

# Book Reviews

## *In the Whirlwind of Jihad*

By Martha Brill Olcott  
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REVIEWED BY JOHN HERBST

Understanding the underlying dynamics of political and social life is not easy in any society and particularly in authoritarian ones. The challenge is even greater when the society in question is remote and has been isolated for decades as Central Asia was under Soviet rule. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan emerged as reluctant independent states in 1991 when the Soviet Union dissolved.

We knew very little about these countries at that time. Our knowledge of Central Asia has certainly increased since. This is evident in the large number of books and articles authored each year on the region; and also in the multiplication of Central Asian centers at universities across the Western world. Despite this, we still have only a rough idea of the factors that produce political

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decisions and the motivations that drive the peoples of the region. Much Western commentary on Central Asia is framed by our own political and societal experience: specifically the historic movement from a faith-based social order to a secular one and from monarchies to democracies. Much writing on political life in Central Asia focuses on the region's struggle toward an open and democratic society and seeks to explain the absence of progress.

The significant issue of the emergence of Islam in Central Asia is at times presented as an adjunct to this question. The growing influence of Islam in especially Uzbekistan and Tajikistan is often presented as a consequence of the harsh authoritarian rule in Tashkent and its weaker variant in Dushanbe. By this interpretation, the crackdown on the secular opposition in Uzbekistan is the decisive reason – or at least the one we harp on – for the growth of political Islam, because the mosque provides the most effective channel for dissent. The fact that this analysis is also applied in the Arab world gives reason to pause and ask if this analysis is more about a paradigm in the mind of the analyst than the reality of the diverse regions being studied.

For this reason, any study that moves beyond our own paradigm in examining Central Asian society is valuable; and any study that gets a handle on the internal dynamics of the region is critical. Martha Brill Olcott's *In the Whirlwind of Jihad*, a study of Islam in Uzbekistan, is the rare book that does that. In a career that began in the late 1970's, Olcott has established herself as the dean of American scholars on Central Asia.

*In the Whirlwind of Jihad* takes the reader on a tour of the development of Islam in Central Asia and especially Uzbekistan. She starts with the Islamic conquest of Central Asia early in the 8<sup>th</sup> century in order to underscore the point that Central Asia has been a critical part of the Islamic

world and a center of Islamic learning from nearly the beginning. Many luminaries of Islamic thought hailed from Central Asia including hadith scholar Imam Bukhari, and the philosophers Al Farabi and Avicenna. Olcott notes that the relatively liberal Hanafi school of jurisprudence has predominated in Central Asia and Sufism has exerted a profound influence. In short, a tolerant version of Islam took root in the region. Of particular relevance to our subject, the Hanafi school accepted the idea that Muslims could be ruled by non-believers or infidels so long as Muslims could maintain their faith unhindered and had access to sharia (Islamic law).

This line of thinking made it easier for the Muslims of Central Asia to accept Russian rule in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as it left the Islamic community free to practice its faith. The establishment of Soviet rule in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a different matter because of its suppression of traditional religion. Indeed the Soviet period exerted a critical influence on the Islam that has emerged in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. The repression of religious practice had several important consequences: it drove practicing Muslims underground and a small but influential community of Uzbeks out of the country, some of whom settled in Saudi Arabia and prospered; it isolated Muslims in Central Asia from the wider Islamic world; it secularized Central Asian society at least in the major cities.

Olcott's work is particularly strong describing the development of Islamic thought during the Soviet and Independence periods. While anti-religious Soviet policy drove much religious life underground, Islam did not disappear. Islamic preachers remained active, at least after Stalin's death. The Hanafi school maintained its leading position in the region in part thanks to the work of Muhammadjon Hindustani, who, after his release from jail following Stalin's death, worked at Dushanbe's Oriental Institute

of the Academy of Sciences, preached in a local mosque and gave illegal religious instruction in hujra's (classes) outside of the mosque. Through these hujra's he became a major influence on the imams prominent in Uzbekistan at independence. Interestingly, the Soviet period witnessed the introduction of salafi influences in the region with the settling in Tashkent of Shami Al Tarabulsi in 1919, a religious thinker educated at Al Azhar in Cairo and who had spent much of his life in Xianjiang. Under his tutelage, the groups Ahl-i-Hadith and Ahl-i-Quran emerged, opposed to Hanfai teachings and Sufi practices and calling for a return to Islam based on hadith and the Quran.

Not all of Hindustani's students remained members of the Hanafi school. Influenced by Salafi thinkers Sayid Abul Ala Maududi and Sayid Qutb, Rahmatulla-alloma and Abduvali Qori preached that certain Central Asian religious practices – venerating “saints,” reciting certain verses from the Quran at funerals, or paying for recitation of the Quran – were “un-Islamic.” In addition, they pushed for a return to the hijab (head covering for Muslim women). It is worth noting that these developments took place before the Soviet Union fell.

The importance of these developments was evident when the Central Asian states became independent. Abduvali Qori's influence was strongest in the Ferghana cities of Andijan and Namangan, where his followers took over local mosques. In Namangan, Islamic militias appeared – Islom Adolat and Islom lashkarlari – who openly challenged secular authorities by seeking to establish a Sharia-based society. As part of this effort, they forced merchants to stop selling alcohol and to close their shops during the Islamic call to prayer. By 1990, Tohir Yuldoshev and Juma Namangani – the future leaders of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)– had emerged

as key players in *Islom Adolat*. In short, an energetic and radical Islam appeared in Central Asia at independence because of developments in Islamic thought in the region – partly reflecting imports from elsewhere in the Islamic world.

Olcott also pays significant attention to the policies toward Islam of the Uzbek President Islam Karimov. She notes Karimov's recognition that, as a major element of Uzbek culture and tradition, Islam would play an important role in post-Soviet Uzbekistan, and how he agreed to the opening of many mosques. She provides a good account of Karimov's reaction to the challenge of radical Islam in the Ferghana Valley and a description of his famous meeting with Yuldoshev and other Islamic leaders in Namangan in December, 1991. These developments heightened his already well developed sense that Islam must play a major role in independent Uzbekistan, but also that it must be contained. Individual preachers or activists could not be permitted in the name of Islam to challenge the authority of the state. To deal with this challenge, Karimov launched a crackdown on *Islom Adolat* and the mosques advocating the establishment of a shariah-based society.

Karimov's policy toward Islam was also influenced by the outbreak of civil war in neighboring Tajikistan with the prominent role of the Islamic Renaissance Party in the opposition. Following Karimov's repression of radical Islam in the Ferghana Valley, Namangani and other Uzbek Islamists went to Tajikistan to fight with the opposition. With the ceasefire in Tajikistan, Yuldoshev, Namangani and their followers were ready to return home, newly organized in the IMU, dedicated to the overthrow of the Karimov government and the establishment of a shariah-based society.

This set the stage for a decade of IMU-organized or inspired terrorist attacks – starting with the February, 1999 assassination attempt on Karimov – and government crackdowns

on radical Islam. Government sweeps against Islamists were not limited to the IMU. They were directed also against *Hizb It Tahrir* – a radical group that, while eschewing violence at this stage of historical development, wants to re-establish a caliphate to rule the Islamic world – and other groups that pursued Salafi goals.

Olcott demonstrates that despite the strong-arm tactics of the Uzbek government, there remains a “marketplace of ideas” in Uzbekistan where traditional Hanafi beliefs compete with their Salafi rivals, and the government must adjust its policies to the realities of an evolving situation. This is evident in the government's treatment of Uzbekistan's most prominent cleric, Muhammad Sodik Muhammad Yusef, who headed the Muslim Spiritual Administration of Uzbekistan at the time of independence. Karimov removed Muhammad Sodik in 1993 for not containing Islamic radicals and he went into exile. Yet Muhammad Sodik returned from exile in 2000 because the Karimov government thought that his presence might be useful in containing the growth of radical Islam.

Olcott's discussion of controversial developments is fact-based and nuanced. In treating the violence in Andijon in 2005 concerning the *Akromiyya* movement, she notes that Uzbek authorities believed that the attack on the armory and the prison break proved their point that radical Islamic thought promotes terrorism. Even while Uzbek officials may have privately agreed that their harsh response -- the indiscriminate shooting of protestors -- went too far, they could not understand why the United States and other Western powers condemned only the Uzbek response and not the initial violence of the protestors.

Olcott has produced a serious work on a major topic that is all too often simplified in public discussion of Uzbekistan. [PRISM](#)