

# Islam in Central Asia (part 1 of 2): How Islam came to Central Asia

**Description:** The five republics of Central Asia, and their historical connection to Islam.

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In modern terms, Central Asia comprises of five republics, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. It is bordered by the Caspian Sea to the west, China to the east, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to the south, and Russia to the north. Sometimes the Chinese autonomous



region of Xinjiang and Afghanistan are included in definitions of Central Asia, but their inclusion fails to take into account the shared history and culture of the five republics. This region is historically connected to the nomadic people who lived and thrived in the area where goods and people crisscrossed across Eurasia. However, today little is known or understood about this unique region of the world for a number of reasons including the demise of the Silk Road and the waxing and waning of their connection to Islam.

Geographically these republics can be divided into three zones. The oasis belt, sometimes called Transoxiana, mainly in Uzbekistan, but also encompassing areas of all the other states; the steppe-desert zone in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan; and the high mountain zone in the southeast of Tajikistan. Islam entered these three regions at different times and in different ways. The ethnic heritage of the three areas was diverse, and it influenced the way they responded to Islam.

At the time of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, around 600 CE, the population of the oasis belt were of Iranian and Turkic origin. The well-traveled Silk Road meant that there were flourishing urban areas such as Merv, Samarkand, and Bukhara. Several different religions thrived there, including

Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Manichaeism. Other religions in smaller numbers included Nestorian Christians and Jews, and in the area now known as Turkmenistan, there were Hellenistic cults.

The area was no stranger to new religions, and Islam entered Central Asia in the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE as part of the Muslim expansion and conquest of the region. In 651-652 CE, Muslims conquered the area known as Khorasan, a vast territory that now spans north-eastern Iran, southern Turkmenistan, and northern Afghanistan. The Muslims retained the name Khorasan, and in 705 CE Qutaybah ibn Muslim, the Abbasid governor, established his principal seat at Merv from where he repeatedly undertook campaigns into the Ferghana Valley

The Battle of Talas, near the border of present-day Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan took place in July 751 CE between the Abbasid Caliphate and the Tibetan Empire, against the Chinese Tang dynasty. This encounter resulted in Muslim control over the area for the next 400 years. After the Karluks, a Turkish tribal confederacy originally fighting with the Tang dynasty, defected to the Abbasids, the balance of power was tipped in the Muslim's favor. Thus, by the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE, the oasis belt had been completely integrated into the Muslim world, and Caliph Ma'mun made Merv, rather than Baghdad, his capital from 813 to 817 CE.

The cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, and Urgench, located still in what is now known as Uzbekistan, and Merv, an oasis city that no longer exists but was located near the city of Mary in Turkmenistan, flourished as centres of Islamic learning, culture, and art until the Mongol invasion of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century CE. Scholars from Central Asia traveled throughout the Muslim world and made significant contributions to medicine and science, and Islamic jurisprudence and studies. Many are still known and respected today. They include the astronomer al-Farghani, the notable mathematician al-Khwarizmi (Latinized to Algorithmi), and Ibn Sina (Avicenna). Ibn Sina is regarded as a most significant physician, astronomer, thinker, and writer, and the father of modern medicine. Also, from Central Asia were hadith collectors, Imam Bukhari, who compiled the most well-known book of hadith, and Imam Tirmidhi, whose family was from the city of Merv.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, Merv became one of the largest cities of the world, with a population of up to 500,000 people. However, in 1221 the Mongol horde swept into the city totally destroying it. Historical accounts suggest that the entire population of one million people, including refugees seeking protection, were killed. When Genghis Khan died six years later, he left an empire that extended from northeast China to the Caspian Sea measuring 28 million square kilometers. While Merv never fully recovered, Islam not only survived the savage conquest but recovered and spread throughout the empire.

The first Mongol Khan to embrace Islam was Baraka (Berke) Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan. He is said to have met a caravan coming from Bukhara, questioned the travelers about their religion and subsequently accepted Islam. From there Islam spread once again claiming the territory previously lost to the Mongol hordes. His descendant Tamerlane consolidated Islam in the area. Those who had tried to destroy Islam, through the grace of God, became its protectors.

However, by the 16<sup>th</sup> century CE, Central Asia was becoming increasingly isolated from the rest of the Muslim world. Although the area had no distinct borders, it contained several main routes of the Silk Road, allowing the transfer of good and ideas. However, when alternate trade routes were established, including faster sea routes between India, China, and Europe, the region became unstable; many clan-based tribes rose and fell across the region until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century CE.

The Russian Tsarist Empire turned its attention to Central Asia in the 17<sup>th</sup> century CE, and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century CE, London and St. Petersburg hustled each other over Central Asia in what was known as the Great Game. Russian expansion continued until the last independent Uzbek regions were annexed or became protectorates in the 1870s. What is now Northern Kazakhstan was the first area brought under Russian control, and by the middle of the century, the Russians were poised to take control of the oasis belt; there the subjugation was completed within a decade.

In the steppe region, Tsarist Russia showed support and goodwill towards Islam and Muslims. They allocated funds for printing Muslim literature and building mosques. The nomads of the steppes had previously possessed few mosques. The Muslims from the oasis belt were encouraged to train and instruct the nomads in more orthodox Islam. The Kazakh nomads perceived this 'new' form of Islam to be narrowly dogmatic and unfamiliar in Kazakh traditional Islam that had been modified by local customs and beliefs. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century CE, Tsarist policies were changing. They started sending Christian missionaries into the steppe region, and in the oasis belt measures were introduced to curb Islamic activities.

Following the Russian revolution of 1917-1922 CE, Central Asia became part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), and was organized into the five republics we know today, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Islam was not treated kindly by the USSR despite an appeal to Russia's Muslims in 1917 that promised, "...your beliefs and usages, your national and cultural institutions are forever free and inviolate."

In part 2 we will discuss the suppression of Islam and its post-Soviet revival.

## Islam in Central Asia (part 2 of 2): From revolution to Islamic revival

**Description:** The Russian Revolution changed the face of Islam in Central Asia, but when the USSR fell, Islam emerged, relatively unscathed.

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mir Lenin and Josef Stalin signed an appeal to the "Muslims of Russia, Tatars of the Volga and Crimea, Kyrgyz, and parts of Siberia and Turkestan, Turks and Tatars of Trans-Caucasia, Chechen and Mountain peoples of the Caucasus, and all of you whose mosques and prayer houses have been destroyed, whose beliefs and customs have been trampled upon by the Tsars and oppressors of Russia: (declaring that) your beliefs and usages, your national and cultural institutions are forever free and inviolate. Know that your rights, like those of all the peoples of Russia, are under the mighty protection of the revolution."[\[1\]](#)

At the time of the Russian Revolution, many Muslim reformers known as Jadids attempted to work within the Soviet system. Thus, in parts of Central Asia, Muslims accounted for 70% of Communist Party membership, and the Bolsheviks[\[2\]](#) were determined to keep their support. Islamic books and objects looted by the Russian Empire were returned, and the Quran of Uthman was ceremoniously returned to the Muslim Congress. Friday was declared a legal day of rest in Central Asia, and by 1921 a Sharia legal system was put in place to work beside the Soviet legal system.[\[3\]](#) However, although gaining the trust of the oppressed minorities in the Russian Empire was essential to the Bolshevik cause, when all opposition was brought under control, Lenin turned his attention to eradicating religion.

The Russian Revolution began by implementing strict Marxist doctrine declaring that the state should be non-religious not anti-religion. Believers who considered themselves revolutionaries were welcomed into the Bolshevik ranks, however, religious tendencies began to grow stronger rather than falling away. Attacks on religion, particularly Islam in

the Central Asia region, began under the banner of combatting crimes based on custom. The Bolsheviks believed that the so-called liberation of women would pave the way to socialism. One particular method used to sideline Islam was mass unveiling.

The Hujum (storming or assault) campaign took place in Uzbekistan (and Azerbaijan). [4] It was marketed as a campaign to liberate Central Asian women encouraging and then demanding that they unveil. On International Women's Day (March 8th) in 1927, after two years of ineffective propaganda, the Hujum entered a new phase. At mass meetings, women were called upon to unveil. In small groups they were expected to come to podiums, declare their liberation, and throw their veils off ceremoniously.

The Hujum was a failure. Although many women embraced unveiling others protested, sometimes violently, that they were not oppressed by the long horsehair veils that were the custom of the time and place. It has been suggested that the Hujum was initiated not only for revolutionary liberation but as a means of undermining Islamic clergy and religious traditions. However, despite the USSR's efforts to eliminate religion, they did not succeed to any great extent until efforts were made to outlaw the Arabic language. The deconstruction of language is often the first step in destroying a culture. In 1930 Arabic was replaced with the Latin Alphabet, and the Muslims were unable to read or connect with the Quran.

During World War Two restrictions on Islam were somewhat relaxed because the Soviet government required the support of all its citizens to fight what they called the Great Patriotic War. In 1943 the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) was established and charged with training clergy and publishing spiritual material under the careful control of the government. As religious persecution subsided, mosques began to reopen, and by 1949 there were 415 registered mosques in the USSR. Through the 1940s and 50s, the Soviet authorities began to view Islam as either good or bad. 'Good' Islam was compatible with socialism. It was represented and controlled by state-appointed clergy and did not require any beliefs or practices; rather it was framed as part of Central Asia's national heritage. 'Bad' Islam, on the other hand, held that there was a higher authority than the Soviet State. It was framed as a trick used to lead people away from the ideals of the USSR. It was considered to be a dangerous social force and a threat to Soviet power. Islam did, however, flourish underground, in tea houses, on collective farms, and in other innocuous spaces. For the next thirty years, religious observance continued and was widespread; it became a matter of national identity. Each Soviet put emphasis on being populated by many nationalities all united under the banner of the USSR. Islam was secondary to national identity; Central Asians were Muslims by tradition, but were also part of the modern USSR.

*A guide in Bukhara told National Geographic in 1971, "I remember my mother and father speaking Arabic at home. But my comrades of this generation find no need for Allah and His prophet. Visit a mosque nowadays and you will see mostly the white-haired."*

In the 1980s Islam took on a greater role in the lives of the people in the five Central

Asian republics. This was a result of changes brought about by perestroika and glasnost. [5] The Muslims dissatisfied with party control of the religious institutions demanded more say in their religious lives. A religious revival by people eager for the moral values no longer under attack in the USSR demanded expressions and symbols of Islam in public life and public spaces. Thus, piety increased, and Islamic publications came back into print including in the Arabic language. Religious education became possible once again. During this time in Tajikistan, more than 70% of Muslim students considered themselves to be believers.[6]

On December 25th, 1991, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev announced the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Using the words, "We're now living in a new world. " In the 1920s, the Soviet government had imposed borders bringing the five nations into existence; thus, they had never before been independent nations. However, when the USSR dissolved, they chose to maintain the Soviet borders and Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan joined the Muslim world as independent nation states.

The Islamic revival in the Central Asian republics was, and still is, supported by the Muslim world. Once their borders were opened, delegations, missions, and organizations, particularly from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, played a significant role in reviving Islam. They funded mosques and schools, and supplied Qurans and other Islamic literature in Arabic, Russian, and Central Asian languages.

All five states still use Soviet-style mechanisms of dealing with Islam. Soviet legislation on religious affairs has been replaced by new versions that unfortunately do not significantly alter the relationship between state and religion. For instance, in Uzbekistan, a person can only legally worship in mosques operated by the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan. Similar legislation exists in Kazakhstan.

Since the fall of the USSR, Islam in Central Asia has once again re-emerged. In 1912, there were about 26,000 mosques in Central Asia. By 1949, there were just 415 mosques in the entire USSR. In 2004, there were 2,500 mosques and dozens of religious schools throughout the Central Asian states. The statistics tell a tale of a slow yet steady and upward revival. When the Mongol hordes swept into Central Asia, Islam stood like a tree being battered by the wind until it could arise once more. It waited patiently for seventy years during the Soviet rule and then rose once again; strong and silent, and strengthened by God.

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Endnotes:

[1] Hunter, S. "Islam in Russia: The Politics of Identity and Security".

[2] Bolshevik - a member of the majority faction of the Russian Social Democratic Party, which seized power in the October Revolution of 1917.

[3] Crouch, D. "The Bolsheviks and Islam."

[4] Northrup, Douglas. "Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia".

[5] Perestroika - The policy or practice of restructuring or reforming the economic and political system. First proposed by Leonid Brezhnev in 1979 and actively promoted by Mikhail Gorbachev.

Glasnost - The policy or practice of more open consultative government and wider dissemination of information.

[6] Ro'i, Yaacov. "Nationalism in Central Asia in the Context of Glasnost and Perestroika."

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