Recent Developments in Soviet Islam

MARIE BROXUP

Since the invasion of Afghanistan there have been some unexpected developments, which have received little publicity in the West, in Soviet policy towards Islam in Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus. It is still too early to say whether these moves constitute the beginning of a new Soviet strategy towards Islam or a tactical adjustment. It is also difficult at this stage to say what prompted these changes; the backlash of the Afghan war, the spill-over of the Iranian revolution, a move to counter more aggressive Chinese propaganda being beamed at Soviet Muslims or simply a reaction to the growth, in Soviet Islam as elsewhere in the Muslim world, of fundamentalist trends. All the evidence, however, points to the Soviet government switching from their bold strategy towards Islam of the 1970s to a more cautious and defensive position.

New Anti-religious Campaign

The April coup d'état in Afghanistan brought to power a communist régime of the hard "Leninist" type. This was followed in June 1978 by a series of wholesale arrests and executions of Muslim fundamentalists and Sufi families.[1]

As these events were happening in Afghanistan there emerged the first signs that the Soviet authorities were taking a tougher line against their own Muslims with the launching of a violent anti-religious campaign in the northern Caucasus, and in Daghestan in particular. (It is common for Soviet anti-religious campaigns involving new measures and policies against Islam to be tested in the northern Caucasus — the homeland of Shamil,[2] cradle of numerous religious uprisings since the 18th century and nowadays the bastion of Islam in its most conservative form.) This move began on 28 June 1978 when the regional committee of the Communist Party of Daghestan passed a resolution on "Measures to Improve the International and Atheistic Education of the Inhabitants of Andi and Gagatli in Botlikh district".[3] In October 1978, the population of Daghestan was subjected to a massive anti-religious campaign which was later to spread to many Muslim areas of the Soviet Union.[4]

There was a short reprieve after the fall of the Shah of Iran and the arrival

of Khomeini, as witnessed by the opening of five new mosques — a record — between 1979 and 1980 in the Chechen-Ingush ASSR.[5] However, after the evident failure of the Soviets to represent their invasion of Afghanistan as an inter-Islamic affair and the collapse of the Tashkent Islamic Conference (September 1980) which had been announced in the Soviet press as the most important post-war political meeting of the Muslim world, relations between the Soviet government and the official Muslim establishment have deteriorated.[6] This decline is evidenced by the fact that since September 1980 not a single foreign Muslim delegation — other than those from Afghanistan — has visited Central Asia and, with the exception of the visit to North Yemen of Mahmud Gekkiev, Mufti of northern Caucasus and Daghestan, no Soviet Muslim delegation has been sent abroad. For their part, the Muftis' official pronouncements in support of the Soviet government, previously fairly frequent, have become noticeably less common. The reasons for this coolness are not entirely clear but it may be that the Soviet government has decided that the price of the Muslim religious leadership's cooperation is too costly or that the Muslim leaders have failed in their role as propagandists. Whatever the reasons it is fairly evident that the Tashkent Conference marked a turning point in the authorities' strategy towards Soviet Islam.

The new anti-nationalist and anti-religious campaign in all Muslim republics is characterised by a double offensive against the danger of "imperialist subversion" and against "religious terrorism" — a new phenomenon. Several high-ranking Party officials, including Haidar Aliyev, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaidzhan, Mohammed Gapurov, First Secretary of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan and Major-General Zia Yusuf Zade, head of the Azerbaidzhan KGB, have warned Soviet citizens against the dangers of "imperialist subversion" and the revival of "religious fanaticism", a term generally used to designate Sufi Islam.[7]

At the same time, a significant change of emphasis is apparent in the Central Asian and Caucasian press. This involves a switch of emphasis away from "Leninist friendship" between the native populations and their Russian "Elder Brother" towards the ability of the "Elder Brother" to maintain order and to eliminate various indigenous and foreign "traitors".

Since the beginning of the Afghan war, two themes have become especially popular in promoting the new message: the Basmachis[8] and the Soviet armed forces. The Basmachis, for decades a taboo subject, now feature regularly in all sorts of memoirs, historical surveys and novels appearing in the languages of Central Asia. The meaning of the message is perfectly clear: "We have beaten you before, if necessary we can beat you again . . ."; "in the 1920s when our power was still weak we put down a well-organised and powerful Central Asian rebellion; in the 1980s, now that our army is the strongest in the world, we shall crush the Afghan rebels easily enough".

The references to religious terrorism are particularly numerous in the northern Caucasus, although they are also beginning to appear in Central Asia. They are generally aimed at the activities of the Sufi orders, more precisely to the Batal-Haji *tariqa* in the Chechen-Ingush Republic and to the "Order of the Hairy Ishans"[9] — an outgrowth of the old Yasawiya brotherhood in Central Asia. It is possible that the assassination of Sultan Ibrahimov, the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Kirghiz SSR, is related to the activity of the Hairy Ishans.

Muslims' Attitudes

Soviet sources are now frequently referring to a Muslim revival rather than to a survival in the USSR. What are the factors contributing to this revival?

1) Soviet Muslims are probably the only group in the USSR who feel secure and confident that "time is on their side". One of the main reasons for this is their tremendous demographic explosion. The last census of 1979 numbered nearly 44 million people belonging to Muslim nationalities out of an all-union total of 262 million. The Muslims increased at an average annual rate of 2.47% — one of the highest in the world — compared to 0.7% for the Russians. In the 1970s the percentage of Muslims in the central committees of the communist parties of the Central Asian republics increased in proportion to the growth in importance of the Muslim populations of these republics.

2) Demographic changes have given a new impetus to the process of *mirasism* — the rediscovery and rehabilitation of the national patrimony. The rediscovery of their brilliant Irano-Turkic culture and past, common to most of the Muslim world, can only enhance the Soviet Muslims' feeling of solidarity with their Muslim brethren abroad. What is more, this search for the past is not limited only to the golden age of Central Asian literature which shone uninterrupted from the 9th to the 18th century, but also to the more recent past such as Shamil's Holy War, the Khan Kenessary Kassimov's rebellion in the beginning of the 19th century, the Andizhan rebellion of 1895 and others, rebellions and wars led against the Russian invaders almost always in the name of Islam.

It should be remembered also that all the great writers of the Irano-Turkic literature of Turkestan (including Ali-Shir Navoi, who was a Naqshbandi) were, if not Sufis themselves, thoroughly impregnated with the ideas of Sufism. When rediscovering such writers or philosophers, even in the guise of "great patriots of the people", it is impossible to avoid some of their Muslim spirituality filtering through to the readers.

3) Another trend which is also perceptible among Soviet Muslim élites is an interest in the "people", more precisely the poor people, who are symbolic of a more genuine national identity and are better Muslims than the russified élites. This "populism" can be viewed as yet another expression

of deeply rooted nationalism and as a revival of Islam.

4) Greater contacts with Muslims from abroad: there are now approximately 25,000 Afghan students in the USSR, 5,000 of them in Tashkent alone. Many of these Afghans are admittedly communists, but there are also large numbers of Muslim fundamentalists among them. These Afghan students, some of whom are Uzbek speakers, have been able to explain to the Uzbeks the actions and motivations of the Afghan Mujahideens.[10]

Another far-reaching and potentially explosive consequence of the Afghan war is the fact that Jamiat-e Islami (the party leading the resistance in, among other places, the Panshir valley) now claims that it has 2,500 card-carrying members over the Soviet border in Tadzhikistan.[11] Even if the claim is exaggerated (which there is no reason to suspect) and Jamiat-e Islami has only 25 instead of 2,500 members in Tadzhikistan, they could still provide the nucleus for an active nationalist-religious resistance movement inside the USSR which could threaten Russian control over the Muslim borderlands.

5) The influence of the Iranian revolution is more difficult to define but is probably as strong on Soviet Muslims as that of the Afghan war. Iran has always enjoyed a tremendous prestige in Central Asia and the Caucasus and is a country where once again something is "on the move". The Islamic fundamentalist revolution can find many echoes among the Caucasian Muslims, such as Uzun Haji's "theocratic state" in 1918-21, which was not very different in character from that of Ayatollah Khomeini's. Whereas it was the Iranians who were listening to Radio Tashkent before the fall of the Shah, Central Asians and Caucasian Muslims now show a passionate interest in news from Iran.[12]

It is understandable therefore that the Soviet authorities should be treading carefully if they are to avoid the pitfalls ahead of them. They need only to look over their shoulders to be reminded that the Tsarist armies' defeat in Manchuria in 1905 was the spark that kindled the birth of the Muslim national movements (almost all the Muslim political parties appeared immediately after Russia's defeat in the Japanese war). Failure, or even a demonstrative lack of success in Afghanistan could trigger similar developments. When nationalist movements in Central Asia and Caucasus re-emerge one thing is certain: they will be imbued by the spirit of Islam.

It is too early yet to speculate on the future course of Soviet-Muslim relations. It seems, however, that the Soviet leadership is taking the danger of a spill-over of the Middle Eastern crisis into Central Asia and the Caucasus very seriously indeed, and that it is taking measures to protect its Muslim territories from possible contamination from abroad. The question is whether the veil can effectively be drawn. If we accept Soviet references to the growing activity of various religious and nationalist "subversive elements" then Islam — for so many years an asset to Soviet expansion in the Muslim world abroad — may well become a serious handicap.

[1]We know from reliable Afghan sources that, as soon as Nur Mohammad Taraki and Hafizullah Amin came to power, they asked the Soviet Union to send, among other advisers, anti-religious specialists who began to arrive in Kabul a week after the coup. It is therefore likely that, being confident of the success of hardline communism in Afghanistan, the Soviet authorities decided that it was the right time to tighten the grip on their own Muslims inside the USSR.

[2]Shamil, 1797-1871, was an Avar, born in the *aul* of Gimri in north eastern Daghestan, Sufi of the Naqshbandi *tariqa,* third Iman of Daghestan, military leader, religious thinker and head of the "theocratic state" in the North Caucasus. He fought the Russians from 1834 until his defeat in 1859. His was an authentic *jihad* or Holy War, not just a national resistance war against the Russian advance. He also fought the Muslims who did not conform to Sharyat law. Shamil, the "Lion of Daghestan", has become for all North Caucasians a legendary symbol of heroism. He is still a figure of tremendous controversy among Soviet writers.

[3]*O meropriyatiyakh po sovershenstvovaniyu raboty po internatsionalnomu i ateisticheskomu vospitaniyu zhitelei selenii Andi i Gagatli Botlikhskogo raiona,* Sh. Ismailov, "Vyshe uroven ateisticheskoi raboty", *Sovetsky Dagestan,* Makhach Qala, 1982, No. 1, pp. 1-8. The area of Botlikh is at the heart of Shamil's territory.

[4]Alexandre Bennigsen, "Soviet Islam Since the Invasion of Afghanistan", *Central Asian Survey,* 1982, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 65-78.

[5]Alexandre Bennigsen and Chantal Lemercier-Quelquejay, *Les Musulmans Oubliés. L'Islam en URSS Aujourd'hui.* Paris, François Maspero, 1981, p. 156.

[6]The Tashkent Conference was called to celebrate the 15th century of Hegira (migration of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina and starting-point of the Muslim era and calendar). All but five delegations boycotted it.

[7]Sufism or Parallel Islam as it is called in the Soviet Union. The Sufi brotherhoods are closed but not secret societies. The adept *(mürid)* is accepted into a brotherhood after a period of initiation and remains all his life under the spiritual control of a master *(mürshid, ishan, sheikh).* His life is regulated by a complicated ritual of practically constant prayers. The *zikr* ("remembrance" of God, *zikr djali,* vocal, sometimes accompanied by musical instruments or *zikr khafi,* silent, depending on the *tariqa*) is the focal point of Sufi ritual. The Sufi orders expect total loyalty and discipline from their adepts and according to Soviet sources Parallel Islam is much more dynamic than Official Islam (as represented by the Official Religious Boards). Since the times of the Mongol invasions, Sufi brotherhoods have traditionally taken up the defence of Islam in times of danger when Islam was threatened. It can be said that it is thanks to the Sufi *tariqa*'s that Islam has survived in the Soviet Union. (For a description of the Sufi brotherhoods, see Alexandre Bennigsen and Chantal Lemercier-Quelquejay, "Muslim Religious Conservatism and Dissent in the USSR", *RCL* Vol. 6, No. 3, esp. pp. 155-7 — *Ed.*)

[8]The Basmachi guerilla movement in Central Asia (in the Fergana valley, Bukhara-Samarkand region, Lokay and Turkmenistan) was a popular rebellion which lasted more than ten years, from 1918 to 1928; in some areas until 1936. The Bolsheviks had to concentrate two armies, the 4th Army under the command of Frunze and the 1st Army under Tukhachevsky and Zinoviev to defeat the Basmachis eventually.

[9]Hairy Ishans, *Chachtuu Eshander* in Kirghiz or *Volosatye Ishany* in Russian. The order was founded in the late 1920s in the eastern Kirghiz part of the Fergana valley. This radical and very clandestine branch of the old mystic Yasawiya (founded in the 12th century by the poet Ahmed Yasawi) considers Holy War against the infidels one of the mystical paths leading to God.

[10]This latest development has so worried the Soviet authorities that they were planning to move the Afghan students from Tashkent to Moscow or Leningrad but had to abandon the idea because of the strong opposition of Rashidov, the Uzbek Premier.

[11]Edward Girardet, "Afghan Resistance: Familiar Pattern", *Christian Science Monitor,* 26 July 1982.

[12]According to our information, Chinese Muslim minorities show a similar intense interest in the events in Iran.