



SACRED PLACES AND “FOLK” ISLAM IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract:

Islam is not a uniform religion but is expressed differently around the world. In Central Asia this corresponds to the experience of a moderate Islam that allows people to move away from the extremists who, nevertheless, are taking root in the area. This is partly due to the incorrect management of the issue of Islamism undertaken by each Government, some failing in terms of laxity and others in terms of hard repression.

Keywords: Islam; Islamism; Central Asia; sacred places.

Resumen:

El Islam no es una religión uniforme sino que tiene diversas expresiones a lo largo y ancho del planeta. En Asia Central esas expresiones se corresponden con la vivencia de un Islam moderado que permite que la gente se aleje de los extremistas que, sin embargo, se van arraigando en la zona. Eso se debe, en parte a la mala gestión del islamismo que hace cada Gobierno, cayendo unos en la laxitud y otros en la represión descarnada.

Palabras clave: Islam; islamismo; Asia Central; lugares sagrados.

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Introduction

The attacks committed in the last decade by people claiming to be acting in *Allah's* name and trying to give a religious glaze to their actions against the West lead us to think that the best way of anticipating these assaults, in the long term, is to foment the development of moderate Muslim groups and to asphyxiate the most radical fundamentalist groups. The main battlefield, therefore, is that of ideas, for the hearts and the minds, which we can translate in Central Asia as the necessity of rediscovering “folk” Islam.

Islam is not a unified religion, but it possesses a multitude of divisions, sects, and Schools of Jurisprudence, besides lacking a common spiritual leader with universal authority. The principal division is based on the dispute for the succession of the fourth *Caliph*³ (Omar) in the 7th century, producing, on the one hand, *Sunnites* (supporters of the *Sunna*, “path” or custom planned by Mohammed) and, on the other one, *Shi'ites* (supporters of Alí, nephew of the Prophet). *Sunnites*, in turn, recognize four principal Schools (*madhahabi*) of Islamic Jurisprudence: the *Hanafi*⁴ (present traditionally in Central Asia and known for its tolerance and adaptability), the *Malaki*, the *Shafi* and the *Hanbali*. In addition, *Sunnites* recognize other lines (*fiqh*) of jurisprudence, such as the *Deobandi*, the *Safi* or the *Wahhabi*⁵.

The role of Islam in politics in Central Asia has changed through time, from being the main regulator of ordinary life to disappearing from the political scene, and then arising again controlled by the State. By the end of the 70's, when some movements claiming a key role for Islam in politics proliferated there, imitating Iran and Afghanistan⁶, Islam had started to be a threat to the USSR, due to two factors: first, because it was an ideology that was undermining the foundations of Marxism-Leninism, and second, because it could be used to channel dissatisfaction with bad Soviet management of other matters (social, economic or cultural). But the “Islamist threat” was manipulated and exaggerated by Andropov, Gorbachev and their comrades, and, likewise, before the '80s the enemies were called *Sufis*, and soon they were replaced by the *Wahhabis*⁷.

Right after the fall of the atheistic Soviet regime other schools, which were more radical than the *Hanafi*, carried out massive proselytism campaigns. The branches of Islam traditionally present in Central Asia are not the most controversial, but they try to live through their faith in a moderate way. Therefore, in B. Raman's opinion, the challenge to regional

³ For the Islamic terminology, see Galindo Aguilar, Emilio (dir.) (2004): *Enciclopedia del Islam*, 1ª ed., Madrid, Darek-Nyumba. See also Mailló Salgado, F. (1987): *Vocabulario básico de la historia del Islam*, Madrid, Akal.

⁴ Cf. Aristegui, Gustavo de (2004): *El Islamismo contra el Islam. Las claves para entender el terrorismo yihadista*. Barcelona, Ediciones B, pp. 26-29. See also Roy, Oliver (1997): *La nueva Asia Central: o la fabricación de naciones*, 1st. ed., Madrid, Sequitur, pp. 231-254.

⁵ Islam is a legalistic religion, and the Quran a set of norms and prescriptions, so the people who know the Quran are expert in law and jurisprudence, and this is why the jurisprudence School or *madhahabi* is more important than the lines of interpretation or *fiqh*. See Khalil Samir, Samir (2003): *Cien preguntas sobre el Islam*, Madrid, Encuentro.

⁶ “The Soviet aggression in Afghanistan (1979) and the Islamic revolution in Iran (1979) posed a serious threat to the foreign political ties of Central Asian official Islam and to its prestige among the Muslims of their own country and of the entire Muslim world. The Muslims of Central Asia, and first and foremost of Tajikistan, largely sympathized with the Afghan mujahidin and Khomeini”. See Polonskaya, Ludmila and Malashenko, Alexei (1994): *Islam in Central Asia*, Reading, Ithaca Press, p. 99.

⁷ This term was used erroneously by the Soviet leaders since the *wahhabism* only existed in Dagestan, where the Saudi movement had penetrated and was rooted in a wide number of rural areas. See Ro'i, Yaacov (2001): *Islam in the CIS. A threat to stability?*, Central Asian and Caucasian Prospects, London, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, pp. 24-27.



stability does not come from the religious field but comes from the IMU, the *Hizb ut Tahrir* and an immense quantity of people discontented with the dictatorships under which they live and which suppress with cruelty any observation of religiousness⁸. But Central Asian people were interested on taking their religion on again through rediscovering their own traditions, which in many cases were not compatible with the new ideologies. This has meant the advance of Islamism being stopped in this region, at least for the moment.

1. The arrival of Islam to Central Asia.

The territory known as Central Asia nowadays (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) has been a much disputed land in history. It has been coveted by Chinese, Mongol and Greek people, among others. In the seventh century after Christ, some years after the Prophet Mohammed's death, Arab troops conquered the region, calling it the *Ma Wara' al-Nahr* (which means: "What is beyond the river", the Amu Darya, the old "Oxus"), and spread the new faith. By 875 Islam had become the official religion of the Samanid state, whose capital was the city of Bukhara, being independent of Bagdad, the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate.

Islam was rooted in Central Asia as a form of continuity with old traditions:

Baba Tükles was a "friend of God". Islam does not have officially canonized saints, but early on, Muslims came to accept that certain individuals have an intimate relationship to God and may intercede with him on behalf of ordinary Muslims. This cult of sacred persons replicated patronage networks that existed in society. Friends of God could be recognized as such in their lifetimes, and after their deaths, their mausoleums became shrines, places of pilgrimage, and foci of communal identity; their disciples, connected to them through chains of initiation, provided a living link to sacred origins.⁹

In this way, the peoples of central Asia could feel that Islam was not a strange religion but that they could incorporate the new faith into their traditions:

This dual process of localizing Islam and Islamizing local traditions led communities to see themselves as innately Muslim. Local customs were sacralised, and Islam was made indigenous. For most people, there simply could not be a distinction, let alone a contradiction, between Islam and local customs.¹⁰

The most Islamised former Soviet regions were the Ferghana Valley (in Central Asia), the Dagestan and Chechnya (in the Caucasus) and Tatarstan (in the Urals - Volga). Though the form of Islam that developed in Central Asia was mostly *Sunni*, specifically the *Hanafi*

⁸ "The main threats to the stability of the CARs in general and to Uzbekistan in particular arise from three sources: first, the remnants of the IMU; second, the growing following of the *Hizb ut Tahrir* in the entire region; and third, large sections of the people, angered by what they consider as the repressive policies of the local Governments and their exploitation of the fears of extremism and terrorism to continue their repressive rule". See Raman, B.: "Jihadi Terrorism in Central Asia: An Update", *International Terrorism Monitor Paper*, No. 22, Paper No. 1691, 1 February 2006, at <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org>, No. 93.

⁹ See Khalid, Adeeb (2007): *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia*. Berkeley/Los Angeles, University of California Press, p. 22.

¹⁰ See Khalid, *op. cit.*, p. 22.



School¹¹ (*madhhab*), we can also find *Shi'ites* (there are some followers in the mountains of Pamir, in Tajikistan, and also in Turkmenistan). *Sufism* also spread among Uzbeks and Tajiks, mainly through the Naqshbandiyya brotherhood¹².

2. Islam under Communism.

One of the main anti-traditionalist changes made by Soviet authorities was the assault on Islam¹³.

The weight of Islam inside folklore was clearly preponderant in many regions. In fact, the *Sufis* (mystical teachers) continued enjoying great prestige among their followers. In this way, an official Islam was established and another popular one. The difference can still be found today in rural areas, where most Muslims live.

Notwithstanding, the most significant outcome of the Soviet period was the creation of the concept of “nation”, of national identity, which did not exist there before 1920 and which turned against the USSR, since among the first ones in decreeing the death of the USSR were these republics, reaffirming their independence from the USSR this way. This was in spite of having ratified in referendums their loyalty and adhesion to the USSR a few months before. This clarified that under the veneer of *sovietisation* and *russification*, in spite of the daily use of Russian as a *lingua franca*, the gap between the colonizing European-Slav and the Central Asiatic settlers was big.

The Bolshevik attempts to eradicate Islam in Central Asia failed since the Muslims began to operate in a clandestine way¹⁴. As result of this, the Islamic movements were politicized and became more resistant. The skills acquired during the Soviet era were essential for the later spread of radical preaching during the 90s, and were taken on, modernized and perfected by groups such as *Hizb ut Tahrir*¹⁵.

During the 30's they closed many institutions (courts, mosques, *madrassas*, *muktab*...) and many clerical people were detained and executed. During World War II, the Bolsheviks changed and created the figure of the “Directorate” (or Board of directors), an organ subordinated to the State whose function was to control any religious activity of Muslim

¹¹ “Central Asian *Hanafi* scholars called themselves *Ahl al-Sunna wal-Jama'a* (People of the *Sunna* and Concord). This designation goes back to a *Hadith* where Muhammad says that the Muslim communities will fragment into seventy-three sects (*firqa*), of which only one will remain –*Ahl al-Sunna wal-Jama'a* (the *Sufis* likewise claimed to be called the same). These *Hanafi* scholars emphasized their righteousness in such a manner”. See Naumkin, Vitaly V. (2005): *Radical Islam in Central Asia: between Pen and Riffle*, Oxford, Rowman & Littlefield, p. 8.

¹² “Sufism gained wide acceptance in *Ma Wara' al-Nahr*. Sufi brotherhoods of Central Asia –Naqshbandiya, Yasaviyya, Qadiriyya, Qubraviyya- exerted the strongest impact on the cultural and socio-political life in the region, in which a new stratum of the religious class was formed, the influential leaders and preceptors of Sufi brotherhoods: *pirs*, *ishans*, and *shaykhs*”. See Naumkin, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹³ “All forms of Islamic expressions came under sustained assault in the Soviet period: patterns of the transmission of Islamic knowledge were damaged, if not destroyed; Islam was driven from the public realm; the physical markings of Islam, such as mosques and seminaries, disappeared”. See Khalid, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹⁴ “The United States supported an Islamic opposition to the Soviet invasions out of doctrinal principles long held sacred. Throughout the Cold War, conventional wisdom in the West saw Islam as an antidote to Communism and thus as a strategic asset to be cultivated”. See Khalid, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

¹⁵ See Baran, Zeyno: “Hizb ut-Tahrir: Islam's Political Insurgency”, *The Nixon Center* (December 2004), p. 70, at <http://www.nixoncenter.org>.



people. The war meant the pressure on Islam was decreased and that's why one of these "Directorates" was founded in Tashkent, the "Muslim Centre for Central Asia", an architectural complex that includes a mosque, a centre for Islamic studies, besides other buildings. Two religious colleges and a small number of mosques were founded there, too.

Under Nikita Krushchev's mandate (1958-64), the assault on Islam was restarted by the closing of mosques and the reduction of the number of clergymen, but in the Breznev era the anti-religious campaigns were more moderate. Anyway, by the late 70s, they were restarted more aggressively as a reaction to the reappearance of Islam in Afghanistan and Iran, seen as sources of problems. Despite the Soviet policies of repression and transformation, Muslim traditions and rites continued being observed, especially in the rural areas, as mentioned before. In addition, the apparent destruction of the traditional structures led to the reappearance of subnational identities (the region, the tribe, the clan, the family, the religion...). So, in the 70s, the traditionally more intransigent centres of Islamic activity inside the USSR (Ferghana Valley and Tajikistan in Central Asia, and Dagestan in the North Caucasus) began to offer signs of an Islamic renaissance, a new wellspring for Islam started there.

After years of religious persecution and of official Soviet atheism, fundamentalist doctrines started to be infiltrated into the region. During the 70's many clergymen passed from the traditional *Hanafi* School to *wahhabism*, thanks, partly, to the work of the *Ikhwan al-Muslim*, the Muslim Brotherhood¹⁶. *Hizb ut Tahrir* gathered these types of salafist groups that were preaching a return to origins and were claiming the reestablishment of a Caliphate ruled by the *Sharia*. In addition, after independence the Government tried to impose a more moderate, official version of Islam, with its own diffusion and control of doctrinal bodies, to the service of governmental power. This forced citizens to flee from this doctrine and fall into line with other groups that have faced some difficulties, risking their lives, because of their opposition to the dictators.

Between 1981 and 1987, the Central Committee of the CPSU approved a series of relative resolutions specifically for Islam. They marked it out as a serious threat and proposed a list of counter measures. The above mentioned resolutions were going in the direction of accusing the capitalist West of using Islamism present inside the USSR to undermine the stability of the country. Afghanistan, in spite of not belonging to the USSR, was the clearest example of this, since it has been demonstrated that Taliban were trained by the CIA so that they could resist the Soviet invasion.

In the speech that Gorbachev addressed to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan (PCUz) in November 1986, he declared war on Islam. He indicated that it was a threat not only because of being a religion (and an ideology, therefore, that contradicts Communism), but, in addition, because it had taken on a political stance there, where the only political institution allowed was the CPSU:

During the Cold War, Islamists tended to be rabidly anti-Communist in their stance, because Communism was a rival ideology, one that rested on universal principles and was hostile to all religions besides. That stance should not blind us, however to the fascination that

¹⁶ "In fact, beginning in the 1950s, foreign Islamic activists had been smuggling literature into Soviet Central Asia. As early as the 1970s, Muhammad Hindustani Rustamov, a respected theologian, noted that several members of the Uzbek clergy had begun to diverge from Hanafi Islam towards Wahhabism. This move was in part due to the efforts of the Ikhwan al-Muslimun (Muslim Brotherhood), which had been active in the country since the 1970s". Baran, "Hizb ut-Tahrir: Islam's Political Insurgency", *op. cit.*, p. 72.



Marxism-Leninism had for Islamists and the model it provided for successful political action.¹⁷

Nevertheless, Gorbachev, who was appointed Secretary General of CPSU in 1985, started a centripetal policy, trying to agglutinate around Moscow the management of the USSR. However, in addition he initiated a series of policies of restructuring (*perestroika*) and opening (*glasnost*). During this period some kinds of parties arose there: ecological (around the question of the desiccation of the Aral Sea), cultural (as the *Birlik*, Unity), oppositional (the *Erk*, Freedom). But the Communist Party continued being the hegemonic one, so it wasn't a pluralistic system. Nevertheless, Muslim associations proliferated, new mosques were constructed, impediments to their construction were removed progressively; in addition, religious education was allowed (that previously had been strictly prohibited and had persisted only clandestinely among the most devout Muslim populations of Dagestan, Tajikistan and Ferghana Valley); and Islamic literature began to appear, but imported from the Middle East or other neighbouring (extremist) countries.

In the mass media journalists moved from a monolithic position against Islam to a less rigid attitude towards it. In fact some media, such as *Ogonek*, turned into open forums so that Muslims could expound their points of view, even when these were opposite to those of the CPSU.

Nevertheless, the Soviet project of modernization altered Transoxiana's region in a fundamental way, though not always in the direction designed (and desired) by the Soviets. Undoubtedly, they set up the props of the new States in a process that hastened with the fall of the communist system.

3. Islam in the independence era.

The fall of communism left an ideological vacuum refilled later with Islam. The lack of well trained imams, capable of refuting the arguments of *Hizb ut Tahrir* and other extremists, still continues to be one of the major difficulties in confronting their message today:

*Il convient de noter que le "retour" à l'islam s'est opéré dans des conditions particulièrement difficiles, c'est-à-dire après une période de combat idéologique fondée sur une politique d'athéisme militant visant à détruire l'influence de la religion dans les sphères familiale et publique, y compris au sein de la vie quotidienne des diverses sociétés musulmane centre-asiatiques.*¹⁸

However, the new States were not capable of answering the people's needs in this field properly, and it was not possible to rescue the same spiritual and illustrated (erudite) Islam of the past of Central Asia¹⁹, but mosques of extremist mould proliferated, managed in most of the cases by foreign imams or by imams trained and educated out of the country, or financed by foreign (Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, etc) funds:

¹⁷ See Khalid, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

¹⁸ See Moldaliev, Orozbek A.: "Le rôle de l'islam Dans l'évolution du fait étatique en Asie centrale postsoviétique", en *Les Islamistes d'Asie Centrale: Un défi aux Etats indépendants?*, *Cahiers d'Asie Centrale IFEAC*, n° 15/16 (2007), Paris, Maison Neuve & Larose, p. 36.

¹⁹ Baran, "Hizb ut-Tahrir: Islam's Political Insurgency", *op. cit.*, p. 71.



*Le renouveau religieux dans l'actuelle Asie centrale est marqué par l'absence de personnalités religieuses véritablement versées dans les sciences religieuses et d'une littérature religieuse.*²⁰

This led to an increase in Islamic radicalism in the 90's, and as a result of this some mosques turned into centres of diffusion of extremist ideas, which supposes now a risk for public security²¹. Central Asia could experience the mushrooming of various islamist groups such as the Islamic Renaissance Party, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, *Adolat*, *Baraka* (Blessings), *Tauba* (Repentance) and *Islam Lashkarlari* (Warriors of Islam). These groups existed clandestinely during the Soviet era, but they came out into the open during Gorbachev's reforms. Other groups came onto the scene and became more active: *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and its splinter *Akramiya* and *Hizb un-Nusrat*; also, *Uzun Soqol* (Long Tunics), *Nurcular*, *Tabligh Jamaat*, *Lashkar-i-Taiba*, *Hizballah*, the Islamic Movement of Eastern Turkestan, the Islamic Movement of Central Asia, and the Islamic Jihad. All of them were sharing the same objectives (the overthrow of the regimes and the establishment of a Caliphate) and methodology, or logistic support²². We cannot forget that most of them are in contact with *Al-Qaeda and the Taliban*²³.

It is not possible to know with certainty the real number of active mosques and *madrassas* in Central Asia due to the fact that we can find only official figures of establishments legally registered, which are far from being very trustworthy in view of the high number of illegal religious establishments. Nevertheless, we can be sure that in Kazakhstan there are more than 5,000 mosques for almost 9 million Muslims; in Kyrgyzstan there are more than 2,500 mosques for 3.5 million public inspectors; in Tadjikistan there are about 3,400 mosques for 6 million believers; in Turkmenistan there are about 320 mosques²⁴ for almost 5 million Muslims²⁵; and in Uzbekistan, between 2,000 and 5,000 for 21 million believers²⁶.

Since independence (1991), Islam has played a different role in Central Asia. We can say that there are three types of Islam: one official, one popular ("folk") and, finally, fundamentalist Islam. All these three types were present in the region previously, but the gap between them has intensified, becoming deeper and deeper. Fundamentalist Islam, which is characterized by a deeper commitment to political life and the use of violence (or threat of

²⁰ See Moldaliev, Orozbek A.: "Le rôle de l'islam Dans l'évolution du fait étatique en Asie centrale postsoviétique", en *Les Islamistes d'Asie Centrale: Un défi aux Etats indépendants?*, *Cahiers d'Asie Centrale IFEAC*, n° 15/16 (2007), Paris, Maison Neuve & Larose, p. 37.

²¹ Khusnidinov, Zukhiriddin: "The Uzbek Response", in Baran: "The Challenge of Hizb-ut-Tahrir: Deciphering and Combating Radical Islamist Ideology", *The Nixon Centre*, (September 2004), p. 43, at <http://www.nixoncenter.org>.

²² See Ro'i, *op. cit.*, p. 31. See also Baran: "Radical Islamists in Central Asia", in Fradkin, Hillel, Haqqani, Husain and Brown, Eric (eds.) (2005): *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Vol. 2, Center on Islam, Democracy, and the Future of the Muslim World, Hudson Institute, at <http://www.hudson.org>, pp. 41-58.

²³ See Gunaratna, Rohan (2003): *Al-Qaeda. Viaje al interior del terrorismo islamista*, Barcelona, Servidoc, pp. 250-255.

²⁴ "Central Asia: Islam and the State", *ICG Asia Report*, No. 59, 10 July 2003, at <http://www.crisigroup.org>.

²⁵ In Kipchak (Turkmenistan) you can find the biggest mosque of Central Asia. It was built by a French company in 2004, with capacity for 10,000 people (7,000 men and 3,000 women) and with a car park with capacity for 100 buses and 400 cars. Its total surface area is 17,672 m², and it has a dome 55m in height and four minarets of 91m. See "Ahmadinejad visits biggest Central Asian mosque in Turkmenistan", *IRNA*, 25 July 2007, at <http://www.president.ir>.

²⁶ The number changes considerably due to the fact that in the first decade of independence more than 5,000 mosques were opened, but less than half could be registered in the Department of Justice, obtaining permission to open. See "International Religious Freedom Report 2005", *US Department of State*, 8 November 2005, at <http://www.state.gov>.



violence) in the political arena, is the most striking one²⁷. Although not every extremist is violent, they can provide some “reasons” for other “fundamentalists”, “fighters of the faith”:

Rustamov-Hindustani in Central Asia was a moderate thinker and teacher who did not call for violence or the creation of an Islamic state. His teachings nevertheless served as the basis for a later generation of ideologists of militant Islam. Post-Soviet Central Asia has had a number of different types of Islamist activists, such as Tahir Yuldashev or Juma Hojiev (Namangani), who founded the IMU. The former head of Tajikistan’s qaziate, Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda, was and still is a skilful politician and diplomat.²⁸

4. Sacred places

In Central Asia there are some “sacred places” or “places of worship”, which are called *ziyoratgohlar*, *qadam joylar*, *muqaddas joylar* by the local population. They play an important role in socio-religious life²⁹. Studying sacred places and their role in the socio-spiritual life of Central Asian society is very many-sided problem. And of course it is not possible to show it within one report.

We should note here that until now this topic was not considered as a sociological aspect. It is known, that *ziyoratgohs* are one of the local forms of interpretation of Islam. The studying of this question has an ancient tradition. In particular some aspects of this topic were dealt with in the works of V.V. Bartol’d, A.A. Semyonov, G. Sneryov, A. Divaev, N. Likoshin and of the French scholar J. Kastan’e. During the Soviet period this question was also considered. Here I would like to mention the work of I. Gol’tsier, *Sacred places in Islam*, he was the first who considered this topic as an independent scientific problem. Among the local researchers who dealt with this problem are A. Muminov, B. Aminov, B. Babadjanov, Sh. Vohidov, T. Saksanov and others.

In scientific literature there are many different characterizations of sacred places. So we can see such definitions as “local forms of Islam”, “local Islam”, “folk Islam”, “the form of local Sufism” and others. Very often this question was considered in contrast to “theoretical” and “folk” Islam.

We should mention that sacred places played an important role in the social and spiritual-cultural life of Central Asian society. I. Gol’tsier also noted this significance: “In the life of Central Asian people local Islam plays a more important role than orthodox Islam”.

Ziyoratgohs present mystical or real burying places of different people or their relatives, and whose activity led to them being sanctified after their death. But often some inanimate things like stones, trees, water sources also had functions of sacred places.

²⁷ We must distinguish among three concepts which are much related to each other, where the later ones presupposed the previous one. These are: *radical Islam*, characterized by a deeper sense of religiosity in life; *extremism*, that is, the use of religion (in this case, Islam) in political life, being only one instrument of it; and *fundamentalism*, which is the use of violence in the political arena, based on religious convictions (in this case it is called *Islamism*).

²⁸ See Naumkin, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

²⁹ “Pre-Islamic holy places started being transformed into Islamic ones, and the characters of the Qahtanid Tubba’ tradition (As’ad al-Kamil and others) became the objects of worship [...] Thus the local cult of saints absorbed the strata of both local and Arab mythology, while the incorporation of local elements into Islam was probably one of the reasons the new religion swiftly took root in the local soil”. *Ibid.*, p. 9.



The main component of a sacred place is the grave of the saint person (*qabr tosh*). Usually there are special people (watchmen), called *karovchi*, *chirokchi*, *sheyh*, *joy egasi* by the *ziyoratgohs* and the local population. They look after *ziyoratgohs*. As a general rule, these people believe they are the saint's successors, who are buried there, or that they are successors of dynasties of watchers. These people are the main source of information on these places.

The main income of a *ziyoratgoh* consists of donations from pilgrims such as products, cloth, and money. People believe that only watchmen can manage them, and if some outsider appropriates these donations he will get sick.

Expert questioning among watchmen of *ziyoratgohs* proves that there are two types of sacred places – *avliyo joy*, the place which is the burying place of the saint, and the second – *qadam joy* - the place which does not have the grave of the saint but where there is a symbolic grave and this place has been sanctified by his activity or by the visiting of his soul after death. Focus-group questioning among the pilgrims showed that the majority do not have any ideas regarding the existence or absence of the saint's real grave in this place.

During two years research we visited more than 80 sacred places, situated in different regions of Uzbekistan, South Kazakhstan and South Kyrgyzstan. All the sacred places we studied can be divided according to several criteria. So, according to territory and significance they are divided into:

1. Sacred places known throughout the world. They are places of worship for pilgrims from different places of the world (Bahouddin Nakshband, Khodja Ahmad Yassavi, Zangi-ota and others).
2. Sacred places known within one region or district. They are places of worship for the pilgrims within this region or district (Langar-ota, Hazrat-I Sulton, Sultona Uvays, Ismoil-ota, Avliyo-ota and others).
3. Sacred places which have limited popularity within a small territory or among one group of people (Kokil-ota, Shayh Umar-vali, Ishok-ota).

Besides that, there are sacred places which are visited by representatives of a profession (for example, the *Ziyoratgoh* of Daud-ota in Karakalpakiya). This saint is a protector of blacksmiths. That's why traditionally his grave was visited by representatives of this profession. In recent years drivers, mechanics and tractor-drivers have also visited this sacred place. It is interesting to note that there is a modern vice on his grave. Pilgrims believe this instrument, which has no close relation to the saint, also has sacred power. Another example is the *ziyoratgoh* of Mirkulol, according to legend this man was a potter and his grave is visited by representatives of this profession. Near his grave there are different kinds of pottery and a kiln. All these elements were added recently. Usually pilgrims ask for professional success.

The majority of sacred places have curative significance. That means that they are visited by people who have different physical and spiritual illnesses and ask for healing. These sacred places usually have such attributes as water, trees, stone and pilgrims believe they can heal. This kind of sacred place is widespread. For example, in Rabkan village of the Fergana region there is a sacred place named Buston-buva which has a tree, people say it heals eye illnesses and futility. In Kuk-terak-buva in Kazakhstan pilgrims are healed of bronchitis and asthma by the help of water and 11 poplars, in the Navoi region there is clay, which heals skin problems.



As I said before there are sacred places whose objects of worship are inanimate things (trees, stones, a water source, a cave or something else). For example in Turbat in South Kazakhstan there is a stone which local people believe to be a meteorite sent by God and to have mystical power. Pilgrims walk around it, pray and ask for success in business. Such sacred places are samples of pre-Islamic belief forms, kept among the local populations of Central Asia.

Also there are sacred places which according to the local legends relate to some historical or spiritual personage. In these places constructions are usually built according to traditional local Muslim architecture: mausoleums, khonakah, chillahona, sufa and others.

It is necessary to note that at the beginning of the 90's of the 20th century a very active process began, not only the renewing of wrecked sacred places, but also the creation of new ones. And sometimes the latter process had non-traditional forms. Sometimes the creation of new sacred places was based on questionable memories of old people who lived in this territory. As the result, the place, which did not have a close connection with some spiritual person, became a sacred place. So, for example, in the Nurata region an analogue of Tashkent Zangi-ota *ziyaratgoh* appeared, in Kazakhstan – an analogue of Karakalpak Daud-ota *ziyaratgoh* appeared (as the founder told us in her dreams she had seen the soul of Daud-ota and he asked her to create in this place his *ziyaratgoh*). This event took place in 2002, and I visited this place in 2004 and saw that everyday about 100 people (Kazakhs, Uzbeks and sometimes Karakalpaks) were visiting this place. Another interesting example is a small mausoleum close to the famous Arslan-bobo sacred place, situated near Turkestan city, which is also a place of worship for local people. The majority of pilgrims believe that a famous spiritual leader was buried here. But after detailed acquaintance with the stone on the mausoleum it becomes clear that it is the grave of the former minister of culture of Kazakh SSR, and his children created this construction after his death. The building of mausoleums on the burial places of former officials, and the gradual sanctification of these places, was widespread in the whole of Central Asia. But during repeated studies in 2005-2006, we noted a significant falling off of this process.

5. Some rituals.

With regard to the hold some rituals have on sacred places, we can say that most of the sacred places have special, specific days for visiting. Usually they are Wednesday and Friday. Pilgrimages can be done on other days, but, according to the pilgrims' words, Wednesday and Friday are the exact days which are most favourable in terms of the souls of the saints (*ruhi shod buladi*) and when prayers most likely to be accepted (*savobi tegadi*).

Many pilgrims visiting sacred places make sacrifices, praying for the soul of the buried person there. Also they ask for different things for themselves and their relatives. Usually people visit sacred places 3 or 7 times, the latter is more common. Sometimes visiting sacred places seven times replaces small hajj. It is interesting that at present there are seven sacred places determined for every region, visiting of which replace small hajj (for example: Etti-Pir in Bukhara, Etti Avliyo in Kashkadarya and others. Even people of the small Turbat village in South Kazakhstan determined seven objects for themselves). In some places there is the opinion among pilgrims that you can not make real hajj to Mecca without visiting your regional seven *ziyaratgohs*. So, we can see that the number 7 has important sacral significance



in existing, local forms of Islam. For example, pilgrims leave 7 coins (*etti tanga atadim*), pray for the souls of 7 dead ancestors (*etti ota-boboni haqiga duo qilish*) and others.

The forms of visiting these places are also different. The most popular forms are individual and group visiting. Also there are pilgrimages of the members of one family, of inhabitants of one village, of the members of one organization. At present there is another popular form of visiting, a group of former classmates on the eve of the jubilee of finishing school; when they visit these sacred places they pray for the souls of dead teachers and classmates.

Visiting *ziyaratgoh* depends on the seasons of the year too. So, in rural areas people visit sacred places during the period of planting and especially during gathering the harvest. During Ramadan month and the period of hajj to Mecca many people visit *ziyaratgohs*.

There are sacred places which are visited only by women (*Bibi Seshanba* in Fergana Valley and others). Usually these women do not have children or have some problems with their marriages. Also women come here to solve some family problems. In either case, women are more active visitors.

Some years ago in sacred places there were popular rituals, such as tying up pieces of material, lighting splinters. But in recent years there has been a mass of explanatory work among pilgrims, which describe these rituals as not corresponding to official Islam. A significant quantity of special literature in local languages explains the rules for making a pilgrimage. This literature is sold near the gates of sacred places. Special tablets appeared on many *ziyaratgohs*, which describe such actions as not being righteous. For example, on the famous Abu Ubayd ibn al-Jarroh *ziyaratgoh* in Karshi there are the following words on the stone: "Worshipping stones, idols, fire is not recommended – it is contradictory to Islam. You must not visit mausoleums too and pray near the grave there". But there is still a watchman (*qarovchi*) near the mausoleum and a special place for lighting splinters near the minaret. This duality characterizes many *ziyaratgohs*, it is clear that all of the above mentioned are important sources of income for the people of *ziyaratgoh*, working at the *ziyaratgoh*. We can observe a gradual rejection of these rituals. The tradition consisting in tying up handkerchiefs on the branches of trees is disappearing. Nowadays, such rituals are done only by old women.

A ritual named *zikk-I dzhakhr* (loud *zikk*) is held in Daud-ota *ziyaratgoh* in Southern Kazakhstan every Wednesday and Friday in the evening. It is interesting that in this *zikk* men and women participate together. About 50 people under the control of leaders carry out this ritual in a small room. It consists of repeating the words: "*Yo-Allohu, yo-Alloh, Khak Dust, yo-Alloh*". The participants bend over, repeating those words. This can continue for 3 hours. At the end some participants, mainly the leaders, are in a trance, some swoon. Many of them shout and cry, and this process can be for 15 minutes.

It's difficult to see such rituals in sacred places situated in the territory of Uzbekistan, although some witnesses say they took place until the 50's of the 20th century. In these cases men and women did this ritual separately.

Another interesting object of our research is the architecture of *ziyaratgohs*. During the Soviet period many buildings were destroyed, so after independence the process of reconstruction and the building of new constructions began on the places of *ziyaratgohs*. In most cases local traditions of building were lost, that's why new buildings had new elements and reflected one's fantasy. Constructions were mainly built according to the traditions of



Muslim architecture, but in most cases with the elements of national style. For example, if we compare cupolas of some *ziyoratgohs* in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, we will see that the first prefer a long, stretched form like the national hats of Kazakhs. Cupolas of Uzbekistan's *ziyoratgohs* are round shaped and sloping.

In the Bukhara and Navoi regions there is a 4-8m high iron hand on the graves of saints. According to the information of the *qarovchi* of these places, they have a dual character: first, they symbolize the five bases of Islam; and second, they symbolize the transitory nature of life. It is believed that a hand reflects the activity of Alexander the Great, who in conquering half of the world left it without anything. So, these iron hands remind believers of God. In the places where nomadic populations lived there are big sticks (about 5m high and with a diameter of about 20cm) near the graves of the saints. They are sticks for driving cattle. These elements are products of modern life. Through them people contribute to the sanctification of a given place and increase the level of influence on the socio-psychological character of pilgrims.

Very often in the opinion of the local population there are hyperbolic ideas about some saint's life. They think the saints were giants. Some respondents said that if the saint sat on the camel he had to bend his legs as they were too long. Camels, mainly white, often appear in the legends about the lives of the saints.

That's why many times we saw saints' graves 4, 5 and even 10m long. In the famous Mizdak-han *ziyoratgoh* in Karakalpakstan (people called it Nazlim-han Sulu) there is a grave 2m above the ground and 5-6m below the ground in the mausoleum. Respondents reported this woman was a daughter of Khan, and near her grave there is another grave. Local people say the dog of a saint called Shamun-nabi was buried there. I could not identify this person with any character from the Koran. The grave of Shamun-nabi is 80m from this place. Its size is 33m and it is the longest grave of a saint in Central Asia. Now I'll try to explain why the grave of the dog is not near the grave of its host. According to the legend the wife of the prophet betrayed him with his enemy. During the battle between them she spilled rice in front of her husband in order to make him fall. But the dog felt this and saved the life of the prophet. After that he said the words, which became widely known: "It vafo, hotin jafo" (Dog is rescue, wife is ruin).

Nazlimhan was a very beautiful woman who wanted all her admirers to jump from high minarets, that's why many people died. So, according to the ideas of local people, the dog, buried near her grave symbolizes the sins of that woman. And that's why her grave is deep under the land.

Renovation work was carried out on this *ziyoratgoh* some years ago, and then local masters found the woman's grave decorated with pictures of the Egyptian queen Cleopatra. So, we can see through modern information technology that new elements were introduced into traditional *décor*.

Ziyoratgohs are the instrument which provides safety and the evolution of ancient traditions and ideas of Central Asian people. *Ziyoratgohs* integrated harmonically into Islam and became an important element of regional Islam. In my opinion, *ziyoratgohs* throughout the whole history of their existence were an important factor of spiritual unity of all Central Asian people and in keeping them tolerant. So, *ziyoratgohs* are one of the main attributes of spiritual life in Central Asian society.



6. Traditional Islam vs. Islamism.

Shi'ites are called “people of *kufir*” (disbelief), or even “of *shirk*” (polytheism), by the *Sunni* for their worship of holy men or “saints” and of their graves and shrines. As we have seen in this article, people of Central Asia are ones who worship “friends of God” and even just ancestors. This is why *Wahhabism* has few adherents among people from, i.e., Uzbekistan, even in the most religious zones. In these areas, the enemy of Islamism is not only official Islam, but also the traditional one, the “folk” Islam, because they are opposite and contradictory: where *Wahhabism* exists it's impossible for the “folk” Islam to exist.

But Islamism may come under forms other than *Wahhabism*, and can offer other faces, like the many fundamentalist groups that have existed in the region: the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, *Adolat*, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, *Hizb ut Tahrir* and others coming from Pakistan. These other forms of Islamism are compatible with the old traditions and kinds of worship just because they are not religious but political groups and offer only a political viewpoint on reality, although they usually employ verses from the Quran.

Where is the line between religion and politics? Where is the limit where one can say this is an extremist group or not? Is it possible to find a place for religion in the political arena? Since society has pre-political fundamentals, and religion has a word for those bases, it is obvious that religion can suggest, not impose, what it thinks is good for that society. But if politics is the art of making it possible to live together, sharing a common space and time in peace and progress, religion can enter this area only with moral authority, not with coercive power. If religion wants to help people to find answers to the main questions of life (who I am, where I go and so on), and to discover the contents of Natural Law (a universal moral guide for oneself and for living in society), politics can help this aim via legislation. That's why, if the intervention of religion in the social area doesn't help society, doesn't make it more in accord with human nature, religion is ignoring its own principles.

Traditionally, religion in Central Asia has nothing to do with Islam in other parts, at least from the point of view of involvement in politics. If in *Shi'ite* countries religion is mostly a political issue (i.e. Iran), with the existence of many Islamist groups, and in *Sunni* countries there are many Islamic political parties (sometimes also *yihadist* groups), in this post-Soviet space religion is a cultural (or identity) issue and not a political one. Only a small part of the population uses Islam as an instrument for political struggle: in Uzbekistan, with clandestine groups flourishing throughout the country as a way of opposing Karimov (because free opposition is forbidden), and in Tajikistan, the only country where Islamic parties are legal, with part of the Government belonging to the IRPT³⁰.

In addition to political and economic reforms toward an open democracy and market, integrating this traditional or “folk” religion into the social structures, with official, permission, may protect society from the virus of Islamism in this part of the world.

³⁰ In Kazakhstan religion is not a very important issue; the same in Turkmenistan; and in Kyrgyzstan, the most important issue is the clan, not Islam.