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THE MUSLIMS IN THE SOVIET UNION : CONFLICT OR ACCOMMODATION ?

Introduction

Soviet Union's policy in relation to its Muslim population, the latter's outlook towards the Soviet system and the probable impact of both on the future of Muslim-dominated Soviet republics have always been an object of intense academic discussions and political polemics. The reasons are obvious. Firstly, the October Revolution of 1917 and the socio-economic and political system established subsequently by it was based on an outright rejection of all religions and adherence to scientific atheism. Secondly, the leading force behind the Revolution was the once-Christian population of Russia and the Muslims were not only a minority in the USSR but also disproportionately under-represented in the ruling Communist Party. Most of the discussions and polemics revolve mainly around two questions : (a) Whether the Muslims could preserve their religious identity in the process of their integration with the Soviet system ; (b) Whether the Muslims will be given the equal opportunity of socio-economic and political development as the Revolution promised or remain as deprived as they were in Tzarist Russia.

Soviet analysts usually adhere strictly to official positions. The opposite pole is represented by authors who characterize Soviet policy towards its Muslim population as one of outright repression, even that of "genocide", and see "the struggle for independence" in every

corner of Muslim inhabited territory".¹ Of course, a more balanced approach is also observed in some works, which tend to differentiate the treatment of 'Islam as a religion' from that of 'Muslim nationalities' in the Soviet Union. Thus, while Soviet negative approach towards Islam as a religion is brought to scrutiny, the importance of assessing socio-economic and cultural development of Soviet Muslims over last seven decades is also recognised.²

Discussions over Soviet Muslims have significantly intensified during the past decade largely due to recent upswing in religious fundamentalism and increasing role of religion as a factor in politics in the Muslim world in general and in the countries adjacent to the USSR in particular. Soviet sources, for their part reject the prospects for any sort of outside influence on its Muslim population. Some western observers also believe that Islam is no longer important in the makeup of the identity of Soviet Muslims. By this reckoning, rise of religious fundamentalism has had virtually no impact on Soviet Muslims due to the advanced state of Soviet Central Asia's modernization, secularization and social mobilization.³ Other observers insist that Islam remains a common denominator among the Turco-Iranian people of the USSR and they cannot remain unaffected by the turmoil just across their borders.⁴

Despite the existence of a wide range of literature on the topic, a clear picture of the place of the Muslims in the USSR and their relation to socio-economic system is hard to discern. It is mainly

1. See, J.G. Tewari, *Muslims under the Czars and the Soviets*, (Academy of Islamic Research and Publications, Lucknow, 1984) p. 429.
2. Geoffrey Jukes, "The Soviet Union", in Mohammed Ayoob (ed), *The Politics of Islamic Reassertion*, (Vikas, New Delhi, 1982) pp. 256-70.
3. See, Martha Brill Olcott, "Soviet Islam and World Revolution", *World Politics*, (Princeton, July, 1982), pp. 487-505.
4. See, Michael Rywkin, *Moscow's Muslim Challenge*, (New York, M.E. Sharpe, 1982); Alexandre Bennigsen, "Mullahs, Mujahidin and Soviet Muslims", *Problems of Communism*, (November-December, 1984), pp 28-44.

due to the fact that most of the works tend to be biased in one direction or another.

The present article is an attempt to study the place of Islam and that of Muslim population in the USSR and their relation towards the system at work. Part I of the article highlights the Soviet approach towards Islam and the development of Muslim population during the Soviet period. Part II has been devoted to the impact of the religious fundamentalism in the Muslim world, on the Soviet Muslims as well as on Soviet policies, both domestic and foreign. Finally, an attempt will be made to indicate some future directions.

I

Soviet Approach Towards Islam

Soviet approach towards Islam is based on the teachings of Marxism-Leninism which outrightly rejects all religions and strictly adheres to scientific atheism. The official view as defined in the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia is that, "Like all religions, Islam has played a reactionary role, being a weapon in the hands of the exploiting classes and an instrument for the spiritual oppression of the workers and for the subjection of the peoples of the East by foreign colonialists.⁵ The withering away of religion, including Islam, was a stated objective of the Soviet state since its very inception. But in terms of the practical implementation, Soviet approach to Islam appears to have been far more pragmatic.

In their policy formulation towards Islam as a religious belief and towards Muslim nationalities the Soviet policy makers have taken into account the complex realities of national and international politics. They judged their actions on the basis of cost-benefit

5. Sheikh R. Ali, "The Muslim Minority in the Soviet Union" *Current History*, (April, 1980), p. 177.

analysis of hostility and accommodation. When they perceived that repression was inevitable they, rarely hesitated. But when they found that accommodation is necessary or beneficial they opted for it. This two-way strategy of Soviet Union toward Islam had its origin in part also to differing perspectives among Soviet leaders and officials on religion in general and Islam in particular. "Ideological fundamentalists" favour an intense anti-religious campaign with a view to wipe out religion from the country as soon as possible.

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On the other hand the "pragmatists" advocate a more selective and flexible approach.⁶ Both these tendencies have been evident over time and to some extent they have competed for ascendancy, with the "pragmatists" gaining the upperhand during the entire period of Soviet rule with the exception of late 1920s and 1930s. As a result, the general direction of official policy towards Islam was a mixture of tolerance and indoctrination, though instances of repression against religious institutions were not seldom.

Alliance Between Communists and Muslim Nationalists

The complex and critical internal and external environ that the Soviet state faced during the early years following the revolution demanded an approach to religion far more pragmatic than traditional Marxist thoughts could provide. Thus, in their policy formulation towards the Muslim population Lenin and his comrades in the party proceeded with caution taking into account both the internal and external dimensions of the issue.

6. Donald D. Barry and Carol Barner-Barry, *Contemporary Soviet Politics*, (Prentice-Hall Inc., New Jersey, 1978), p. 247.

The Muslims of pre-revolutionary Russia were in various stages of "pre-nationalist" development ranging from clan to early stage of the formation of "bourgeois nation". Although the Muslim society was undergoing profound social changes including the influence of modern politics characterised by anti-Tzarist movement the October Revolution occurred before the Muslim national movement grew in importance. To the Bolsheviks, prime concern was to woo the support of Central Asian Muslim population in order to sustain in power and maintain the integrity of the country. No less important was the fact that Islamic dimension was recognized as a potential foreign policy tool for securing the support of colonised and semi-colonised people of the East as against the influence of Western colonial powers. These considerations led the Soviet leadership to subordinate their basic hostility towards Islam as a form of religious belief, to the needs of internal and external policies. On November 24, 1917, a special appeal signed by Lenin and Stalin was addressed to all the "toiling Muslims of Russia and the East", "...whose beliefs and customs have been trampled upon by the czars and oppressors of Russia...". The appeal read: "Your beliefs and customs, your national and cultural institution are declared henceforth free and inviolable. Organize your national life freely and without hindrance, this is your right. Know that your rights...are protected by the entire might of the revolution..., support this revolution and its Government".⁷ This appeal was followed by some concrete measures designed to attract Soviet Muslims. Church was separated from the state by a government decree of January 23, 1918 abolishing the privileged position of Orthodox Church. A Central Muslim Commissariat was set up under the Commissariat of Nationalities and in contrast to the hostility then displayed toward the Orthodox Church, attacks on Islam were discouraged by the authority.⁸ This was followed by a significant expansion of Muslim recruits in the Communist Party. For understandable reasons, most of them

7. Sheikh R. Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

8. *ibid.*

were Muslim nationalist intellectuals representing varying degrees of radicalism, who saw socialism as a vehicle for liberating Central Asia from its downtrodden status and speeding up modernisation.⁹ In this regard, Bolshevik approach was also encouraging. Those who wanted to be both Muslims and Communists could do so. Even Communist Party conferences were interrupted for Muslim prayer.¹⁰

From the very beginning of Soviet rule Islam was cautiously used in Soviet relations with the growing nationalist movement in Asia. It is this period when Lenin formulated his natural ally theory which implied that the socialist countries and the national liberation movement of colonial and semi-colonial peoples and the newly-liberated nations were symbolically linked in one great historical struggle against imperialism, hence, they were natural allies.¹¹ Hoping for a huge response, the Bolsheviks, since 1918 were appealing to the colonized and semi-colonized peoples to rise against colonialism. Initially, this policy seemed to be working. Turkish prisoners of war, Iranian democrats, Indonesian freedom fighters, Indian revolutionaries and Muslim militants of Califat movement and Arab radicals all flocked to Moscow. A number of important gatherings took place during this time, including three Komintern Congresses (in 1920, 1921 and 1922), the Congress of the "Toilers of the East" in Baku (1920). Both Muslim nationalists and Communists attended these fora and discussed common strategy against colonial powers.¹²

The Offensive

However, the so-much-flexible Soviet policy towards Islam, the resultant alliance relationship between Soviet Communists and Muslim nationalists were short-lived. The world-wide revolutionary

9. Geoffrey Jukes, *op.cit.*, p. 259.

10. Sheikh R. Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

11. See, A.K.M. Abdus Sabur, "Soviet-Iranian Relations Since the Islamic Revolution", *Biiss Journal*, (Dhaka), 1985, Vol. 6 No. 1. p. 90.

12. Alexandre Bennigsen and Marie Broxup, *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State*, (Croom Helm, London, 1983), pp. 93-100.

wave of Post-World War I period gradually waned. The immediate prospects for revolution in the West were bleak. In the circumstances, Stalin's theory of "socialism in one country" became victorious over Trotsky's theory of world revolution and permanent revolution. The USSR embarked upon a policy of building socialism through Five Year Plans of socio-economic development which demanded a strict work discipline in all over the country. Meanwhile, the Communist Party increased its strongholds in Central Asia. As seen from Moscow, these factors *en bloc* made an offensive against religion not only necessary but also possible.

In the Muslim countries, Communist Parties supported by the Komintern had suffered serious set-backs. The nationalist governments in Turkey and Iran, despite Soviet political, military and financial support, moved closer to the West and adopted a hostile attitude towards the USSR. In both countries, the local Communist Parties were outlawed and quickly liquidated. It was followed by the downfall of the King Amanullah of Afghanistan who displayed friendly attitude towards the Soviet Union. The most powerful of the Arab Communist Parties the Egyptian Communist movement was destroyed by its rival *Wadfi*.¹³ These developments coupled with other set-backs in China, India and Indonesia were enough to convince Moscow that revolutionary momentum in the East is lost, at least for the time being. It reduced the viability of using Islamic factor as foreign policy tool. In the circumstances, during late 1920s a wholesale offensive against all religions, including Islam became evident. This anti-religious campaign continued upto the World War II. During this period *Sharia* Courts, *madrashas* and many of the mosques were closed, printing of religious materials and performing of *Hajj* was prohibited. The abolition of *Waqf* and *Zakat* deprived the *mullahs*, *imams* and religious institutions much of their economic power. Religious practices were strongly discouraged.

13. *ibid.*, pp., 100-101.

As religious propaganda was prohibited, there was no way of combating it.¹⁴

It is in this period, when most of the Muslims due to indoctrination, for the fear of socio-economic deprivation and no less significantly, for the interest of social advancement moved away from Islam. Some, who did not want to break away with religion, made it an exclusively private matter and refrained from identifying themselves publicly with religion. That part of Soviet Muslims who remained true to their religious faith was concerned in the socio-economic life of the country and was eliminated from the political scene.

Relegitimization of Islam

The Second World War marked a new turning point for Islam in the Soviet Union. Faced with the threat of Fascist aggression, the Soviet leadership was compelled to woo its aggrieved population and seek allies in the outside world. Measures adopted to do so included a flexible approach towards religion in general and Islam in particular. The Soviet government embarked upon a policy of normalization of its relations with the Muslim religious establishment and accommodation with it. During the War, at least three conferences of Muslim leaders were held in Ufa (1942), Tashkent (1943) and Baku (1944). Some Mosques were allowed to reopen increasing their number by the end of the war to about 3000, pilgrimage to Mecca was cautiously re-established.¹⁵ The Muslim religious leaders, on their part have judged it expedient to cooperate with the authorities in order to regain legitimacy. During the War they summoned the faithful to rise up to defend the Soviet Union and pray for the victory of Soviet Army.¹⁶ During the years following the War the relations between the Soviet authorities and the Muslim establishment gradually normalized and a

14. For details, see, Shirin Akiner, *Islamic Peoples of the Soviet Union*, (Kegan Paul International, London, 1983), p. 31; Geoffrey Jukes, *op. cit.*, p. 260; Alexandre Bennigsen and Marie Broxup, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-103.

15. Sheikh R. Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

16. *ibid.*

modus vivendi was achieved. The most significant development in this direction was the official sanctioning of four Spiritual Directorates, which were :

- (1) *Spiritual Directorate of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (Sunni)*. Its headquarters are in Tashkent, working language is Uzbek and follows the *Hanafi* school. Being the biggest Spiritual Directorate, it administers the only two Soviet Madrashas (one in Bukhara and the other in Tashkent), produces nearly all the Islamic publications and has the largest Islamic library in the USSR.
- (2) *Spiritual Directorate of the European SSR and Siberia (Sunni)*. Its headquarters are in Ufa, working language is Tatar and follows the *Hanafi* school.
- (3) *Spiritual Directorate of Northern Caucasus and Daghestan (Sunni)*. Its headquarters are in Makhachkala, working language is Arabic and follows the *Shafi'i* school.
- (4) *Spiritual Directorate of Transcaucasia (Sunni-Shi'i)*. Its headquarters are in Baku, working language is Azerbaidzani and follows the *Jafari* and *Hanafi* schools.

The Spiritual Directorates come under the Council of Religious Affairs of the Council of Ministers of the USSR. They are concerned with every aspects of the administration of Islam in the Soviet Union. With the establishment of officially sanctioned Spiritual Directorates Muslim religious institutions achieved their long-cherished legitimacy and working environment, though they were to adapt to the peculiar conditions of the USSR, where atheism is the part of official philosophy. Since then a relative *status quo* between the Soviet authorities and the Muslim religious institutions continue to exist with a brief disruption during the last years of Khrushchev, when a number of Mosques were closed and atheist propaganda intensified. After Khrushchev's removal in 1964, persecution of religious institutions virtually ceased though state disapproval of religion persists as ever and overt attachment to religious

practice remains a bar to social advancement. But beyond that it is tolerated as "something which can be expected to wither away of its own accord in due course".¹⁷

The Muslim religious leaders for their part have judged it expedient to give full support to Soviet policies as the price for the existence of their institutions. During the Cold War period they persistently criticized the US and other Western powers and protested against the creation of NATO, SEATO and CENTO.¹⁸

Increasing Cooperation

Some significant changes regarding the role of Soviet Muslim religious establishment and its relations with the authorities took place during the period since late 1960s. The USSR under the leadership of Brezhnev embarked upon a more activist policy towards the Third World in general and the Islamic world in particular. It increased the importance of Islamic dimension as a foreign policy tool. Since late 1960s, as the USSR again reappeared on the political scene of the Middle East with a new Muslim face, the need for close cooperation between the Soviet Muslim religious establishment and the authorities increased substantially. Since then the Soviet Muslim religious establishment dramatically increased its interaction with the Muslim World.¹⁹

The Soviet objectives in promoting such cooperation with Muslims were many-fold :

- (1) To demonstrate the presence of religious freedom in the USSR and thus, to reduce opposition to communism in the Islamic world which generally regards this Soviet system not only as an atheist one but also intolerant to Islam in practice.

17. Geoffrey Jukes, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

18. Sheikh R. Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

19. Alexandre Bennigsen and Marie Broxup, *op. cit.*, pp. 104-108; Sririni Akiner, *Islamic Peoples of the Soviet Union*, (Kegan Paul International, London, 1983) pp. 32-25; J.G. Tewari, *op. cit.*, pp. 411-415.

- (2) To demonstrate to the Third World in general and the Muslim World in particular, by using the economic progress achieved in Central Asia and Caucasus during Soviet period that the Soviet experience is more successful and rewarding than the capitalist way of development.
- (3) To use Muslim religious leaders as a valuable asset in fostering Soviet image as a friend and partner of the Muslim World and in improving relations with the Muslim countries, specially in the context of issues like Arab-Israeli conflict which were of great significance to Soviet foreign policy objectives in terms of her competition with the US for influence in the Islamic World.

However, everything has to be paid for and the Soviet government had to make important concessions to the religious establishment, which include, toning down of anti-religious propaganda, opening of new mosques and provision of other facilities. Soviet religious leaders for their part have cooperated, apparently willingly, with the authorities with the intention of sustaining their socio-religious institutions as well as increasing their power, privilege and influence. Cooperation, as viewed by them, was aimed at creating a vested interest within the Soviet authority in favour of sustenance of the religious institutions. The cooperation of the Muslim religious establishment in promoting Soviet foreign policy is manifest in three ways : visits and conferences in the USSR; visit abroad by Soviet Muftis and propaganda broadcasts by Soviet Muslim authorities.

The soviet policy of withering away of religion and establishing harmonious relations among divergent nationalities has not been without success, although the extent of that success is far from absolute.

The result of this marriage of convenience between the two sides indeed contributed to some significant positive developments in the life and living of Soviet Muslims.

During the Soviet period radical changes occurred in socio-economic and cultural life of the people of Central Asia and Caucasus. An area which was in the "pre-nationalist" stage of development has witnessed modernization and development by a degree nearly unprecedented in any other Muslim dominated habitat. Socio-economic and cultural development of these nations during Soviet period is literally spectacular. Prior to the Revolution, illiteracy was predominant in the Muslim areas. Even in 1926, literacy rate among most of the Muslim nations was below 10 percent.²⁰ Already in 1970, literacy rate among the Muslim nations exceeded 99% which is uncomparable with any Muslim nation outside the Soviet Union.²¹ Though the Muslims in terms of higher education still are lagging behind the Christian population, the gap is being bridged gradually.²²

The Muslim areas of the USSR have on the whole benefitted significantly from differential spending on their development by the central government.²³ A predominantly agrarian area was transformed into an industrial one. The Soviet Muslims in terms of wages, education, general health, life-expectancy, compare extremely well with their ethnic cousins in the adjacent independent countries.²⁴ Now, nationality and language are factors that differentiate Soviet Muslims not only from the Slavs but also from each other and the stage of socio-economic development distinguish them from their ethnic cousins and co-religionists in the adjacent Muslim countries, while the socio-political system and economic relations bind them to the rest of the Soviet Union.

Summing up, the Soviet policy towards the Muslim areas has not been without success in its stated objective of achieving a withering away of religion and establishing harmonious relations among

20. See, Shirin Akiner, *Islamic Peoples of the Soviet Union*, (Kegan Paul International, London, 1983), pp. 63, 117, 280, 296, 321, 334.

21. *ibid.*

22. Geoffrey Jukes, *op. cit.*, p. 265.

23. *ibid.*, p. 260.

24. *ibid.*, p. 261.

different nations, but the extent of that success is far from absolute. Islam as a religious belief maintained its survival and continues to play a major role in the private life of many Muslims. A remarkable portion of them still do practice Islam though their exact number is hard to estimate. According to official claims, only about 10% of once Muslim population are now religious.²⁵

For about seven decades of Soviet rule religion has been cornered down in public life. Islam, like other religions, has been deliberately assigned a limited place in Soviet life. The Article 52 of the October 1977 Constitution gives all Soviet citizens the right "to profess or not to profess any religion."²⁶ While the right of conducting atheist propaganda is guaranteed by the same article of the constitution²⁷ and sponsored by the state, religious propaganda is severely restricted. On the other hand, since the end of Khrushchev period persecution of religion virtually ceased. Since mid-1960s pragmatists among the leadership, who prefer cooperation with the Muslim religious establishment in view of its utility in consolidating internal harmony and achieving foreign policy objective have been enjoying the upper-hand. Muslim religious leaders as well judged it expedient to give full support to Soviet policies as the price for the continued existence of their institutions and increased government patronage to them. It would be appropriate to suggest that both the parties, the Soviet authority and the Muslim religious establishment have a common interest in maintaining the present trend of cooperation.

II

The rise of religious consciousness and the revival of Islamic fundamentalism in the Muslim world have an influence on the USSR and its policies, both domestic and foreign. She has the fifth

25. See, Shahram Chubin, "Soviet Policy Towards Iran and the Gulf", *Adelphi Papers*, (London), 1980, No. 157, p. 38.

26. *Constitution (Fundamental Law) of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics*, (Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, Moscow, 1982), p. 34.

27. *ibid.*

largest Muslim population in the world with about 45.5 million in 1979 who constitute about 17.4% of total population of the country²⁸. The number is growing rapidly both in absolute terms and as a percentage of total Soviet population. The integration of these people to the rest of the country have been a prime concern since the early days of Bolshevik rule. The Soviet Muslims live principally in the Southern Republics bordering with countries where Islam is the dominant religion. This region being a hot-bed of political instability remains a focal point of super-power rivalry with the US gaining the edge. In this regard, the super-power, either rationally or irrationally have tended to view the changes in this region in terms of a zero-sum game, loss of influence by either of them is a gain to its opponent and *vice-versa*. The Soviets have given a particular importance to their relations with Muslim countries and from the very outset, Islamic dimension was recognized as a potential foreign policy tool and consciously used in the USSR's relations with them.

In this backdrop, the rise of religious consciousness and the revival of Islamic fundamentalism in the Muslim world, Soviet Military involvement in Afghanistan and the triumph of Islamic Revolution in Iran exposed the Islamic factor—a potential asset in Soviet foreign policy — to a vulnerability. The situation was worsened by the conscious attempts from within the Muslim world and beyond, to use these developments against the USSR. They followed two directions; discrediting Soviet image in the Muslim world and attempts to export Islamic revolution to the USSR.

Isolation in the Muslim World

In the first direction successes were remarkable. Following the Afghan crisis the USSR was faced with severe opposition from the Islamic World. Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) condemned the Soviet action and demanded the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. In addition OIC also

28. Shirin Akiner, *Islamic Peoples of the Soviet Union*, (Kegan Paul International, London, 1983), pp. 40-41.

suspended Afghanistan's membership in the Organization.²⁹ Though some Arab radicals, viz., Syria, Libya, South Yemen and the PLO were hesitant to play a visible role and were reluctant to cause deterioration of their relations with the USSR, in view of being in a genuine state of war with the US-backed Israel none of them except the South Yemen openly identified with the USSR on Afghan issue.³⁰ The Afghan crisis offered the Western countries, particularly the US, with an opportunity to repair their image in the Islamic world damaged by their overt patronage of Israel. The USSR remains isolated on the Afghan issue and it is yet to repair its image in the Muslim world damaged by the continued presence of its troops in Afghanistan.

The Soviets were highly concerned about the possibility of the US using the anti-Soviet sentiments in the Muslim world that followed the Afghan crisis to its own benefit. A number of publications were addressed to the problem, "USA and the Islamic World" authored by A. Kislov and R. Zimenkov,³¹ both Soviet experts on US policy towards the Middle East was one of them. Economic exploitation of the Muslim World by the US through trade, private investment, aid and other means, US use of military pressure, political and ideological subversion against them were the main issues discussed. At the same time, US attempts to rally a number of Muslim countries "on the basis of anti-Communism and anti-Sovietism," was also focused. This and other Soviet publications suggest that the Soviets realize the political atmosphere that shaped in the Muslim countries during late 1970s and early 1980s concerning the position of the USSR but they could not suggest an immediate way out of the situation. At the same time, most of the Soviet analysts including A. Kislov and R. Zemenkov remain confi-

29. *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*, (Vol. XXVI, 1980) p. 30242.

30. For details See, A.K.M. Abdus Sabur, "The Afghan Crisis: Prospects for a Negotiated Settlement", *Biiss Journal*, (Dhaka), 1984, Vol. 5, No 1, pp, 51-61.

31. A. Kislov and R. Zimenkov, *USA and the Islamic World*, (Sterling, New Delhi, 1984).

dent that Washington's "Islamic card" "will be beaten in the long run just as so many of its other cards were beaten before".³²

The prospects for spillover effect of Afghan issue on Soviet Muslims did not come true. Prognoses of such effects by the Sovietologists, both Muslim and Western, proved to be wishful thinking. Moreover, the Soviet Muslim religious establishment totally identified itself with the government policy regarding Afghanistan. Most powerful Soviet Muslim religious leaders including Ziauddin Khan ibn Ishan Babakhan from time to time totally endorsed the official position³³ to stress upon the limits of influence of Western propaganda on Soviet Muslims.

Attempts to Export Islamic Revolution

During late 1970s early 1980s persistent attempts were made by a number of forces in the Muslim World to export Islamic revolution to the USSR and to influence government policy toward Islam with a view to ensure greater religious freedom for the Soviet Muslims. But, most of them tried to do this in a subtle way or without inviting hostility from the USSR. In this regard, a request by Libya for a consulate in Tashkent to proselytize among Soviet Muslims is a case in point.³⁴ But, the Iranian attempts distinctly different from other, both in scale and vigour. Iran's policy is based on the premise of pan-Islamism, which is conceived with an idea of eliminating any atheist or non-Islamic rule in the areas populated by the Muslims. Soon after the Revolution, Iran embarked upon a policy of exporting Islamic revolution to its neighbours, including the USSR. In the speeches of Ayatollah Khomeini, to those of his subordinates and in the radio and press of the Islamic Republic, the call for a broader Islamic revolution has been a recurrent theme.³⁵ Leading Iranian personalities

32. *ibid.*, p. 74.

33. See for example, J. G. Tewari, *op. cit.*, pp. 415-416.

34. Shahram Chubin, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

35. Fred Halliday, 'The Iranian Revolution in International Affairs: Programme and Practice', in Abdul Majid Farid (ed), *Oil and Security in the Arabian Gulf*, (Croom Helm, London, 1983) pp. 24-25.

The Iranian attempts to influence the Soviet Muslims have so far yielded very limited, if any, success. It is unlikely that the Soviet Muslims would pose a threat to either the social system or the integration of the country by making a common cause with Iran or using Islam as a form of national identity. The reasons are obvious. About 85 percent of the Soviet Muslims are of Turkic origin against the 8 percent of Iranian origin.⁴⁵ It reduces the prospects for Iran using the ethnic linkages. While 90 percent of the Soviet Muslims are Sunni, only 10 percent of them are Shiite.⁴⁶ Iranian Revolution,

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despite its influence on Sunni Muslims as well, proved to be a purely Shiia phenomenon. The Soviet Muslim religious establishment still remains strict to its policy of accommodation and cooperation with the authorities. About seven decades of Soviet rule, modernization and atheist indoctrination have greatly decreased the influence of religion and the latter have been pushed out of public life. Soviet society achieved a significant degree of integration and the Muslims have been assimilated to the rest of the society. They are in a higher level of socio-economic and cultural development and having a better standard of living than their counterpart in Iran or elsewhere in the region. In recent years, some Muslims in the USSR like Politbureau members G. Aliev, D. Kunayev achieved some real power in the Soviet context.⁴⁷

45. S. Akiner, "Islam in the Soviet Union, *News Letter*, (An Information Bulletin of the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Dhaka), Vol. 4, No. 14, May 25, 1983, p. 9

46. *ibid*, p. 11.

47. For details, see, A.K.M. Abdus Sabur, "Soviet-Iranian Relations Since the Islamic Revolution", *Biiss Journal*, (Dhaka) 1985, Vol. 6. No. 1. p. 111,

After a brief period of hesitation that followed the Afghan crisis, the Muslim religious establishment again intensified its activities aimed at promoting Soviet foreign policy objectives. Since late 1981, a number of Soviet Muslim dignitaries visited the Islamic World. Some of them were received by influential Muslim leaders like King Khaled of Saudi Arabia, Prime Minister Jordan and the Crown Prince of Kuwait. Muslim delegations from Syria, Jordan, Tunisia, Algeria, Bangladesh and a number of other countries also visited Soviet Central Asia.⁴⁸ These overtures undoubtedly helped the USSR to reduce its disastrous isolation in the Muslim world that followed her military involvement in Afghanistan. Despite conscious efforts to export Islamic revolution to the USSR and despite her isolation in the Islamic World over the Afghan issue, the Soviet Union still remains confident that her capacity to exploit the Muslim connection exceeds the risks that her Southern population may be infected by religious zeal. If, however, the price of improved relations with Muslim countries gets inflated to an extent able to engender religious consciousness within the USSR, it may well prove high enough for her to consider a revision of her policy towards Muslim religious establishment.

Uneven Demographic Growth : A Concern for Moscow ?

As some western sources suggest, what apparently concerns the Soviets at present is the demographic rather than the strictly religious aspect of the problem. The Soviet census figures show that the rate of growth of the Muslim population is much faster than that of the Slavic population (see Table). During the 1959-70 intercensal period the growth of population among Slavic nations varied from 0.82 percent to 1.12 percent a year against the growth of Muslim population by 3.15 percent. Some individual Muslim groups grew at markedly faster rates: the Uzbekes at 3.93 percent and the Tadzhiks at 3.94 percent. During the 1970-79 intercensal period disparity between the Slavic and the Muslim population in terms of the rate of growth intensified in favour of the latter. This trend, in the medium and long-range view, is

48. For details, see, Alexandre Bennigsen. *op. cit.*, pp. 42-44.

pregnant with socio-economic and political consequences which might affect the existing national harmony in the USSR. However, the possibility of gross reduction in the rate of demographic growth even in Soviet Muslim population in the face of intensive process of modernization of almost all aspects of their life which more often than not have negative impact on such growth rates.

Table 1 The Growth of Slavic and Muslim Populations during the period 1959-79.

	During 1959-1970 intercensal period	During 1970-79 intercensal period
The USSR as a whole	1.34	0.90
The Russians	1.12	0.70
The Belorussians	1.23	0.50
The Ukrainians	0.82	0.43
Populations of muslim origin	3.25	2.47
The Uzbeks	3.93	3.43
The Tadzhiks	3.94	3.45

Source : Murry Feshbach "Between the Lines of the 1979 Soviet Census" *Problems of Communism*, (January-February), 1982, p. 29.

In lieu of a conclusion

How viable would be the existing national harmony and political stability in the USSR, to what extent the Muslim population has been integrated to the Soviet society, whether the Islamic resurgence is a threat to the Soviet Union or Soviet Islam is a relic of the past, and whether the sharp increase in the Muslim population of the USSR is a manageable problem are the questions, concrete answers to which lie in the distant future. A long period of internal stability enjoyed by the USSR despite the fascist occupation of a large part of its territory during the World War II and the lack of any apparent

syndrome of instability discourage possible adverse predictions regarding the future stability of the USSR. It is also because of the fact that prognoses of so many western analysts regarding prospects for political turmoil in the USSR did not come true. However, what could be safely said is that neither the establishment of socialist society, nor its developed stage exclude the prospects for political turmoil in a country. It is primarily because of the fact that even a developed socialism does not eliminate the contradictions among social groups, classes and nations. The events of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Poland during late 1960s through early 1980s are cases in point. Whether the USSR would witness similar developments or not would in great measure depend on its success or failure in furthering the process of socio-economic development, social harmony and of national integration. If in this process any syndrome of instability occurs in the USSR, there is hardly any doubt that the Muslim population would represent one of the important factors in influencing the future directions of events.