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Islam and globalisation in post-Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus

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Globalisation, extensively studied since the end of the bipolar era, had already become a phenomenon before the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and was actually accelerated because of it. We are particularly interested in its religious aspect, for the light that it sheds on the delicate transition of a region that has long remained isolated and which only opened up to the world in 1991. Post-Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus belong to the Turkish-Iranian region, but are distinguished by Russian and Soviet cultures whose strong influences are prominent. Let us clarify how this religious space was reconstructed, what happens when local Islam meets globalised Islam, the mechanisms used to manage the relationship between the political and religious aspects and to find out the direction in which the Islamic future is heading, in a region situated at the crossroads of several areas of turbulence.

Globalisation, while increasing trade relations, also influences structures of intra and extra state opportunities that affect social and religious movements. Understanding the interactions that govern new relations between globalisation and the nation-state is therefore important. If globalisation does not strip the state of its capacity to act, it reduces its leeway, by blocking off different areas. These include the economy, media, education and creating a challenge to various States, which consequently seek to shield their citizens from this influence.

Although integrated into a certain “socialist globalisation” that put them in contact with the Eastern Bloc and other Afro-Asian “sister” states, the republics that stemmed from the USSR only really became involved in the globalisation process in 1991, by gaining independence and striking relations with various players of the international scene (States, inter-governmental organisations, non-governmental organisations, media,

tourists, etc.). However, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan are struggling to accept the interference of these players, which to them are potential threats to their fragile sovereignty. Let us analyse the Islamic aspect of this clash, whose confrontation with young states is part of the continuation of total control over a social policy against local and foreign movements and whose aim is to conquer the individual and collective conscience.

THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN LOCAL ISLAM AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

Islam in Central Asia, in particular, belongs to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam within which there are two Sufi brotherhoods, the *Yeseviyya* and *Nakhibendiyya*, which originated in the 14th and 15th centuries in Turkestan [Kazakhstan] and Bukhara. In 1991, Islam in Central Asia was weakened and absent from the public eye, but remained present in private circles where it still governed life cycles and formed one of the bases of identity. Closely watched over, it had very little contact with the outside world, except through limited cooperation between the official Directorate of Spiritual Affairs of Central Asia (based in Tashkent) and certain Arab states of social allegiance. As for the small Shiite minority of Bukhara and Samarkand and the Ismailis (Shia Seveners), they were becoming assimilated and had no connection with the outside world.

In the Caucasus, Islam is more varied than in Central Asia: mainly Shi'a Twelver in Azerbaijan, but there are still Sunni Muslims from the Shafii school in the north of the Caucasus, particularly in Dagestan in Chechnya. Georgia homes several communities, including Shiite Muslims at the Azeri border, Sunni Muslims in Adjara, Abkhazia and the valley of Pankissi.

After 1991, religious globalisation resulted in the interference of external Islamic movements that could be categorised – but also interlinked – into three movements depending on their origin. These were Arab, Turkish and Iranian and which were respectively and unfairly described as Salafist, Sunni Brotherhood and Shiite.

Unlike the concern of the West, Iranian Islamic influence remained marginal. A large Sunni majority dominated Islam in Central Asia, and the Shiite movements were not taken into consideration. Only Tajikistan was infiltrated by an Iranian influence that was more to do with their linguistic ties than a preference for the religious philosophy of the Islamic republic. On the other hand, due to a close separatist proximity between Iran and

Azerbaijan, the Iranian influence became more effective in the Shiite areas of southern Azerbaijan, Baku, Aras and Nakhichevan. This success was the work of private organisations, connected to important Ayatollahs such as Lenkerani and Sistani, who attracted young students in the Hoze (Islamic Iranian campuses). Their impact, however, had to be put into perspective because the political degradation between Baku and Teheran significantly hindered missionary work from 1995.

Turkey, although a secular country, was more successful than Iran. Religion being a fully fledged aspect of its regional policy, Ankara's diplomacy equipped each one of its embassies with an office for religious cooperation, entrusted with promoting the Turkish Islamic model, and which aims to create a circle of influence. Thus, the *Diyanet*, the official Turkish organisation of Islam management in Turkey, financed mosques, theology faculties in these countries and distributed Islamic literature extensively, without neglecting the creation of new religious structures by encouraging students to come to Turkey. The private movements, however, were the ones that particularly worked well for the re-Islamisation of Central Asia and the Caucasus, the most active being Osman Nuri Topbas' *Nakhibendi*, and Fethullah Gülen's neo-brotherhood *Nurcu*.

The disciples of the latter had created dozens of modern schools that were secular, but striving indirectly towards the moral preaching and the spreading of a moderate Islam and that which was mixed with Turkish nationalism, ensuring in this way, the support of the Turkish embassies. The strength of these Turkish movements lies in the fact that, everywhere else except in Uzbekistan, they also enjoyed favourable consideration from the local official authorities, which see Islam in Turkey as a barrier against Iranian or Saudi-Arabian Islam, as they were perceived as more radical and politically dangerous.

Finally, the third wave of re-Islamisation originated from the Arabic peninsula and, to a lesser extent, from the Indian sub-continent. Referred to in a caricatured way, using the term, "Wahhabite", a reference to Mohammad Abdal Wahhab (1703-1792), founder of Wahabism, puritan fundamentalism that is present in Saudi-Arabia, also known as Salafism, it follows several fundamentalist and radical trends. This austere form of Islam, dominant in most of the Gulf countries, including Pakistan and Afghanistan, established itself in the Ferghana Valley, but also in the Caucasus, Dagestan and Chechnya, where its instrumental role in the war against the Russians allowed national cohesion. In this region, dominated by Islamic brotherhood and the amalgamation of other Islamic denominations, borrowing anti-Islam practices, the moving towards Salafist Islam intimidated the authorities by its political dimension, which was capable of challenging the powers. This is the reason for which the state machineries,

inheritors of the Communist Party, did not hesitate to take over traditional Islam once again and promote it to the status of an official religion.

These foreign processes did not forget the local origins of the Islamic revival in any way, which were already at work at the end of the Soviet era. As a matter of fact, the ambivalence of the Soviet regime towards Islam meant that even under repression, certain Ulemas led an intense theological activity and trained certain disciples, which are today the players of the Islamic revival.

THE STATES FACING A GLOBALISED ISLAM

In accordance with the vicissitudes of Islamisation, Central Asian societies did not experience Islam in the same way. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where the populations were late and superficial in turning towards Islam and where a strong proportion of the population is still Slavic, globalised Islam has only a limited hold, unlike Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, where Islam had a heavy impact on these old Muslim societies living in the heart of Islamic cultural capitals such as Bukhara and Samarkand.

However, in spite of these variations, certain similarities can be noted between the different state policies concerning the way in which Islam is managed. First of all, Islam is an integral part of all national identity policies, without, however, going as far as including Islam in the constitution. Moreover, states with “*muftiyat*” and “*kaziyat*” are “nationalising” former Soviet religious control organs that are regionally based. One in Baku in the Caucasus, the other in Tashkent in Central Asia. This nationalisation also involves the forming of state committees in charge of managing Islam and the control of foreign relations. Finally, the state runs the training of religious structures under an educative policy, distinguishing national Islam furthermore in every republic by strengthening Sunni Islam and leaning on the legacy of the local brotherhood ensuring better stability.

Despite the same reaction to an Islam that is firmly controlled, the results are not the same from a country to another. In Uzbekistan, the country with the largest population in Central Asia and where Islam is traditionally the most influential, the religious situation is defined by the tension between several small fundamentalist groups. These groups were tolerated and active after independence, and much later, declared as outlaws that were opposed by central authorities. Having taken refuge in Tajikistan, where a terrible civil war raged from 1992 to 1997, the main

Islamist militants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan then found further refuge within the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The American bombings in Afghanistan during the September 11th 2001 attacks considerably weakened the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (MIO) of which one of the two chiefs, Namangani, was killed. Another obscure Islamist movement, the *Hizb ul Tahrir* (the Liberation Party), the only active one in Central Asia, but originating from the Middle East, millenarian and obsessed with restoring the Caliphate, started to win over supporters. Its highly secret structure does not allow us to analyse its real force, but it is said that it is rather well established in the country.

In Tajikistan, the relations between Islam and the state could best be described as original. After several years of civil war, the main branch of political Islam, the Party of the Islamic Renaissance, was legalised and even associated with power, a first and so far to date, unique experience in Central Asia.

In Kyrgyzstan, a clear dichotomy can be seen between the north, which is hardly Islamised and where the activism of Islamist movements is almost absent, and the south, which is more religious. On several occasions clashes in this region have been taking place with the Uzbek and Kyrgyz police, allied against Islamic militants of the IMU. Whether in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan, it is most often in the Ferghana Valley, lying on all sides of the three Republics, that Islamism is most violently apparent. Besides, all the Islamist organisations that have spread throughout the valley have a multi-ethnic composition.

In Kazakhstan, the same dichotomy as in Kyrgyzstan exists between the north and the south where a stronger Muslim influence can be left, but this escapes any Islamist fundamentalism.

In Turkmenistan, Islam has never been very influential. The mosques, constructed by the President to amplify his personality cult, are empty and they will not be filled up any more under the new President, Kurbanguli Berdymuhammedov.

In Azerbaijan, admittedly less radical but relatively politicised Islamist movements are tolerated by the central authorities, which, without giving them any legal status, do not prohibit their existence and expression in public. As for northern Caucasus, the irredentism of Salafist organisations has led to clashes with the federal authorities despite the situation being relatively calm for a few years now, except in Chechnya.

In conclusion, it should be noted that all the republics are confronted with the same dilemma: how to embrace globalisation and ensure a place on the world's stage and guarantee internal stability at the same time. It is important to order in a global context where Islamism is perceived as the main source of unrest; most of the Central Asian states are tense and

agitated about their policy on how to manage people belonging to a religious order. Fearing that any concession to Islamist speeches might be misconstrued as being weak, all these regimes favour intransigence, thus indefinitely putting off any hope of dialogue and national reconciliation.