjacent states as well as on security of communications. Due to unfavorable conditions the economy of the region is not self-sufficient, and its development to a great extent depends on the ability of local states to integrate into the global economic system. All that determines the main features

of the regional countries' behavior as regards Russia, the West, China, Islamic countries, which has to be flexible, deliberate, built on compromise and balancing between different interests.

After the collapse of the soviet system the Central Asian region has turned into a new scene of action of various geopolitical forces that have began the great game for domination here. The region is attractive with its available resources and geostrategic position in the very center of the Eurasian continent on the intersection of critical transport routes. In general, one can speak of the renewed phenomenon of the Central Asian geopolitics, which seemed to have seized to exist after this area was invaded by the Bolshevik troops in 1920s.<sup>21</sup> The Afghan scenario proper was to finally solve the issue of Moscow's domination in this region, however local forces entered the geopolitical scene and succeeded in preventing the realization of interests of soviet military superpower.

Recently almost all states of the region in its foreign policy were orientated to Washington, which proclaimed "new" Asia as a strategic region for itself. The Unites States and Turkey, at least last decade of last century, could have assumed a dominant leadership – US because of its huge economic capability, and Turkey because of its relative historical intimacy to CA countries and hostility to Russia, but neither sought to exert hegemonic power. Turkey and US have been playing different roles in the balance of power.

Meanwhile, Russia itself has to take note of the re-emergence of Iran and Chinese as a competitor for providing outlets for energy and cooperators as well. Russia is now

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<sup>21</sup> Z.Brzezinski, "The Grand Chessboard", 1997

showing more flexibility in dealing with Central Asian producers who are dependent on its pipelines, especially for gas.<sup>22</sup>

The current situation in Central Asia fully confirms this expression. When it is mentioned about the Grate Game in the region, it means that not only Central Asian countries, but also mostly external forces decide who will control the region. Now the strong US interest in the region - ranging from investments to pressures for some oil pipelines over others - is of deep concern in Moscow and, depending how the United States handles it, perhaps a mixed blessing in the other countries.

Permanent threat from South (Afghanistan) does not allow Central Asian states to concentrate on economic issues, that is why the further steps not only of region leaders but also US and Russia to solve abovementioned problems will be very important. These countries feel alone and are in search of-looking for relationships, among themselves and with great power, which can provide security in region.<sup>23</sup> Russia has been still playing a marginal role in region staying away from Central Asia problems. It is also clear that USA was not in a hurry to undertake any responsibility for the situation in Central Asia region recent time. But rapidly changing situation in CAR and recent change of leadership has given greater cohesion in pursuit of national interest to Russian and US policies.

Overt U.S. interest in a region that Russia has always regarded as its "near abroad" risks a replay of The Great Game, the 19th century contest between Russia and

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<sup>22</sup> Z.Brzezinski, "The Grand Chessboard", 1997

<sup>23</sup> Z.Brzezinski, op.cit.

Britain for control of the Central Asian trading routes that carried silk and spices from the Far East to Europe. During the 1890s, the British and Russians negotiated the Russian-Afghan border, established Afghanistan as an official "buffer" under English influence in 1907-1909 and thereby called a halt to the Great Game, at least for the time being.<sup>24</sup>

The United States has been very supportive of the Central Asian states, who needed to reduce dependence on Russia, and US needed to enlarge its influence in the region. But CA states have become irritated by the dominance of the Iran question in U.S. policy, which many believe, has been contrary to their interests. Nor do they like being viewed as pawns in a new Great Game in Central Asia. But in the same time it is clear that US had restricted political and economical resources for absolute influence for stability supporting. If the United States cannot stop Russia from resuming a leading role in Central Asia, the Americans hope they can at least prevent a reunification of Russia and some of the former Soviet republics.

Difficult national problems of the Third World countries are considered simplify by the American analysts, saying that: "all it should return and to become "clear" as it was before during the USSR period.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the national interests of Asian "ethnic mosaic" become secondary, because the US priorities are problems of countries, blocks and their mutual relation. Within the framework of such position Afghanistan and its "Taleban" movement, which is a child of Pakistan and US's intelligence services, is considered as a counterbalance to Eurasia force centers and as a territory for the alternative of Russian, Iranian and Chinese pipelines.

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<sup>24</sup> Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Princeton University Press, 1980).

## **V. COMPERATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE ASPECTS AND PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE**

Of course, there can be no peace without freedom and human rights. And democratic changes are part, probably one of the most important parts, of this process. They and the switch to market economy - two most frequently mentioned aspects - are

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<sup>25</sup> International Herald Tribune, 5 May 2000

interdependent and also connected with changes going on in other spheres. The practice and theory of democracy have already demonstrated that transition to it is not necessarily a process completed within a short period of time, which has only one type and opens only one road for post-totalitarian development. One is tempted to ask: What is democracy?

For Western countries, it took many years, so in eight years here it is absolutely impossible. It is unreasonable to expect a western-style democracy in countries, which are barely acquainted with representative government and only recently came into existence. Those who believe that the world consists of East and West that will never meet are convinced that democracy is alien to Central Asia, that democracy as a Western phenomenon is outside the scope of local mentality, historical experience and the way of life. There is another, mainly local opinion, that a specific democratic model is possible here - yet nobody specifies which one. Human rights activists and liberals looking at the West believe that Western-type democracy should be established in Central Asia immediately and without deliberations. Unfortunately, all of them are prone to mythologizing. Their deliberations offer more stereotypes, tendentious and straightforward opinions than theoretically justified conceptions, dialectical and systemic approaches to the very complicated processes in post-Soviet societies and states.

Concerning the second factor, which is mentioned above as a "new great game" between US and Russia in region, however, cannot consider as a main one. Despite US's advantages in terms of resources, and secularism, Washington was effectively eliminated from this supposed competition because it was geographically distant and because nothing coming from Central Asia could go to US except by crossing a third country.

During the last decade Russia has been busy solving its own economic and political problems, having markedly favored the West for a time in its diplomatic strategy. At the same time, Russia enjoyed the great advantage of geography. Were it not for the poverty of the Russia government, its partly isolation from the West, Russia would have been the bridge to the West.

But if this game never happened, it nonetheless highlights an important point: geography matters profoundly in international affairs - where a country stands depends to a large extent on where it sits - but geography is not something that exists entirely outside of the minds of the people who are on any given map. In sum, physical geography is terribly important in the relations among states, but how states view it, that is, how they conceive their political and cultural location, may matter as much or even more. Therefore, following the recovery of their independence, the Central Asian countries have had to make decisions about three different maps: the old map that linked them into the Soviet Union and still ties them to Russia, the map of their own region that defines both its limits and their interrelationships, and the new and larger map that defines their relations with various states and regions beyond their own.

On top of that, there is one other factor that needs to be looked at about what is creating the cycle of violence, which will lead to such turmoil, so what factor is that?

Focusing opinion on the situation in region last years, it is easy to note that Central Asia has become an international center of drug business and drug trafficking. Drug dealers are interested in further destabilization of the situation in region. As the

drug business in Central Asia is growing, Islamic opposition movements are appearing in the region.

The convenient location of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan makes these countries attractive for international drug business. These countries lie in between the largest drug producing countries of the world and Europe - the most profitable market. They lie close to the so-called "Golden Crescent" countries (Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran) and through China they have access to the "Golden Triangle" countries (Myanmar, Laos, Thailand). Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan border on Afghanistan, and Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan have a common border with China with its huge drug sales market. The huge amount of drugs produced along the border of the Central Asian countries is a challenge they still cannot answer. Opium poppy production in the Southwest Asia has grown very high due to Afghanistan, which, having overtaking Myanmar has become the world's leader in drug production. In 1999 Afghanistan produced 4,581 tons of opium, which means nearly 460 tons of heroin.<sup>26</sup>

Earnings from drug trafficking even at the lowest link of this narcotic chain are pretty high given that the average wage in Central Asia was only US \$30 per month. The income of residents of border areas is even lower. This creates ideal conditions for involving local residents in drug trafficking. Today the drug business in Central Asia involves several million people and the annual turnover of this industry total US \$14 billion.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Times of Central Asia, 29 December 2000

<sup>27</sup> Times of Central Asia, op. cit.

It is largely the connection with the international drugs trade that has compounded the problem of terrorism and organized crime throughout the region. There is ample evidence to suggest that extremist and criminal groups in region participate in the lucrative narcotics trade. The UN Drug Control Program estimates that 65-80% of the drugs produced in Afghanistan are now routed through Central Asia.<sup>28</sup> Combined with increasing regional production and a rising trade in synthetic drugs, this confirms the expanding role of the drugs trade.

As with the illicit narcotics trade in Latin America and Southeast Asia, an increasing percentage of violence within Central Asia can be traced to this lucrative business. That is what we are finding today, because what has happened now in Central Asia is there has been a new cycle of violence that has been set on its way, a cycle of violence that we do not know where it will stop. But it is not due to lack of democratic values in region. That is a violence, which extremist groups use the flag of Islam as a vehicle to fight for control over territory within the region or clash with government forces to ensure that an environment conducive for their operations is maintained.

#### A.) FUTURE PROSPECT

It is only now, in the wake recent destabilization in Central Asian states that Central Asian governments seems to be starting to realize that fundamentalism is one of the radical forms of protest against economic chaos and the indirect and direct pressures, and that the 'Islamic factor' calls for persistent attention. This is especially the case in Ferghana region, where the religious conscience of the masses of people has to be taken

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<sup>28</sup> UN World Drug Report 2000

into account and forcible methods of struggle against Islamic fundamentalism have to be abandoned. There is no doubt that strong-arm methods are justified in a number of cases. However, the Islamists' reaction to sustained pressures is easy to predict if one thinks of the sad experience of Algeria, Egypt and other Muslim countries. It is absolutely clear that the time has come to look for other ways and measures which are capable to at least stop, if not avert, the politicization and radicalization of Islam and, most importantly, to pay special attention to the "internal economic stimuli" of the above-mentioned processes.

The measures outlined with the purpose of liquidating the social and economic stimulus to the growth of popularity of fundamentalist political ideas bring some hope. However, a great number of mistakes have already been made, intentionally or otherwise. Thus it seems to me that the political and extremist potential of the fundamentalists of Afghanistan and some regions of Central Asia have not yet been exhausted.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, counter-propaganda by the government mass media has been unconvincing and so far ineffective, but there is a more successful and more professionally organized attempt to campaign for avoiding Islamic extremism expansion.

However, with spring not far off and with it the opening of Central Asia's snowy mountain passes, the region's leaders are growing attention to expected attacks by Islamic militants from Tajikistan and Afghanistan. As long as Taleban is ruling in Afghanistan and provides a base for groups like the IMU, instability in Central Asia will take place. The paradox of the situation is, that not even the people of Afghanistan are attracted to

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<sup>29</sup> The Economist, 27 January 2001

the fanaticism of the Taleban. The Taleban have an iron-fisted control there and have steadily refused to have democratic elections.

Due to limited capabilities Central Asians believe that the world community should do something in Afghanistan to change the situation, that we would end up with Afghanistan as a center of, number one, terrorism, a base for terrorism for the Central Asia but also for the world; that it would be repressive and have one of the most repressive and fanatic regimes and anti-Western regimes on the planet; and, number three, it would be the center for the growth of heroin and that it would put all of the resources; the billions of dollars received from the growth of one-third of the world's heroin in the hands of these religious fanatics.<sup>30</sup> That is exactly what has happened.

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<sup>30</sup> UN World Drug Report, 1999

## VI. CONCLUSION

Central Asia is itself a stable area but borders on countries such as Afghanistan that are capable of exporting instability in order to ensure that multi-million-dollar criminal activities such as drugs smuggling can continue. The countries of this region have found themselves under the Damocles' sword of Afghanistan - a state that has become not only a military proving ground but also a hotbed of terrorists and mercenaries.<sup>31</sup> Those undergoing training in the military camps there today could tomorrow be going armed to any of the world's flash points.

It is a significant fact that this indigent, starving country, which does not, incidentally, have an enterprise manufacturing weapons, is, however, literally stuffed with them. Where are they coming from? Who is helping this country to arm? Why has the war, which has been going on here for 20 years now, a war which is causing the deaths of innocent people and which has engendered more than 6 million refugees, thus far simply not compelled the international community to take radical action that could finally put a stop to the local civil war and extinguish the seat of tension? This tension has crossed the borders of Afghanistan itself, and until there is peace in this country, speaking of regional security is simply impossible. A process of the destabilization of the situation in neighboring states also, the countries of Central Asia included, is taking place.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> E.Mamytova, *Islamic Fundamentalism and Extremism in Central Asia*, 2000

<sup>32</sup> I.Karimov, "Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the XXI Century", 1997

There is no need to prove that the war in Afghanistan that has been continuing for already more than twenty years stands as a principal source of this threat; as Afghanistan has turned nowadays into a training ground and hotbed of international terrorism and extremism and become the main source, a warehouse of the world drug production that brings gains worth of billions of dollars and feeds international terrorism. The areas bordering with Afghanistan, and in the first instance, the states of Central Asia are being turned into one of the shortest and most suitable routs – corridors for transporting hundreds tons of heroin mainly to the countries of Europe and North America.

That is why a very important question is what superpowers and world society's policy will be towards Afghanistan.

There are, what is more, many complaints from states that consider themselves a bastion of democracy about the domestic policy of the countries of the Central Asian region. High government officials from the West countries and the United States who visit this region periodically consider it their duty to say to Central Asia leaders, specifically, that they are pursuing reforms in half-baked fashion and democratic institutions are inadequately developed, although they seemingly fail to notice here that the situation is being destabilized not on account of unemployment, not owing to the unhappiness of the citizens of these countries with the social policy being pursued by the government, but due to account of ethnic problems that have arisen but owing to the threat to security emanating from neighboring Afghanistan, where there has been a symbiosis between international terrorism and religious fanaticism and where extremism has raised the green flag of Islam. And these threats of a neighboring country with a tremendous concentration of inveterate gangsters and fanatics are affording the Central

Asian countries no opportunity to take up questions of renewal and democratic transformations or to calmly tackle questions of the further development of the market economy and integration in the world economy.

In this regard it is important to underline that for all these opponents, who live in the West, which is a long way from Afghanistan, and it is probably hard to understand the external factor that is destabilizing the situation in Central Asian states, primarily in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. That is why it is very disputable attempting to impress upon these states that if they accelerate reforms, this will be perfectly sufficient for resolving the question of future prosperity. If this is, indeed, the case, it is only partially so. The most important thing is that Central Asian states need to have done with the threat that is constantly hanging over them, when at camps of bandits and saboteurs in the vicinity terrorists intending with weapon in hand to establish a new order there are being trained and when most powerful ideological expansion is under way. Look at the quantity of subversive literature that is entering the region and at how many missionaries are attempting to politicize local sacred religion of Islam. Afghanistan and its Taleban movement as a serious external threat to security and very important the world community take up this problem seriously, radically. The problem is also that world community is in no hurry with its actions, and the four Central Asian states have resolved that it is time for them to unite in order together to defend themselves against international extremism, religious included. If the west is really concerned about stability and human rights issues in Central Asia, it had better realize that they can be improved only when social-economical circumstances are improved and that such can never be achieved where there is instability.

However, the way in which the state authorities respond to the challenges posed by radical Islam influences the future development. The Central Asian authorities have responded and still respond with repression and persecution. This has radicalized parts of the official clergy and broadened support for the Islamic extremists in society. Even if terrorist and criminal acts have to be punished, it is important the dialogue and a search for compromise between the authorities and fundamentalist and radical Islamic movements in order to avoid radicalization, conflicts and instability.

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12. Commonwealth of Independent States - Union of 12 former Soviet republics;
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### **LIST OF ACRONYMS**

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| 1. CAR  | Central Asian Region  |
| 2. IMU  | Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan  |
| 3. CIS  | Commonwealth of Independent States  |
| 4. FANO | First letters of four provinces of region – Ferghana, Andijan, Namangan and Osh |
| 5. USSR | The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics   |



