

# The U.S. and Central Asia: Religion, Politics, Ideology

Zhanar Aldubasheva, Elnura Assyltayeva, Mukhtar Senggirbay, Gaziza Aldubashova

**Abstract**—Numerous facts evidence the increasing religiosity of the population and the intensification of religious movements in various countries in the last decade of the 20th century. The number of international religious institutions and foundations; religious movements; parties and sects operating worldwide is increasing as well. Some ethnic and inter-state conflicts are obviously of a religious origin. All of this make a number of analysts to conclude that the religious factor is becoming an important part of international life, including the formation and activities of terrorist organizations. Most of all is said and written about Islam, the second, after Christianity, world religions professed according to various estimates by 1.5 bln. individuals in 127 countries.

**Keywords**—USA, Central Asia, Religion, Politics, Ideology Terrorism, Regional Security

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE issue of the Muslim factor in the West is certainly important, since the very existence of the West is the unbearable factor for the Muslim fanatics who stand behind the Islam. The Western civilization is an alternative model, in many ways a world order alien to Islam. In Central Asian countries, Islam is the dominant and defining religion professed by the majority of the population. The Islamic factor, directly or indirectly, plays an important role in the politics of these countries. Therefore, it is impossible to ignore the religious factor in the Central Asian countries. When the anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan was launched, for obvious reasons, these countries had to rely on the U.S. administration's opinion and act with caution to Washington. At the same time, the illegal radical Islamist organizations, such as Hizbat-Tahrir al-Islami (Arabic - Islamic Liberation Party), very actively propagandize in the former Soviet republics, particularly in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. It may not safely be said whether such groups as Hizbat-Tahrir maintain direct contacts with the international terrorist organizations, such as Al-Qaeda. However, such possibility cannot be excluded, either. According to the analysts, such organizations are very attractive to those who have not been able to self-actualize in the difficult socio-economic conditions currently experienced by the Central Asia's countries. According to the political analyst Farid Asadullin, even the so-called *fatwas*, the orders of the higher Muslim spiritual leadership of the Central Asia Republics which prohibit the young people to contact the Hizbat-Tahrir' representative, are barely observed. In mid-summer 2002, Abdurashit Bakhromov, the Mufti of Uzbekistan has issued such an order. In fact, any such directive, even issued by a reputable clergyman, can be executed only if the young generation is able to self-actualize in some legitimate public processes.

However, due to a massive unemployment, young people are easily recruited by radical Islamic or pseudo-Islamic organizations. It is arguable that the radicalization tendency will gradually increase, since there are no objective preconditions to improve the living standards in these countries in the near future. This is true for the countries bordering Afghanistan [1].

At the same time, the analyst points that difficult economic conditions make most of the population socially passive and indifferent to politics. Therefore, the transformation of Central Asia into the U.S. base to bomb Afghanistan has not seen any significant protest of the local population. In the Central Asian Republics, it is either human rights activists or radical Islamic youth organizations making attempts to oppose the local political elites. The latter consider America as a financial donor paying the political loyalty of the regional leaders [2].

According to F. Assadullin "...if the anti-terrorist operation will openly be an anti-Islamic in nature, then, combined with the dynamic deterioration of the economic situation, it can result in a powerful social explosion in Central Asia... The social explosion, that will inevitably have a religious overtone, is possible in the immediate future." Further, F. Assadullin argues that the second stage of the anti-terrorist operation can serve as a catalyst for this process. It will definitely burst and cause an anti-American sentiment, and force even the loyal Islamic clergy to reorient since it would be difficult for the latter to explain the ordinary Muslims the killings of innocent people in Iraq. In his opinion, America must not forget that every fourth resident of the planet somehow belongs to the Islamic civilization. Due to an ill-considered aggressive U.S. policy, the radical Islamic organizations will get a lot of new members ready to fight against the U.S. hegemony in the region and far beyond. Washington should more closely monitor the political regimes are to establish closer relations with Central Asian states, it is primarily about the Muslim world, which certainly would try to increase its influence. Fuller specifically dwells on this issue, and given that the section "The struggle for the Muslim soul of the Central Asia," concludes his book, the topic of Islam in the future destiny of the region is becoming a dominant.

The author believes the region was at the crossroads of various international geopolitical interests and ideological groups, in his opinion; it may be a number of combinations:

- i. Turkic group against Iran;
- ii. Turkic-Iranian group against the Arab states;
- iii. "Islamistan" consisting of Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia, detached from the Arab world and India;
- iv. More extensive grouping at the level of the entire Muslim world, which may be or may be not against the West or Israel;

J. Fuller believes the membership of the Central Asian states in the anti-Western blocs is very likely in case of dissatisfaction with their CIS membership and relationship with the West. For about 75 year, these Republics were a part of the state which ideology was a struggle against the West, which would facilitate such transformation.

For the Central Asian states, there is a real issue of the militant Islam dissemination. The growth of radical Muslim organizations in these states would be the most real threat than any other external factor. For this reason, most of these countries unreservedly supported the U.S. efforts in combating international terrorism.

The Central Asia political leaders were seeking to derive much benefit from the anti-terrorist operation conducted by the U.S.

Zh.M.Aldubasheva, PhD Candidate of the Political science Department of the al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Almaty, Kazakhstan. E-mail: zhanar-03@mail.ru

These benefits would be not only the U.S. military, economic and political resources and their usage, but also the elimination of the Muslim extremist organizations and the source of serious political instability on the border, particularly with Afghanistan. The IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) was included in the list of prohibited terrorist organizations. In August 2000, the U.S. Department of State has added the IMU to the list of the most dangerous foreign terrorist organizations. Similar action has been made by the UN. In October 2002, the IMU was added by the Great Britain to the list of terrorist organizations. The IMU was made responsible for a series of explosions in Tashkent, in February, 1998 that killed 16 individuals; for attacks in Tashkent and Surkhandarya regions; as well as for the invasion on the territory of Kyrgyzstan and kidnap in the Batken region. The IMU's paramilitary units have fought alongside the Taliban against the anti-terrorist coalition' forces in Afghanistan. The Kyrgyz government believes the extremist movements influence the socio-political situation in the country and the level of criminality. "The Islamic extremist movements seek to destabilize the situation and move the focus of religious confrontation in the territory of Kyrgyzstan. To prevent the conflict, the Kyrgyz Ministry of Interior has enhanced the activities of the Department responsible for the relations with civil society," - quoted Khabar [Kazakhstan's news agency] B. Subanbekov, Head, Ministry of Interior, Kyrgyzstan. According to Essen Topoev, Minister of Defense, Kyrgyzstan, the current situation is much different from what the Republic was experienced in 1999 - 2000, when Juma Namangani' troops have penetrated into the southern part of Kyrgyzstan. Currently, in addition to the army units of Kyrgyzstan, the anti-terrorist coalition' grouping is deployed at Gansi airbase. Kyrgyzstan is also supported by the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) member states and the Russian airbase at Kant.

However, in spite of these measures, the MoD (Ministry of Defense) of Kyrgyzstan does not deny that the situation on the Republic's frontier lines remains difficult and the risk of destabilization in the region still remains. The situation on the Tajik-Afghan border is particularly challenging. Lately, the unprecedented activity of drug traffickers was recorded here, and experts incriminate a direct link between drug trafficking and activated militant activities, since drug trafficking provides the material basis for the armaments. The IMU' militants who have twice attacked the Southern region of Kyrgyzstan, once again gather in the frontier areas of Afghanistan. According to the Kyrgyz MoD, the Al-Qaeda' military groups have been forced out of the central regions of Afghanistan by the anti-terrorism coalition located on the CIS borders.

Only in the Gorno-Badakhshan region more than twenty of such groups have already been recorded. And many of them have already silted into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan [3]. The U.S. Department of State has "warned of possible anti-American attacks in Uzbekistan. According to the U.S. DOS, extremist groups, including Al-Qaeda could choose hotels and other "vulnerable points" for these attacks [4]. The Turkmen authorities believe that there are no domestic Islamic fundamental groups [5].

The U.S. geo-strategic policy has its disadvantages such as the increasing anti-Americanism in particular, and the worldwide anti-Westernism as a whole. This is largely due to the aspiration of Americans to impose their own national stereotypes to the mankind at large.

Besides, anti-Americanism is also observed in the EU's foreign policy. At the same time, Samuel P. Huntington notes "the sound cooperation with Europe is the best antidote to the feeling of a superpower, Americans have formed." One of the ultimate priority for the U.S. foreign policy would be establishment of equal relationship with key partners to mitigate and abolish the global anti-American sentiment.

In addition to the Muslim factor influencing the U.S. foreign policy, the ideologues of the U.S. hegemony should consider this strategy and periodically update it taking into account the growth of anti-Americanism worldwide.

Currently, there is a tendency of growth of such social and political phenomena as anti-Americanism. The anti-Americanism can be observed not only in the Muslim countries, but also in the EU. Before and after the U.S. military operations launched in Iraq, this tendency has intensified as never before.

February 15-16, 2003, the world was swept by mass demonstrations and rallies against the United States, against the introduction of armed forces in Iraq and against the U.S. policy decision to eliminate the "evil country" by means of war, that is, using violent methods.

About 10mln. people participated in these anti-war demonstrations and peace rallies. They swept in 60 major cities around the world, which were attended by over 600 different mass organizations, both political and social. The largest mass participation of the demonstrators was in Rome, about 3mln. individuals; in London - over 2mln individuals, and in all major cities in Europe, USA and Asia. In New York alone over 100 thousand people participated in demonstrations opposing the U.S. plan to begin the war against Iraq [6]. In Arab countries demonstrations were not of such a mass character. This is explained by the U.S. presence of expeditionary military housing; military ships; aviation; and etc. in these countries, as well as by authoritarian and other regimes prevailing there.

The radical change in the geopolitical world balance in a very short time, was a consequence of the terrorist attacks September 11, 2001 in New York and Washington, DC and the subsequent operation of American and British troops in Afghanistan. Geographical neighborhood of the Central Asian states to Afghanistan determined their active engagement in the international anti-terrorist coalition. Uzbekistan was the first CAR state which demonstrated its willingness to cooperate and provided its territory for a number of foreign units lead by the USA. Uzbekistan was one of the key points for Pentagon operation. The availability of the former Soviet military bases and airfields used back in the 80s for the same purposes, sustained the implementation of U.S. plans.

Generally, Uzbekistan continued its policy of strategic cooperation with the United States, build up earlier. During the visit of President Islam Karimov to Washington in mid-March 2002, the U.S. actually received confirmation of Tashkent's loyalty and continued support to anti-terrorist operation conducted by the US. Uzbekistan feared that in fact the Islamists military infrastructure was not destroyed, it may expect new extremists attacks, both in Afghanistan and against Uzbekistan. Despite doubts on the ability of the Western peace-keepers to control the situation in this country, Tashkent was much interested in a long-term military presence of the U.S. and its allies in Afghanistan.

In addition, Uzbekistan has managed to represent its interests in the Afghan government. [Rashid Dostum], a representative of a large Uzbek Diaspora in Afghanistan was appointed as a Vice-President with the relevant authorities. R. Dostum, being a Tashkent-controlled player could significantly facilitate the solution of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) issue on the original territory. It should be noted that planned confederation in Afghanistan proposed by Rashid Dostum, was potentially beneficial for Uzbek leadership.

In this case, the territory of Uzbekistan bordering with Afghanistan, the Uzbek government would control an Uzbek faction to ensure complete safety of the southern borders, and a powerful instrument to influence the geopolitical processes in this strategically important region. Tajikistan has also agreed to provide territory for military under the anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan. The foreign policy of Tashkent and Dushanbe in many ways are exactly the opposite. Tajikistan is one of the closest allies of Russia, dependent to a greater extent than any other Central Asian states.

We can assume the Tajik leadership actions was a direct consequence of the Russian foreign policy changes. So it was rather a Moscow move than Dushanbe, or one of the Kremlin' concessions to Washington. Kyrgyzstan provided the country's main airport in Bishkek - Manas to accommodate the anti-terrorist coalition forces and to render humanitarian aid to the Afghan people. The reasons compelled the Kyrgyz authorities to take this step, coincide with the Uzbek, namely, assist to eliminate military threat from Afghanistan. Besides, Bishkek was seeking to use an external factor to resolve domestic political and economic issues. The Government of Turkmenistan declared its support to the initiative to establish an international anti-terrorist coalition against only, if it is coordinated by the UN. The point is that Ashgabat mean the information and humanitarian cooperation, but not the deployment of foreign armed groups. Turkmen Foreign Ministry denied reports the Republic would provide its territory and military facilities for military operations run by foreign states. So, Ashgabat, in this case clearly adhered to the principle of neutrality. Kazakhstan's geographical and geopolitical location has predetermined the Astana's support to the goals and objectives of the anti-terrorist operation conducted by the international community in Afghanistan. Kazakhstan's approach was based on the necessity to stop any external support to the warring parties and hold a UN Security Council' special session on Afghanistan. These initiatives were proposed at the UN Millennium Summit in September, 2000. Immediately after the events of September 11, the Chief of State made an official statement condemning the inhuman terrorists acts, and expresses the readiness of our Republic to render any assistance in their apprehension and punishment. According to the RoK President, Kazakhstan believe the terrorists, as well as their patrons should be punished. Kazakhstan was originally prepared to support the U.S. anti-terrorist operation with all available means. Nursultan Nazarbayev, the RoK President at the meeting with the U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, stated: "We are aware the American leadership has addressed many states with such requests. If, such a request provided to the GOK, we address it positively, "[7]. In addition, the report "Kazakhstan's position on resolving the situation in Afghanistan," released as an official document of the UN Security Council and General Assembly, highlighted the RoK position on the subject. In fact, Kazakhstan is extremely interested in establishing a normal peaceful life in Afghanistan and close political and economic relations. Considering the negative impact of political-military conflict in Afghanistan to Central Asia, it is impossible not to cover an issue of drug trafficking. According to the UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) in Central Asia about 65% of Afghan drugs are currently trafficking through Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to China and Russia, and then to Europe and the United States [8]. Thus, Afghanistan remains one of the most "lively" crossroads of the external players including the Islamic ones and their interests in Central Asia. The divergence of these interests makes this country a permanent hotbed of instability. The politicization of Islam does not occur simultaneously in different parts of the Muslim world, due to internal socio-economic and political issues in each country. Egypt, Syria and Iraq were the first countries going through this process since back to the 50th-60th they were facing deep social, economic and political changes.

Then in the 70s - 80s. - Pakistan, Iran, Morocco and other countries have joined the club.

## II. CONCLUSION

Thus, according to experts, the U.S. military presence in Central Asia is served to solve, except for the Afghan problem, other issues important to U.S. national security, namely:

- i. Have in the region, the rapid reaction force, demanded, in the case of political instability in Pakistan, and especially in case of next aggravation of India-Pakistan conflict;
- ii. Have the infrastructure in the region for an active policy towards Iran and its nuclear program;
- iii. Projecting American military presence in the Caspian energy resources;
- iv. Control the territory of China, especially the areas of deployment of missile systems, and to some extent, further growth of China.

In general, the U.S. current political activities in Central Asia as well as the expansion of this superpower presence in the region is characterized by ambiguity on the one hand, and clear strategic, national goals and objectives specified in the U.S. geopolitical strategy, on the the hand. It should be noted that the countries of Central Asia should consider the economic integration of Central Asian states to international organizations, both politically and economically as a real political counterweight to the U.S. political influence and pressure in the region.

The views of Americans on the world order has undergone significant changes. During the Cold War, the international system was considered as a strictly bipolar: the international community was "divided" into two camps, and all foreign countries were assessed in accordance with their inclination to one of the geopolitical poles. Current world is a pyramid with the U.S. on top. The U.S. is building the inside world political system with a hierarchy based on a country's loyalty to the liberal democratic values and the market economy order. But in fact, as America considers itself a bulwark of world's democracy, a commitment of any state to above principles to be verified by the loyalty to Washington and its policy.

As a result, all countries are divided into three categories -the allies implicitly recognizing the hegemony and those who seek to join them; the states with negative attitude to the United States ("rogue"); undecided or inactive members of the world political processes. Russia and China clearly do not belong to any of these categories. According to numerous representatives of the American elite, the current period of political history of the world community provides a unique opportunity to combine the hegemony of one country with the assertion of democratic values.

In theory, it is recognized that the geopolitical situation so much comfortable for the USA is not eternal, but all political leaders of this country would avoid any changes to a negative direction. The attractiveness of the ideas advocated by the United States and rather good political prospects of their distribution, inspire the American elite representatives that the first hegemony of the democratic state would only be strengthened in the future.

The controversy between the inevitable authoritarian style of such type of leadership and proclaimed democratic principles, is not considered. The fact of a national idea, particularly of an American exceptionalism to be introduced the originally liberal ideology of the United States, is not considered as well.

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**Zhanar Aldubasheva** was born in the South Kazakhstan Region of Kazakhstan on October 3, 1984, got her Master's Degree in Political Science (2008) at the al-Farabi Kazakh National University (Kazakhstan). Currently she is a PhD student of political science, Department of Philosophy and Political science, the Al-Farabi Kazakh National University. She is an author of more than 20 scientific papers in the following countries. Her research interests include international relations, U.S. foreign policy, issues of national and regional security and democratization in Central Asia.

**Mukhtar Senggirbay** was born in Almaty Region of Kazakhstan on August 10, 1979. He had a Bachelor's Degree in Journalism (2001) at the Al-Farabi Kazakh National University and Master's Degree in Journalism and Mass Communication (2008) at the Caucasus School of Journalism and Media Management in Tbilisi, Georgia. He worked as a correspondent and media manager at the number of media outlets in Kazakhstan and Georgia. His article was included into the book "From the Practice of Kazakhstani Journalists", published in Almaty in 2009. Currently he is working on his PhD research on the techniques of preventing ethnic conflicts used by the new independent nations of the post-soviet space. His fields of study include ethnic conflicts, social conflicts, and ethnic identity. Mr.Senggirbay is the member of the Union of Journalists of Kazakhstan.

**Assyltayeva Elnura** was born on March 5, 1986. Assyltayeva recently got her a Master's Degree of Political science at the Kazakh National University where she focused on illegal migration in Kazakhstan. She worked at the same university as a assistant professor. She is currently employed at the Center for Research on Ethnic Relations at the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Her areas of study are civic identity, nation building, inter-ethnic relations, ethnic and political conflicts.