"I Am an Atheist and a Muslim": Islam, Communism, and Ideological Competition

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A thousand years of tyranny are better than one night of anarchy.
—al-Mawardi

INTRODUCTION

When do religious and political ideologies come into conflict? Political and religious systems of belief are closely tied throughout history, sometimes working in tandem and sometimes in bitter opposition. In cooperation, religious and political ideologies can meld to create powerful feelings of nationalism, but in conflict they may produce violent exchanges between political and religious institutions. Within the Soviet Union, communist elites brutally attacked religious individuals and organizations because they believed that religion was antithetical to their socialist vision.[1] In response, religious institutions often spearheaded political opposition to communism in the Soviet Union and bloc countries of Eastern Europe, with the Roman Catholic Church most famously leading a successful assault on communism in Poland.[2] In marked contrast, Islam produced no active opposition to communism, and many Communist Party members and officials within central Asia openly retained their Muslim identities. Why were central Asian Muslims able to blend their religious identities into the

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1. Paul Froese, "Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43 (2004): 35-50.
2. Maryjane Osa, "Resistance, Presistance, and Change: The Transformation of the Catholic Church in Poland," *Eastern European Politics and Societies* 3 (1989): 268-99.

communist system, while Christians either relinquished their religious identities altogether or stood in defiant opposition to communist rule? Ironically, part of the answer lies in the fact that Islam has no theological tradition which separates church and state. In addition, economic and political circumstances made Soviet communism more attractive to many Muslim elites. In the end, the strong political aspirations of Islam actually made it possible, as Ernest Gellner states, "to simultaneously affirm an ancient identity and justify a strenuously Leap Forward."[3]

This essay examines the interaction of Islam and Soviet communism through a historical analysis of religious persistence in the five Soviet Republics of central Asia—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. This study uncovers the socio-political circumstances and the unique theological characteristics of Islam which made it malleable to Soviet communism. Islam's ability to adapt is important to note in a world in which current events have painted Muslims as predominantly obstinate and confrontational.

BACKGROUND HISTORY AND BASIC CONCEPTS

The history of Western Europe provides many interesting examples of competition between religious and secular ideas. Instances of counter-religious doctrines cropped up during the "Age of Enlightenment" when rationalists proposed that human reason alone, without divine revelation, leads to an accurate understanding of not only the physical world but also morality and justice. Nevertheless, secular and religious ideologies are often quite copasetic. For instance, an individual can easily believe in Keynesian economics while also being a devoted Christian, reflecting Weber's insight into how religious and secular worldviews are often compatible and can borrow from one another to produce compatible systems of belief. This compatibility is the result of defining the domain of a secular ideology in such a way that it does not overlap with a religious doctrine. In fact, some historians hold that religion was most successful in Western Europe after religious and secular doctrines became the specialties of separate institutions. Peter Raedts persuasively argues that

A new era for Christianity in Europe began when after 1800 the churches gradually lost support of the state and had to organize themselves. And it was not until then that the new mass media and the schooling of all the population made the christianization of everyone a reality.[4]

Struggles between religious and political doctrines in Western

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3. Ernest Gellner, "Marx's Failure and Mohammed's Triumph," *The New Presence* (March 1995): 65.

4. Peter Raedts, *Richard Rufus of Cornwall and the Tradition of Oxford Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 7.

Europe eventually gave rise to a separation of church and state.

Arrival of Soviet communism in the early twentieth century dramatically changed church-state relations within the territories which fell under its influence. Communism was unique because it was the first political ideology that was not only anti-clerical but also advocated a radical atheistic worldview.[5] As explained by Isaiah Berlin:

What in fact was created by Marx was a new ecumenical organization, a kind of anti-Church, with a full apparatus of concepts and categories, capable, at least in theory, of yielding clear and final answers to all possible questions, private and public, scientific and historical, moral and aesthetic, individual and institutional.[6]

As such, communist ideology could not accept the continued influence of religion even as an independent institutional entity. Lenin demanded that communist propaganda must employ

militancy and irreconcilability towards all forms of idealism and religion. And that means that materialism organically reaches that consequence and perfection which in the language of philosophy is called—militant atheism.[7]

Militant atheism became central to the ideology of the Communist Party and "a high priority in the policies of all Soviet leaders."[8] In addition to answering the question of how society should be organized, communism advocated the destruction of all religion. Within the logic of militant atheism, convinced atheists were not only the most politically astute but also the most virtuous individuals.

Consequently, religious groups tended to be vehemently opposed to communist rule because their theologies designated a separation of church and state with atheistic communism clearly violating this principle. Protestant sects, the Roman Catholic Church, and the

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5. Anti-clerical movements throughout Western Europe attacked religious organizations in attempts to expand the domain of political ideology into traditionally religious realms.   In late eighteenth-century France, "militant republicans argued that the state had a responsibility towards its citizens to free them from harmful influences: that included a duty to do everything in its power to undermine the Roman Catholic Church, or even undermine the influence of religion more generally." See Hugh McLeod, *Secularization in Western Europe: 1848–1914* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 60.   Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* was also an active attempt to diminish the role of religion in German culture.   And throughout Europe, political liberals attacked religious elites for their sanctimonious excesses.   Still, political actors in the nineteenth century generally remained accepting of religion as an ideal even when they were hostile to certain religious activities and privileges.

6. Isaiah Berlin, *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and the History* (London: Pimlico, 1996), 119.

7. William Van den Bercken, *Ideology and Atheism in the Soviet Union* (New York: Mounton de Gruyter, 1989), 123.

8. Dimitry Pospielovsky, *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism and Soviet Antireligious Policies* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1987), 1; Bohdan Bociurkiw, "Religion and Atheism in Soviet Society," in *Aspects of Religion in the Soviet Union,* ed. Richard Marshall (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1971); Arto Luukkanen, *The Party of Unbelief* (Helsinski: SHS, 1994); James Thrower. *Marxist-Leninist "Scientific-Atheism" and the Study of Religion and Atheism in the USSR* (Berlin-Amsterdam: Mouton Publishers, 1983).

Orthodox Church all initially staged opposition movements with some successes and many failures. In the case of the Russian Orthodox Church, religious leaders were either executed, disillusioned, or became pawns in the communist propaganda system.[9] The Roman Catholic Church generated more successful opposition to communist rule in Eastern Europe and at the very least retained some of its autonomy.[10]

Interestingly, Islamic groups generated little opposition to communism. This may come as a surprise for a couple of reasons. First, the image of enraged Muslims waging a religious war (the *jihad*) for political purposes is a common one. Karen Armstrong points out that, in Islam, politics is a

matter of supreme importance, and throughout the twentieth century there has been one attempt after another to create a truly Islamic state. This has always been difficult. It was an aspiration that required a jihad, a struggle that could find no simple outcome.[11]

But the anti-religious policies of the Soviet Union produced no *jihad* in the overwhelmingly Muslim regions of Central Asia. As Alexandre Bennigsen and Chantal Lemercier-Quelquejay put it: "apart from a few peasant troubles of no great gravity on the Middle Volga, in Azerbaijan and in Central Asia, the Muslim masses did not rise up in defense of their faith."[12] The absence of *jihad* suggests that Soviet Muslims were unwilling to fight for the political ideals of their religion. In actuality, Soviet Muslims did fight for their ideals—but as with all religions, the ideals of Islam are more complex than any popular image of war-mongering Muslims suggest.

Second, Muslims were certainly numerous enough to wage a massive *jihad* if they so desired. Changes in the proportion of Muslims in Central Asia mask the fact that the Muslim population grew throughout the twentieth century. While the Republics of Central Asia went from 78 percent Muslim in 1926 to 55 percent in 1965, this decrease reflects the number of Russians and other Eastern Europeans who were moved into the various Central Asian Republics to farm, work in and manage factories, and administer public offices and schools.[13] Nevertheless, the number of Muslims in Central Asia grew from around 10.5 million to 16 million over forty years (see Table 1).

9. Sabrina Ramet, *Nihil Obstat: Religion, Politics, and Social Change in East-Central Europe and Russia* (London: Duke University Press, 1998).

10. Paul Froese and Steven Pfaff, "Desolate and Replete Markets: Poland, East Germany and the New Religious Paradigm," *Social Forces* 80, no. 2 (2001): 481-507.

11. Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), 158.

12. Alexandre Bennigsen and Chantal Lemercier-Quelquejay, *Islam in the Soviet Union* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1967), 152.

13. Ibid., 169-70.

Table 1: Change in Proportion of Muslims in Central Asia (1926-1965)

Central Asia	1926	1939	1959	1965
Total pop.	13,671,000	16,624,000	22,978,000	29,080,000
Muslim pop.	10,670,000	11,200,000	13,650,000	16,000,000
% Muslim	78	68	59	55

Source: Bennigsen and Lemercier-Quelquejay (1967:169)

In fact, Muslims had the highest birth rate of any group in the Soviet Union.[14] So while their proportion within Central Asia was decreasing due to the in-migration of non-Muslims, their proportion within the Soviet Union was increasing due to higher Muslim fertility. The growth of the Muslim population all over the Soviet Union was such that Soviet demographers actually feared that the Soviet Union would become a Muslim-majority nation by the twenty-first century.[15]

Regardless of the increasing Muslim population, the Soviet government continued to actively pursue its anti-religious agenda. The Soviet regime shut down thousands of mosques, closed Islamic schools, and completely abolished the Islamic court system, the institutional apparatus of Shariah Law. How could the Soviets accomplish these measures without any active opposition from the enormous Muslim population? The answer lies within the political and social aspirations of Muslims within Central Asia and within the doctrine of Islam.

THE POLITICS OF ISLAM

Carl L. Brown points out a key difference between Christianity and

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14. Yaacov Ro'I, *The USSR and the Muslim World: Issues in Domestic and Foreign Policy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), 79. Michael Rywkin, *Moscow's Muslim Challenge: Soviet Central Asia* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1982), 70.

15. See Ahmed Rashid, *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism?* (London: Oxford University Press, 1994), 56. Because Islam was used as an ethnic identifier the measurement of actual practicing Muslims becomes difficult. In addition, the number of Muslims in Central Asia and the Soviet Union depends on how researchers define "Muslim" and census reports differ immensely during the Soviet era with some reports admitting that their count of Muslims is a rough estimate. The growth of inter-marriage following the great in-migration of non-Muslims into Central Asia further complicates matters. By 1967, around 10 percent of marriages in Central Asia were of mixed religious background. See Bennigsen and Lemercier-Quelquejay, *Islam in the Soviet Union*, 194. Whether offspring from mixed marriages were considered Muslim by researchers is unclear.

Islam,

In Islam, unlike Christianity, there is no tradition of a separation of church and state. . .
One simple reason for this difference between Islam and Christianity is that Islam
knows of no "church" in the sense of a corporate body whose leadership is clearly
defined, hierarchical, and distinct from the state.[16]

Much has been made of the fact that Islam is not only a religion but
also a political doctrine. This stems from the origins of the religion
and the distinguished talents and vision of Muhammad, who excelled as
prophet, military general, and civic leader. As Mircea Eliade notes,

The history of religions and universal history know of no enterprise comparable to that
of Muhammad. The conquest of Mecca and the foundation of a theocratic state
proved that his political genius was not inferior to his religious genius.[17]

Muhammad created an extensive Islamic community governed by
religious law—an ideal that would forever intertwine politics and
religion within the doctrine of Islam.

In contrast, no similar theocratic ideal exists in the history of
Christianity. Early Christianity grew into an extensive network of
religious communities which were later embraced by the Roman
Empire. Since the initial rise of Christianity, Christian institutions
were independent of state government, producing a church-state
relationship in which religious and political spheres were autonomous
even while becoming mutually dependent.

The medieval church-state arrangement and the modern idea of a secular state that is
religiously neutral were both the results of working compromises. The more
reasonable among the partisans of pope and emperor, just as the later the more
reasonable Catholics and Protestants, seeing that doctrinal purity and logical
consistency spelled continued strife, settled for a nebulous but manageable middle
ground between the extremes.[18]

Doctrinal competition between Christianity and European rulers'
claims to legitimacy were sufficiently resolved through an understand-
ing of separate yet symbiotic spheres of influence. This relationship
was also theologically justified within Christian scripture, often
referred to as the doctrine of "two swords." As the Apostle Paul
explains in Romans,

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority
except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, he who
resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur
judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no
fear of him who is an authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his
approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he

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16. Carl L. Brown, *Religion and State: The Muslim Approach to Politics* (New York:
Columbia University Press, 2000), 31.

17. Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas: Volume 3—From Muhammad to the Age
of Reforms* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 77.

18. Brown, *Religion and State: The Muslim Approach to Politics*, 46.

does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, honor to whom honor is due.[19]

Unlike Christianity, Islam produced no distinct understanding of the separation of church and state. The origins of the Islam indicate how religious culture became intricately intertwined with political rule under the personal power of Muhammad. "Islam started out as a faith determined to conquer and convert the world. 'Politics' and 'the state' were subsumed into its mission."[20] The *Shariah*, or Islamic law, provided the blueprint for religious governance and divided the world not into secular and religious spheres but into *dar al-Islam* (the land of Islam) and *dar al-harb* (the land of warfare). According to this theological perspective, regions in which Islamic law was not the rule of government remained embattled.

After Muhammad, the complexity of governing expanding Islamic communities demanded a division of labor between ulama and sultan. And while the *Shariah* provides a basic political theory for governance of an Islamic community it does not outline the specifics of how to legislate and govern rapidly expanding states. "From around 850 . . . power came to be divided between the Sultan, who managed military affairs and enforced law and order, and the ulama who managed social, family, and commercial affairs. The religio-political project of the Prophet and early Imams was replaced, among Sunnis and Imami Shi'ites, by political quietism."[21] Consequently, ulama's often deferred new and pressing political decisions to ruling sultans, leading to a "political quietism" amongst Islamic clerics. In fact, "On balance, the weight of Muslim tradition was on the side of political submission. . . . Caliph Umar, often singled out in the hadith literature as the epitome of early Arab boldness, is related to have admonished, 'If he (the ruler) oppresses you, be patient; if he dispossesses you, be patient.' There are also numerous hadiths of this sort attributed to Muhammad."[22]

In the modern era, Islamic theorists are split in how to deal with the political import of the *Shariah*. "Islamic intellectuals reacted to the West either, on the one hand, by syncretism, justified by seeing certain Western ideas as expressions of true Islam; or, on the other hand, by revivalism, going back to the sources of revelation."[23] Islamic revivalism takes the form of disparate fundamentalist groups which react to modernization rather than provide a means to reconcile

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19. Romans 13:1-7 RSV.
20. Antony Black, *The History of Islamic Thought: From the Prophet to the Present* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 349.
21. Ibid.
22. Brown, *Religion and State: The Muslim Approach to Politics*, 55.
23. Black, *The History of Islamic Thought: From the Prophet to the Present*, 279.

Islamic ideals with modern realities.   In turn, Islamic syncretism can take multiple forms although it also draws on the early Islamic community for legitimacy.

Indeed, observers of Muslim political thought in modern times have often noted, sometimes with patronizing sympathy, sometimes with superciliousness, that those Muslims who seek democracy argue that Muhammad was the first democrat and the early Muslim community was the first democracy, those advancing socialism depict Muhammad as the first socialist and the early community as the first socialist state, and so on as political styles change. Even certain Muslim communists went so far as to urge that Muhammad and the early community prefigured the idealized communist society.[24]

Because Soviet communism preached a decidedly anti-Western doctrine, it had an interesting appeal to Muslims who were displeased with the imperialism of Western empires. Of course, communism was also anti-religious. Nevertheless, the civil war which followed the Russian Revolution placed Bolsheviks in no position to wage a war against Islam in central Asia. Therefore, Bolsheviks attempted to appeal to Muslims as allies by promising them political independence and religious freedom.[25] In fact, Lenin professed an admiration for Muslims who had revolted against imperialism and saw many Islamic folk heroes as emblematic of the human struggle against oppression.[26] In 1917, Bolsheviks made the following official announcement to Muslims of the former Russian Empire:

To all toiling Moslems of Russia and the East, whose mosques and prayer-houses have been destroyed, whose beliefs have been trampled on by the czars and the oppressors of Russia. Your beliefs and customs, your national and cultural institutions are

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24.   Brown, *Religion and State: The Muslim Approach to Politics*, 49.

25.   Central Asian Muslims sought independence from Russian rule. Conflict between Muslims and the occupying Russian forces occurred on occasion but their relationship remained relatively peaceful.   This was due to the fact that Imperial Russia rarely infringed on the daily lives of Muslims. "Tsarist governments regarded Islamic culture and society with barely concealed contempt, but their attitude toward Muslim religious practice and education was if anything more tolerant than toward those of Jewry and the dissenting Christian sects." See Geoffrey Wheeler, "National and Religious Consciousness in Soviet Islam," in *Religion and the Soviet State: A Dilemma of Power*, ed. Max Hayward and William Fletcher (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1969), 192. Of course, Muslims were subject to attempts by Christian proselytizers to convert them but they freely maintained Islamic schools and institutions without interference from Tsarist officials. The occasional conflict concerned the ubiquitous problem of rising taxes. See Geoffrey Wheeler, "National and Religious Consciousness in Soviet Islam." But for the most part, many of the more conservative Islamic leaders showed themselves to be loyal to the Tsar and in return Islamic institutions were unquestioningly preserved.   See Shrin Akiner, "Islam, the State and Ethnicity in Central Asia in Historical Perspective," *Religion, State, and Society* 24 (1996): 91-125; and Erich Bethmann, *The Fate of Muslims under Soviet Rule*, Minaret Series from American Friends of the Middle East, Inc., 1958, 4. This relationship necessarily changed once the Bolsheviks were securely in power.

26.   Amir Taheri, *Crescent in a Red Sky: The Future of Islam in the Soviet Union* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1989), 142.

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 and its organs. . . . Support this revolution and its government![27]

This announcement did not go unread. In communism, many Muslims saw the possibility of Islam once again becoming a powerful force in a world that appeared to be leaving them behind.

An influential group of Muslim elites often labeled "national communists" seized the opportunity handed them by the Soviets and attempted to influence the changing political tide of Central Asia rather than be washed away by it. These forward-looking Islamic thinkers attempted to "rationalize Islam, to purify it and bring it into line with the modern era."[28] Leading historical scholars on Islam in the Soviet Union, Bennigsen and Lemercier-Quelquejay, summarize the characteristics of this group as follows:

They were, generally speaking, sincere Marxists who, to begin with, accepted without reservation the programme of the Bolshevik Communist Party but remained none the less deeply imbued with the nationalist ideal. . . . Within Marxist doctrine, they took their pick of ideas and methods, selecting those that were in keeping with their particular need; that is to say, those which could substantiate their case for a more radical struggle with the West and an acceleration of the pace of reform in Muslim society. . . . The Moscow government gave them its blessing, regarding them as a necessary 'buffer' between central power and the native population, and hoping that it would be able, in the long term, to re-educate them.[29]

Re-education of this group would entail the dissipation of nationalist fervor and the eradication of religious culture. But the Soviets would never successfully disentangle Islam from Marxism in the Muslim Republics. In fact, many Muslims would come to view communism as a form of Islam throughout the Soviet era; as one Muslim dignitary pointed out in 1970 at an international conference, "Soviet leaders who believe neither in God nor his Prophet nevertheless apply laws that were dictated by God and expounded by his Prophet."[30]

Sultan Galiev was the intellectual leader of the national communists and the highest-ranking Muslim in the Communist Party between 1920 and 1923. As a leading advisor to Stalin, Galiev argued that in Islamic regions "we need to say openly, to whom it is appropriate, that we are in no way fighting against any religion, we are only conducting

27.   Bernhard Wilhelm, "Moslems in the Soviet Union: 1948-1954," in *Aspects of Religion in the Soviet Union*, ed. Richard Marshall (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 258.

28.   Phool Badan, *Dynamics of Political Development in Central Asia* (New Delhi: Lancers' Books, 2001), 183.

29.   Bennigsen and Lemercier-Quelquejay, *Islam in the Soviet Union*, 105.

30.   Helene Carrere D'Encausse, *Decline of an Empire: the Soviet Socialist Republics in Revolt* (New York: Newsweek Books, 1972), 239.

propaganda for our atheist convictions, exercising our right to do so."[31] But in addition to advocating religious tolerance, Galiev made a more dangerous political move in advocating an independent communist state in Central Asia. In 1918, Galiev wrote that "we must unite the Muslim masses in a communist movement that shall be our own and autonomous."[32] This placed Soviets in a difficult position; a grassroots communist movement was occurring within Central Asia but was taking on a nationalist and Islamic spirit referred to as "Sultan Galiyevism."

By the late 1920s, Stalin decided that central Asia needed to be purged of Sultan Galiyevism. This decision demonstrated the insincerity of promises made to Muslims by Bolshevik leaders concerning national autonomy and is supported by numerous earlier writings by Lenin and Stalin who expressed a desire to eliminate Islam while recognizing the importance of recruiting potentially supportive Muslims to their cause.[33] Once Stalin had secured power, he began a famous series of purges in a pro-active measure to destroy any political competitors. In Central Asia, Galiyev was arrested and sentenced to penal servitude; he was eventually executed in 1940. And between 1927 and the 1939, supporters of Galiyev and his brand of Marxism were purged from the Party.

No longer would Soviets urge Muslims to "build your national life freely and without hindrance."[34] This insincere proclamation enticed Muslims to support a communist regime at a time when Soviet power was still precarious within Russia. The idea for a united Muslim Republic lasted until around 1924 when Soviets thought it prudent to divide it into distinct states. While the motivation to split Central Asia into individual republics may be linked to an attempt to weaken any emerging Islamic unity, Central Asian scholars argue that it was essentially "based on Stalin's personal doctrine of nationalities."[35]

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31. Shoshana Keller, "Conversion to the New Faith: Marxism-Leninism and Muslims in the Soviet Empire," in *Of Religion and Empire*, ed. Robert Geraci and Michael Khodarkovsky (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 2001), 318.

32. Bennigsen and Lemercier-Quelquejay, *Islam in the Soviet Union*, 114.

33. Wilhelm, "Moslems in the Soviet Union: 1948-1954."

34. Erich Bethmann, *The Fate of Muslims under Soviet Rule*. Minaret Series from American Friends of the Middle East, Inc., 1958, 10.

35. See Alexandre Bennigsen and Marie Broxup, *Islamic Threat to the Soviet State* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), 44. Both Lenin and Stalin viewed Islam and the Muslims of central Asia as primitive and extremely prejudiced to reason; therefore, as Stalin stated, Islam had to be destroyed "by indirect and more cautious ways" than those used against the Orthodox Church. See Wilhelm, "Moslems in the Soviet Union: 1948-1954," 258. It also appears that the Soviets inherited the Tsarist view of Muslims as a united ethnic group even though Muslims spoke a myriad of different languages and practiced different forms of Islam (most generally divided into Sunnis and Shi'ites). Islam initially became an ethnic marker throughout central Asia through a prolonged interaction with Russians. When Imperial Russia occupied central Asia, Muslims of that region came into close contact with

Essentially, the divisions were an attempt to section off groups based on crude ethnic linguistic distinctions.

The division of Central Asia was met with resistance from militant Muslims who had initially sided with the Bolsheviks and wished to keep a united Muslim Republic called Turkestan. Those actively opposed to the new Soviet policy in central Asia were eventually liquidated in the 1930s as traitors to the communist movement.[36]

By killing off many leading Muslims communists, Stalin created a political dilemma. Replacing Muslim communist leaders with Russian communists would insure that Islamic nationalism would not impact communist ideology in Central Asia, but loyal Russian communists were urgently needed in the newly formed Russian Republic and few had knowledge of the Islamic society they would be asked to rule. Nevertheless, many elite positions in central Asia were given to Russians. But Muslim communists were still needed to advise these leaders and often held leadership positions themselves. The Board of Muslims was created for the edification of Russian communists concerning Islamic society and many Communist Party members in central Asia were self-identified Muslims; in 1918, one-half of the Communist Party of Turkestan was Muslim and in 1924, the Bukhara Communist Party was 70 percent Muslim.[37] Under these circumstances, Soviet elites had to come to terms with the fact that Muslim communists were a reality that could not be wholly eliminated.

By the 1940s, Soviet Islam had lost the leadership of Sultan Galiev but it solidified into a network of Muslim Boards which were allowed to meet at a Central Muslim Religious conference to discuss the state of Islam and its relation to Soviet communism. Representatives of the Central Muslim Board showed support for the Soviet government and were often used to promote Soviet propaganda to Muslim citizens. During World War II, the Central Muslim Religious Board was employed quite extensively to unify Muslims against Germany. But an interesting balance existed within the board to reconcile Soviet rule

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Russian institutions and culture for the first time. From this new frame of reference, Islam "came to be used as a generic term to refer to everything that was perceived to be local, not foreign." See Shirin Akiner, "Islam, the State and Ethnicity in Central Asia in Historical Perspective," 106. Subsequently, Muslim, Russians and eventually Soviets viewed Islam as an ethnic identity regardless of very distinct differences in religious practices, commitment, and religious organizations within Islam. "During the first six years of the new regime (from 1918 to 1923) the term 'Muslim' was used in official Soviet texts to designate all the Muslim nationalities of the USSR. A 'Muslim' Red Army and a 'Muslim' Communist Party were in existence for a short while. Muslim administration was carried out by 'Muslim Commissariats' and in 1918 the Central Muslim Commissariat in Moscow represented the embryo of a 'Muslim government.'" See Bennigsen and Broxup, *Islamic Threat to the Soviet State*, 37.

36. See Bennigsen and Broxup, *Islamic Threat to the Soviet State*, 43.

37. Dmitry Trofimov, *Islam in the Political Culture of the Former Soviet Union: Central Asia and Azerbaijan* (Hamburg: University of Hamburg, 1995), 15.

with Islamic law.   In 1942, the Central Muslim Religious Board sent
Stalin the following salutation: "hearty greetings in the name of
Muslims of the USSR to you . . . champion of the liberation of
oppressed peoples and a man ever attentive to the need of the peoples
. . . May Allah help you bring your work to a victorious end."[38] As this
message demonstrates, representatives of official Islam showed respect
and allegiance to the Soviet government while also explicitly establish-
ing the importance of their religious identity and the purpose of the
communist project in relation to a higher power.   The message clearly
suggests that Stalin would not accomplish his goals without the
assistance of Allah.

While Muslims of Central Asia were certainly denied national
autonomy under communism, many of the initial goals of "Sultan
Galiyevism" came to fruition. Muslim communists had wanted to
modernize Central Asia and Soviet Russia was providing them with the
resources to do it. Therefore, Islamic nationalism did not automatically
find itself opposed to communist interests.   In contrast, nationalism
throughout Eastern Europe was at odds with the communist agenda
from the beginning and developed into the main expression of anti-
communist convictions. This is mainly due to the fact that Eastern
Europe was more industrialized than Central Asia; consequently,
communists sought different goals in these regions.   Eastern European
communists wanted to unite the proletariat of all countries and shift
the control of industry into the hands of its workers. But Central Asia
had no industry to speak of and Muslim communists hoped to
industrialize their regions in order to "catch up" to their western
counterparts.   The act of modernizing Islamic society was closely
linked to its empowerment in the world economy and therefore
communism became an unintended means to realize this pre-existing
nationalist goal. In fact, "many high-ranking [Central Asian com-
munist] officials saw no contradiction between Islam and Com-
munism."[39]

Certain Islamic leaders actively argued that Muslim home rule
would be best achieved through participation in the Soviet project.
For instance, the journal of the Tashkent Spiritual Directorate advises

"Believers who are good Muslims . . . must take part in building a new life and a new
society in their own country. This Directorate also encourages children to participate.
For example, one Muslim leader in a sermon attacked a Baptist ban on Baptist children
joining the Pioneers," he concluded: "They are wrong. Our children must be Pioneers,
members of the Komsomol and then of the Communist Party. Everywhere they must
play a leading role."[40]

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38. Wilhelm, "Moslems in the Soviet Union: 1948-1954," 265.
39. Mehrdad Haghayeghi, *Islam and Politics in Central Asia* (New York: St. Martin's
Press, 1995), 38.
40. D'Encausse, *Decline of an Empire: the Soviet Socialist Republics in Revolt*, 14.

Unlike Christian churches in Eastern Europe which demanded an exclusive membership that could not be reconciled with Communist Party membership, many Muslim leaders viewed participation in communist and even atheist organizations as a way to strengthen Muslim power.

In line with Muslim nationalist goals, Soviets offered something which had not previously been available to Muslims—free public education on a massive scale. At the end of the Tsarist regime less than three thousand Muslim children attended public school, but the Soviets prioritized the educational system to the extent that by 1921 over 84,000 Muslim children were enrolled in state public schools.[41] In time, all Muslim children attended free Soviet schools and by most accounts received instruction similar to that of more modernized regions of the Soviet Union.

Muslims certainly took advantage of the educational opportunities offered by the Soviet government. Central Asians were some of the least educated people in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, but by the 1950s they were receiving secondary educations at a rate comparable to the other Soviet republics (see Table 2).

Table 2: Increase in Percent of Population with Secondary Education (1939-1970)

	Percent of Population over 10 years of age with Secondary Education		
	1939	1959	1970
USSR	11	36	48
Latvia	18	43	52
(most educated republic)			
Central Asian Republics			
Kazakstan	8	35	47
Kyrgyzstan	5	34	45
Tajikistan	4	33	42
Turkmenistan	7	39	48
Uzbekistan	6	35	46

Source: Tuzmuhamedov (1973:149)

The Soviet government also industrialized Central Asia at an impressive rate. A comparison to other Central Asian countries reveals the industrial progress made by the Central Asian Republics (see Table

41.   Bethmann, *The Fate of Muslims under Soviet Rule*, 16.

3). By 1965, the Central Asian Republics had at least eight times more per capita output of electricity than Iran, Pakistan, or Turkey. In addition, the Central Asian Republics had substantially more tractors, doctors, and newspapers in circulation per capita than Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey combined. Finally, nearly 90 percent of Soviet Central Asians could read by 1965 while only 30 percent or less of Iranians, Pakistanis, or Turks were literate in 1964. These achievements were actively sought and encouraged by leading Muslims who wanted to improve their lives and economic strength.[42]

Table 3: Modernization of Central Asia (1928-1965), Compared to Iran, Pakistan and Turkey (1964)

|	Central Asian Republics		Iran	Pakistan	Turkey
	1928	1965		1964	
Per capita output of electricity, kwh	4	950	58	34	143
Number of tractors (per 1,000 hectares of sown land)	0.2	34.7	0.7	0.2	2.7
Percent literate over 9 years old	16	87	15	16	30
Newspaper circulation (per 10,000 population)	22	223	15	5	45
Number of doctors (per 10,000 popula-tion)	4.0	17.4	3.4	0.9	4.0

Source: Tuzmuhamedov (1973: 141)

By 1970, Central Asian Republics had established industries and an educational system; in turn, the need for foreign skilled workers and managers was no longer pressing. The Muslim population became more technologically advanced and urbanized to the extent that they began to fill elite roles within the Central Asian Republics. This is evidenced by a study of technological and scientific workers in Uzbekistan between 1960 and 1975. The percent of doctors in science, doctoral candidates in science, and "scientific elites" who are Uzbek

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42. D'Encausse, *Decline of an Empire: the Soviet Socialist Republics in Revolt.*

dramatically increased within the fifteen-year period of the study (see Figure 1). While only 35 percent of all doctors of science were Uzbek in 1960, 60 percent are Uzbek in 1975. In turn, the percentage of scientists in Uzbekistan who were Russian was shrinking.

Figure 1: Change in Percent of Scientists in Uzbekistan
Who Were Ethically Uzbek (1960-1975)
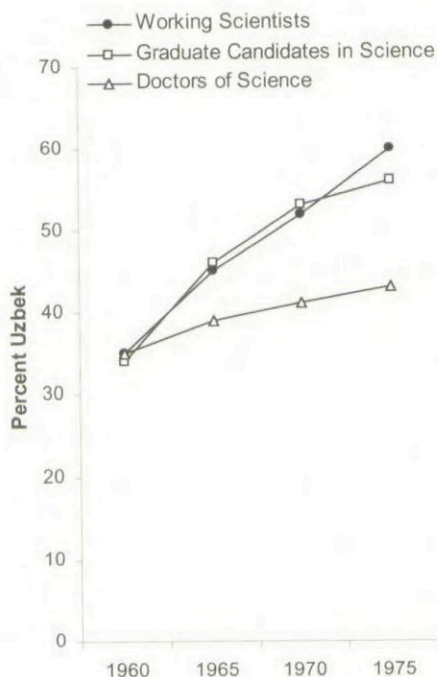
Source: Roi (1984:55)

The relationship between Islam and communism was a growing process of give and take. Muslim leaders saw the long-term advantages of modernization and Central Asia quickly became the most technologically advanced region in the Islamic world.[43] But while many Muslims sought entry into the economic and political structure created by the Soviet Union and succeeded in becoming part of the ruling and educated elite, they were simultaneously losing their Islamic traditions.

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43. Nevertheless, Central Asia did lag behind the industrial growth of other Soviet Republics and an active debate still rages concerning the effect of industrialization on the long-term economy of Central Asia. See John Glenn, *The Soviet Legacy in Central Asia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 94.

In 1929, the Soviet Union passed the "Law on Religious Asso-
ciations" which outlined how state officials were to monitor and control
all religious groups.   In Central Asia, communists dissolved all Islam
courts; these courts oversaw criminal justice by upholding both
customary law (*'adat*) and Koranic law (*Shariah*). Bennigsen and
Lemercier-Quelquejay point out that this assault was relatively easy
because it was supported by Muslim elites who viewed the Soviet
reform as "merely one more engagement in the long war of the *jadids*
to modernize the juridical structure of Islam."[44] In this case, the
communist anti-Islamic policy realized what some Islamic nationalists
had hoped to accomplish as long ago as the early nineteenth century.
While the loss of Islamic courts was clearly not supported by all
Muslims, it is important to note that some Islamic thinkers saw
communism as a means to settle centuries-long conflicts within the
Muslim community. As one Muslim scholar noted, Islam can justify
even "the rule of a usurper as a means of assuring the public order and
the unity of all Muslims."[45] By the mid-1920s, Islamic courts ceased to
have any official impact in criminal cases or civil suits and Soviets had
established communist state courts throughout Central Asia. A record
of functioning Islamic courts in Uzbekistan from 1922 to 1927 shows
their rapid elimination (see Figure 2).

In turn, Islamic studies were no longer an element in the
edification of Muslim youth, a deficiency which would have powerful
implications for the practice of the Islam throughout Central Asia.
For instance, Soviet schools reformed the instruction of indigenous
languages and "through the so-called language and alphabet reforms,
Central Asian youths were denied access to the very rich Islamic
religious literary traditions written in the Arabic alphabet."[46]
Approximately eight thousand Islamic primary and secondary schools
were in operation in Central Asia before the Russian Revolution; by
1928, none remained.[47]

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44. Bennigsen and Lemercier-Quelquejay, *Islam in the Soviet Union*, 145.

45. Brown, *Religion and State: The Muslim Approach to Politics*, 55.

46. M. Nazif Shahrani, "Islam and the Political Culture of 'Scientific Atheism' in Post-
Communist Central Asia: Future Predicaments," in *The Politics of Religion in Russia and
the New States of Eurasia*, ed. Michael Bourdeaux (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), 278.

47. Bennigsen and Broxup, *Islamic Threat to the Soviet State*, 48.

Figure 2: The Decline of Islamic Courts
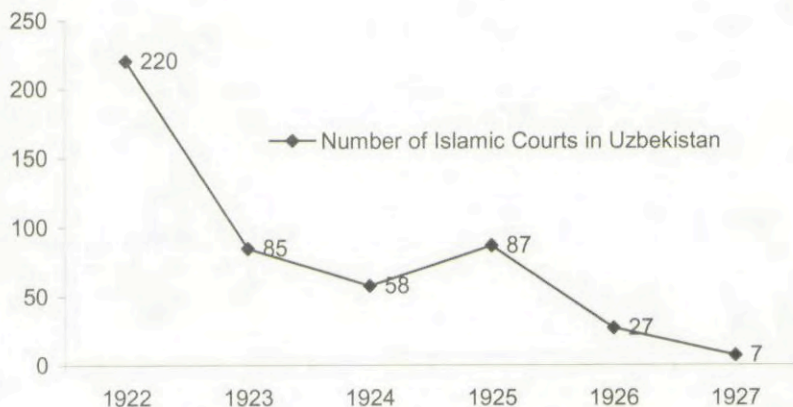
Source: Keller (2001a: 148)

In Islamic communities, schools and mosques were mainly supported by revenue generated by *waqf* (clerical property).[48] Without this independent resource, schools and mosques became dependent on Soviet officials who closed both en masse. Islamic schools did not survive the assault and official mosques were depleted in great numbers. "In 1917, there were 20,000 mosques in Central Asia, but by 1929 fewer than 4,000 were functioning and by 1935 there were only 60 registered mosques in Uzbekistan [the largest of the Asian Soviet Republics with over half of the Muslim population of Central Asia]."[49] Without (*waqf*) clerical property, imams and mullahs were unable to financially support themselves and the number of official clergy dropped dramatically to the point where many regions were without any registered imams or mullahs. In addition to losing resources to support themselves many Islamic clergy were arrested and imprisoned during Stalin's first purges.[50] While unofficial clergy continued to minister to Muslims, official clergy were effectively driven from their positions by financial necessity. By 1936, Keller finds that there were no registered Islamic clergy in the urban centers of central Asia, although unregistered clergy certainly continued to practice.[51]

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48. Ibid.
49. Ahmed Rashid, "The Fires of Faith in Central Asia," *World Policy Journal* (Spring 2001): 47.
50. Shoshana Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign Against Islam in Central Asia, 1917-1941* (London: Praeger, 2001), 226.
51. Ibid., 230.

Finally, Soviets attempted to alter the Islamic clan structure at the village level. The extended patriarchal structure of Islamic families throughout central Asia was crucial in the transmission of local customs and daily rituals. Marriages were largely arranged and married women were sent to live with the families of their husbands. Resources were shared within this family unit with the eldest male overseeing the distribution and application of finances. The introduction of communism to local regions had mixed success in altering this family system. Bennigsen and Lemercier-Quelquejay explain:

The Soviet regime struck heavily at the large joint family, causing it to lose all economic significance. In spite of that, this type of family survived . . . in a modified form but still preserving its traditional characteristics in the formerly nomad districts. Here the large joint family persists more as an ethical than as a functional unit, in the sense that a number of customs survive despite prohibitions; but these are nevertheless gradually disappearing.[52]

The massive in-migration of non-Muslims also impacted the Islamic family system simply by introducing Muslims to new levels of ethnic and religious diversity. The 1959 Soviet census shows that the percent of interfaith marriages (which they call "mixed" marriages) in central Asian Republics was quite high, between 14 to 18 percent of the population in urban centers (see Table 4). The number of interfaith marriages indicates that local Islamic customs were commonly broken by the 1950s and the traditional Islamic family system was in crisis.

Table 4: Percent of Interfaith or "Mixed" Marriages in 1959.

	Total	Urban	Rural
Kazakstan	15	18	12
Uzbekistan	8	15	5
Kyrgyzstan	12	18	9
Tajikistan	9	17	6
Turkmenistan	9	14	3

Source: Bennigsen and Lemercier-Quelquejay (1967:194)

While interfaith marriages were on the rise, certain clan or tribal relationships survived communism amazingly well. In fact, leadership roles based on clan hierarchical systems tended to reproduce

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52.   Bennigsen and Lemercier-Quelquejay, *Islam in the Soviet Union*, 186.

themselves within the Communist Party. "The tendency for kinship to permeate Soviet institutions was not confined to the local level but appeared at the highest tiers of authority such that the tribal structure has 'in some bizarre fashion fused with the party structure to form a single indissoluble whole."[53]

In terms of institutional change, the secularization project appears to have had very mixed results in Central Asia. On the one hand, Soviets were quite successful at eliminating Islamic courts and schools, decreasing the number of active mosques, and weakening the Islamic family with a rise in interfaith marriages. On the other hand, the Communist Party became merged with Islamic tribal structures making "most party members, Komsomol, and Znanie sympathetic to the Islamic and nationalist causes and thus reluctant to vigorously [attack the beliefs of Islam]."[54] Institutionally and philosophically, the political arm of Islam reconciled itself to the doctrine of communism. But to what extent did Islam loose its religious content due to this accommodation?

THEOLOGICAL JUSTIFICATIONS

In Central Asia under Soviet rule, the term "Muslim" became largely a point of reference for communal identity, but whose specifically religious essence for many nominal Muslims when used during this era. But much the same could be said of being "Catholic" in Poland or "Orthodox" in Russia, the Ukraine, and Belarus: these terms were, and to a significant degree still are, used to evoke national and ethnic identities in these regions.[55] But strictly speaking, a communist in Poland could not be a Catholic, and a communist in Russia was not also Orthodox. This important difference between the persistence of religious identifiers under communism depends mainly on theological differences between Christianity and Islam.

Because Islam dealt with severe persecution in the past, there are specific religious rules regarding how Muslims should react to religiously hostile environments. Normally, individuals are required to follow the five "pillars" (*rukns*) of Islam in order to be Muslims; however, these requirements can be waived under special circumstances. Within lands of religious warfare, it is accepted that a believer may not practice Islamic rituals or customs because doing so would endanger themselves. As Bennigsen and Lemercier-Quelquejay explain:

[D]arl ul harb, faith without religious observance, is perfectly possible and even

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53. Glenn, *The Soviet Legacy in Central Asia*, 97.

54. Haghayeghi, *Islam and Politics in Central Asia*, 38.

55. Dmitry Furman and Kimma Kaariainan, "Religioznaya stabilizatsiya: Otnosheniya k Religii v Sovremennoi Rossii," *Svobodnaya Mysl* 7 (2003): 1533, 18-32.

common, and that Islam, like Judaism, is a religion where the part played by spiritual leaders and religious institutions is only secondary, and therefore it is better able than Christianity to resist outside pressure.[56]

Of special interest is that this type of Islam is theologically considered a form of resistance. By giving up religious observance the Muslim can retain his or her faith in secret and thereby withstand the extermination of Islamic belief. *Darl ul harb* became a real and popular option for Central Asian Muslims who were predominantly Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi School. This school represents one of the most liberal religious orientations within Islam. Mehrdad Haghayeghi explains:

Several Hanafi principles have been instrumental in providing a flexible framework for the practice of Islam, hence offering more freedom to the Central Asian believer. First, and perhaps the most critical aspect, is the qualitative distinction that has been made between faith (iman), and work or practice (amal). The Hanafis argue that if a Muslim wholeheartedly believes in God and the prophethood of Muhammad, but is negligent in performing his religious duties, he is not an infidel.[57]

Through this theological distinction between faith and practice, religion can easily remain personal and internal and never needs to manifest itself as a social or political movement. In Central Asia, Soviet officials destroyed the institutional basis of Islam without opposition, but Hanafi Muslims claim to have retained their religious integrity in dar-ul harb, where religious expression is wholly unobservable and exists only in the heart of the individual.

This fact makes the doctrine of Islam very different from most Christian theologies. Islam "depends less for its survival on the regular conduct of religious ceremonial worship by qualified clergy than the various Christian sects."[58] The theological system of Islam provides much greater freedom to religious believers to privately proclaim faith without relying on professional clergy or a system of rituals to validate it. In contrast, the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox Church must sanction rituals and rites performed in its name. But Muslim communities throughout central Asia were theologically free to improvise and create local solutions to get around government regulations on religion. Let me mention some of the more common occurrences.

Officially, mosques were closed in great numbers throughout central Asia. But unofficial mosques were consistently created and maintained in villages. Often old or condemned mosques were utilized in place of officially closed mosques which were frequently re-occupied for use by communist officials. Another religious space utilized by Muslims is called a "mazar," a gravesite or tomb often

56.   Bennigsen and Lemercier-Quelquejay, *Islam in the Soviet Union*, 182.
57.   Haghayeghi, *Islam and Politics in Central Asia*, 80.
58.   Wheeler, "National and Religious Consciousness in Soviet Islam," 188.

marked by piling stones into pyramid shapes. Interestingly, mazars are often "deliberately made to look neglected so that local officials (financial inspectors are especially feared) will take the mazar to be non-functioning."[59] Keller compiled a detailed list of unregistered houses of prayer in 1936 from local records throughout central Asia.[60] Her results show a tremendous number of unregistered mosques in both rural and urban areas (see Table 5).

TABLE 5: HOUSES OF PRAYER (1936 SURVEY)

	Pre-1917	Closed	Open	Registered	Un-regis-tered
Totaled Ration Records (Rural Districts)	9,720	6,160	3,590	386	2,583
Totaled City Records	10,489	6,544	3,724	686	2,588

Source: Keller (2001a:223)

Keller notes the many limitations of her data and one can assume that more unregistered mosques existed than were recorded. Nevertheless, the fact that the number of both registered and unregistered mosques in 1936 is a fraction of the number of mosques in existence before 1917 indicates that unofficial mosques could not fully replicate the extensiveness of Islamic houses of prayer in pre-communist times. Of course, further closures of mosques occurred after 1936; the most drastic assault happened under Khrushchev when 3,567 mosques (mostly unregistered) were closed between 1961 and 1963 in Uzbekistan alone.[61] Therefore, one can assume that many Muslim communities went without mosques or houses of prayer during the communist era.

Unofficial clergy served many Muslims. Keller also tracked the

59. Sergei Poliakov, *Everyday Islam: Religion and Tradition in Rural Central Asia* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1992), 102.
60. Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign Against Islam in Central Asia, 1917-1941.*
61. John Anderson, *Relgion, State, and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 384.

number of registered and unregistered imams and mullahs.[62]   Here
she does not provide a comparison to pre-communist times but one
gets a clear sense of how greatly unofficial clergy outnumbered official
clergy (see Table 6). Unofficial clergy were often young students or
conversely retirees from traditional clerical families but "the majority of
such mullahs did not know dogma, the canonically approved rituals, or
the prayers [of Islam]. . . ."[63]

Nevertheless, Poliakov argues that these untrained clergy served
"Islam very well on the daily level, because they know very well what
their people need."[64] While it seems possible that the spiritual needs
of Muslims were being served on some level, the Islamic character of
this spiritualism is unclear. In an ironic twist, the League of Militant
Atheists in Tashkent actually wanted to translate the Koran into Uzbek
so that more Muslims would know the Koran so that they could
subsequently be shown its fallacies.[65]

TABLE 6: ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS LEADERS (1936 SURVEY)

	Registered clergy	Unregistered imams	Unregistered ishans	Unregistered mullahs
Totaled Raion Records (Rural Districts)	108	1,151	118	806
Totaled City Records	0	98	25	0

Source: Keller (2001a:230)

The glaringly idiomatic aspects of unofficial Islam leads one to
question to what extent was it simply a collection of various forms of
spiritualism which were not necessarily Islamic in any substantial
theological sense. When Muslims have little or no knowledge of the
writings, teachings, and rituals of Islam, are they still Muslims? Certain
scholars point out that one can not assume that Islam is dependent on

62. Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign Against Islam in Central Asia*,
1917-1941.
63. Poliakov, *Everyday Islam: Religion and Tradition in Rural Central Asia*, 107.
64. Ibid.
65. Keller, "Conversion to the New Faith: Marxism-Leninism and Muslims in the Soviet
Empire," 328.

mosques and clergy for survival because Islamic theology only requires Muslims to remain faithful to a higher power. Walter Kolarz's summation of the study of Islam under communism illustrates this point:

If one glances back over the many years during which the Soviet communists have fought Islam one easily discovers that much of the fight has been concentrated on the secondary aspects of the Moslem religion; the veil of the Moslem women; the pilgrimage to a sacred tomb, often of doubtful historicity; the wasteful ways in which Moslem feasts are celebrated; circumcision often carried out in unhygienic conditions. . . . [But] Communism is not concerned with the abolition of certain practices but with the extermination of religion itself. . . . The real target is the central idea and message of the Koran, that there is one God.[66]

Therefore, the success of communism might be measured in terms of how many atheists it could produce. This is a tricky outcome to assess in Central Asia for a number of reasons.

The Soviet League of Militant Atheists reported tens of thousands of members in the Central Asian Republics in the 1930s and a miraculous growth rate comparable to other Soviet republics.[67] But these reports are highly unreliable[68] and the League of Militant Atheists was rendered defunct by 1940. Independent reports show that the proportion of atheists in Central Asia by 1970 are equal to that of the Soviet Union as a whole (see Figure 3) but there is no way to determine if these atheists were ethnically Russian, Ukrainian, or native to Central Asia.

Figure 3: Atheists in Central Asia (1970)
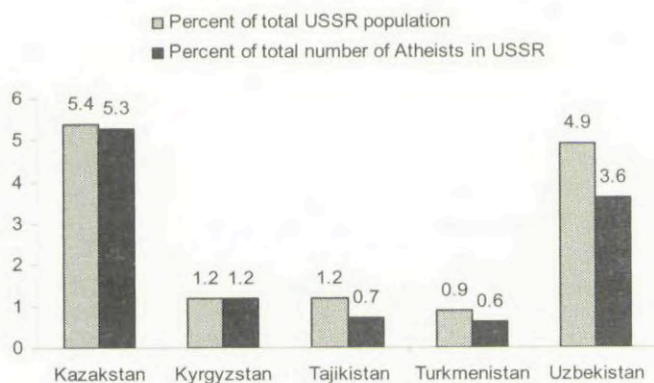
In sum, atheist recruitment was certainly not more successful in

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66. Walter Kolarz, *Religion in the Soviet Union* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1961), 445.

67. Bennigsen and Lemercier-Quelquejay, *Islam in the Soviet Union*, 150.

68. Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998).

Islamic regions than elsewhere and there is qualitative evidence to
believe that it was actually less effective than elsewhere. First, atheist
proselytizers encountered something new in the recruitment of Muslim
people—they were accustomed to attempts of Christian missionaries to
convert them to a new faith. In Eastern Europe, Roman Catholics and
Orthodox believers had never really encountered active attempts to
convert them to a different faith. These churches enjoyed a monopoly
influence over their populations and were assisted by the state in
dispelling religious competitors. While Islam was certainly a majority
religion in central Asia, Muslims had encountered Russian missionaries
and were familiar with their tactics. The head of the League of
Militant Atheists, Emelian Yaroslavsky, was aware of this phenomenon
and saw it as a potential problem for atheist recruitment. Yaroslavsky
warned atheists in central Asia that

A careless approach to the matter of antireligious propaganda among these people can
call up memories of this [Tsarist] oppression and be interpreted by the most backward
and the most fanatical part of the Muslim population as a repeat of the past, when
Christian missionaries reviled the Mohammedan faith.[69]

Second, Muslims were not willing to disown their religious
members for publicly advocating atheism. As one committed Kazakh
communist explained, "I am an atheist but also a Muslim, because all
Kazakhs are Muslims and I cannot deny my forefathers."[70]
Consequently, the League of Militant Atheists faced an opponent that
refused to fight with Muslims willing to accept atheism but unwilling to
attack Islam.   In fact, the phenomenon of the "non-believing Muslim"
is reported to be widespread in Soviet publications.[71] But this
phenomenon is difficult to explain. It is not clear that Muslims were as
much "non-believers" as they were willing to reconcile the doctrine of
atheist communism with the idea of Islam. Uzbek scholar, Tolib
Saidbayev, argues that under communism Muslims lived in "two
dimensions: 'in the one, relating to the public sphere, Central Asians
were thoroughly Sovietized in their attitudes, values and loyalties; in
the other, relating to the private sphere, they retained a largely
traditional outlook, their world shaped by customs and preconceptions
that were rooted in Islamic practice.'"

These two dimensions are most easily observed in the interaction
between Muslims and the Communist Party. Communist Party
members throughout the Soviet Union necessarily disavowed their
religious memberships or beliefs or, at the very least, kept them
hidden. But Communist Party members throughout central Asia were

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69. Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign Against Islam in Central Asia*,
1917-1941, 156.
70. Akiner, "Islam, the State and Ethnicity in Central Asia in Historical Perspective," 115.
71. Alexandre Bennigsen, "Official Islam and Sufi Brotherhoods in the Soviet Union
Today," in *Islam and Power*, ed. Alexander Cudsi and Ali Dessouki (London: Croom Helm,
1981), 98.

self-proclaimed Muslims. Various reports from inside the Soviet Union document this exception to normal Communist Party practice. In 1918, approximately one-half of the Communist Party members in Turkestan (a single united Central Asian Republic at that time) were self proclaimed Muslims and in 1924 the Bukhara Communist Party reported that 70 percent of its members were Muslims.[72] In 1965, an investigation into mosque attendance in Kazakhstan revealed that "every tenth participant was a member of the Komsomol."[73] And in 1985, a Soviet study reported that 14 percent of the Uzbek Communist Party and 56 percent of the Tajikistan Communist Party were "active Muslims," implying that they were "believing" Muslims.[74]

Under these circumstances, it appears that atheistic communism and Islam were actually reconciled or at least were expanded to produce a new form of Islamic communism. This reconciliation was not permitted by the Orthodox or Roman Catholic churches, even though some members of these religions certainly collaborated with communists. In contrast, Islam in Central Asia placed fewer restrictions on the believer than mainstream Christian institutions. Both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Church demand membership and attendance for religious inclusion and viewed communist organiza-tions as competing for the loyalty of its members. In addition, the hierarchical structure of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Church were uneasy with the activities of "underground" religious movements which did not consult with an official religious representative. Within these religious traditions, secrecy could potentially be considered heresy. In the case of Czech Catholic Church, the fact that under-ground priests married led to their eventual excommunication.[75]

Due to the theology of Islam, covert religious practice or even a lack of religious practice is acceptable as long as the individual privately believes in Allah.

In Islam, the means of crossing the boundary from non-Islam to Islam is relatively straight-forward: through the shahada or the profession of faith that 'There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God.' This first pillar of the Islamic faith is the moral equivalent of a public declaration delimiting the borders of one's mind.[76]

Therefore, Muslims felt no theological dilemma in worshiping in private in non-official mosques and with non-official clerics and often improvised with the content of the rituals.

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72. Dmitry Trofimov, *Islam in the Political Culture of the Former Soviet Union: Central Asia and Azerbaijan* (Hamburg: University of Hamburg, 1995), 15.

73. Georg Von Stackelberg, "The Tenacity of Islam in Soviet Central Asia," in *Religion and the Search for New Ideals in the USSR*, ed. William Fletcher and Anthony Strover (New York: Praeger, 1967), 95.

74. Trofimov, *Islam in the Political Culture of the Former Soviet Union: Central Asia and Azerbaijan*, 15.

75. Tilmann Muller, "Secret Priests," *World Press Review* 39, no. 4 (1992): 33.

76. (Nyang in Hashmi 2002:103).

These doctrinal differences between Christianity and Islam provide a key insight into religious persistence under communism. Overall, Islam was less competitive than Christianity with communism; in other words, it more easily reconciled itself to the religious and political demands of communism. Without active competition between the doctrines of Islam and communism, religious and anti-religious fervor was less apparent throughout central Asia. Many Muslims dispassionately admitted to being atheists and many Communist Party members openly retained their Muslim identity. This produced an ideological landscape with no clear victors. Soviet atheists were unable to disrupt strong ties to Islam even amongst leading communists in central Asia. And while Muslim identity resolutely persisted throughout the communist era, Islam entered a long *jahiliyya*—the Muslim term for an era of religious ignorance. Decades of covert Islamic activity led to a re-emergence of pre-Islamic symbols and spiritual beliefs as untrained clergy improvise from a limited knowledge of their religious heritage.[77] In many ways unofficial Islam resembled indigenous folk religions and the Islamic scholar Sharin Akiner[78] even asserts that during Soviet rule "scarcely anybody, other than the ulama and religious trainees, knew even the basic Muslim attestation of faith: 'There is no God but God, and Muhammed is His Prophet.'" In the end, the Soviet era produced an unusual mix of estranged Muslims and religious communists woven into an ideological braid which, years after the fall of the Soviet Union, is still in the process of unraveling.

ISLAM AFTER COMMUNISM

Muslims retained a steadfast Islamic identity throughout the communist era. When the Soviet Union fell in 1991, Soviet Muslims had to define what their Islamic identities meant to their religious and national futures.

The phenomenon of "resurgent" Islam in Central Asia, which has attracted much attention in the West, has little to do, however, with Islamist political movements in other parts of the world. It is fundamentally a popular and, to a large measure, provincial or rural educational effort to reclaim Islamic knowledge and learning and to gain the right to practice Islam in public without fear of intimidation.[79]

But the political upheavals of 1989 have deeply affected Islam. While Muslims are rediscovering their cultural and religious traditions,[80] they are struggling to define their political center in a world without communism. Muslims celebrated the ending of

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77. Glenn, *The Soviet Legacy in Central Asia*, 92.
78. Akiner, "Islam, the State and Ethnicity in Central Asia in Historical Perspective," 114.
79. Shahrani, "Islam and the Political Culture of 'Scientific Atheism' in Post-Communist Central Asia: Future Predicaments," 285.
80. Ibid.

religious repression throughout Central Asia. When restrictions on religious practice subsided, Muslim leaders immediately began to organize efforts to educate the population about the ways of Islam. Following the end of Soviet rule,

the observance of various Islamic practices and rituals in Central Asia such as daily five-times prayers (namaz), fasting during the month of Ramadan, payment of Sadaqa (voluntary contributions for the maintenance of mosques), attendance at the mosques during the important Muslim festivals like Qurban Bayram, Mawlud, and Idul-fitr have acquired legitimacy with great fervor. Similarly, observance of the main family rituals such as circumcision, religious marriages and burials, which were done secretly during the Soviet period, have been legalized.[81]

In addition, some Muslims harbor anti-Russian sentiments which are mainly expressed "as a demand for the use of native languages in literature, adabiyat, or in cultural or traditional, sunna or sunnat, activities."[82] Subsequently, non-Muslims have also been migrating out of central Asia in large numbers.[83]

Despite the apparent Islamic fervor surrounding the end of Soviet religious regulations, Central Asian Muslims did little or nothing to bring about the political change which permitted their new religious freedoms.

Rather, it was the breakdown of Soviet central authority that provided an almost effortless opportunity for independence. Unfortunately, the rapidity with which political freedom was brought to bear left these republics ill-prepared to fill the ideological void created in the collapse of Marxism.[84]

Without any clear opposition movement to communist rule, central Asian republics have been slow to change their governing structures.[85] This is due in part to the political coalition of official Islam and communism during the Soviet era. Religious leaders and advocates are not quick to upset a political system which they have long legitimated. And "[t]he fusion of the [Islamic] clanic structure with the Communist hierarchy . . . have meant that clanic relations have been preserved throughout the period of 'modernization' of Central Asia."[86]

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81. Badan, *Dynamics of Political Development in Central Asia*, 184.

82. Nozar Alaolmolki, *Life After the Soviet Union* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 23.

83. Jeremy Azrael and Emil Payin, *Cooperation and Conflict in the Former Soviet Union* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1996).

84. Haghayeghi, *Islam and Politics in Central Asia*, 71.

85. The lack of political change "has been most noticeable in Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, and less apparent in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The root of the problem lies in the fact that contrary to postcolonial governments, the Central Asian independence did not alter, to any significant degree, the republican power structure, leaving in tact a Communist personnel whose authority is being slowly challenged by the very nature of the reforms they are obligated to undertake." See Hafhayeghi, *Islam and Politics in Central Asia*, 133.

86. Glenn, *The Soviet Legacy in Central Asia*, 131.

Therefore, mainstream religion in central Asia has not been a force of political reform like it has been throughout Eastern Europe and the largely Christian republics of the former Soviet Union.

The Islamic revival of central Asia is decidedly moderate,[87] manifesting itself in a reawakening of Muslim traditions while being devoid of political progressivism.   Government elites happily support the resurgence of Islamic culture while being wary of more radical or, what might be labeled, "nontraditional" religious groups. In both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the government "unofficially distinguishes between 'traditional' and 'nontraditional' religions, suggesting a de facto inequality."[88] Nontraditional groups are regulated in these regions and even more harshly denied freedoms are present in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. This is done through constitutional articles which require respect for "national traditions" and results in the severe persecution of the more politically vocal religious groups.[89] Official Islam greatly benefits from these religious regulations as long as it remains supportive or at least deferential to the ruling elite.

However, "the growing popularity of militant Islam . . . springs directly from the refusal of the Central Asian regimes to broaden the political base of their governments, allow democratization, and lift bans on political activity."[90] The Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) successfully fought political repression in the Tajikistan civil war and now enjoys membership in the coalition government of Tajikistan.   It appears that to avoid more civil unrest the states of Central Asia will need to recognize and accept political growth within Islam.

In the final analysis, what may determine the longevity of the present Central Asian governments and at the same time prevent further politicization of the Islamic forces in the foreseeable future is the willingness to institute an all-inclusive democratic framework within which all social forces, irrespective of their ideological orientation, could partake in a peaceful plural electoral competition.[91]

CONCLUSION

Soviet communism was a political reality to which Islam adapted. This adaptation was not unconditional though. Muslims leaders found within the philosophy of Soviet communism ideals which mirrored ideals of social justice within the Islamic tradition. For this reason, Muslim communists argued that Soviets were actually carrying out the will of Allah, albeit in ignorance.   In addition, Muslims found that

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87.   Haghayeghi, *Islam and Politics in Central Asia.*
88.   Paul Marshall, *Religious Freedom in the World* (Nashville, Tenn.: Brodman and Holmes Publishers, 2000), 185.
89.   Haghayeghi, *Islam and Politics in Central Asia*, 158.
90.   Rashid, "The Fires of Faith in Central Asia," 55.
91.   Haghayeghi, *Islam and Politics in Central Asia*, 134.

many of the social programs implemented by Soviets fit their pre-existing nationalist goals. This further helped to solidify a working relationship between Muslims and atheistic communists.   No similar relationship developed between communists and Christians in Russia and Eastern Europe; in fact, Soviet communism began its occupancy in many Christian regions by actively assaulting the local churches and religious leaders. But within central Asia, Soviet communists first appealed to the interests of Muslims before later attacking their traditional religious institutions.

Beyond these initial political and economic differences, Muslims also differ from Christians in terms of how they understand their religion and their religious identities. The doctrine of Islam is more flexible in terms of how it defines true believers than most Christian churches. Consequently, Muslims more easily practiced their religious rituals in private and even more commonly relinquished their religious practices with the understanding that their religious convictions were known to Allah, the defining characteristic of being Muslim.

The case of Soviet Muslims appears confusing at first glance. Islam is a cluster of religious doctrines with political aspirations and Soviet communism was decidedly atheistic. Therefore, Islam and Soviet communism were quite natural enemies. Nevertheless, the fact that Muslims tended to accommodate and sometimes foster Soviet communism demonstrates the importance of both political and religious goals to Central Asians. First and foremost, many Muslims saw political and economic advantages to Soviet communism while Christian groups tended to suffer losses in both political and economic strength. Second, Christian groups expected members to make a choice between the advantages of participating with the Soviet system or remaining faithful to their religious tradition. In contrast, certain theological elements within Islam allowed Muslims to both participate in the project of Soviet communism and remain faithful Muslims. Therefore, Soviet Muslims accommodated the strictures of atheistic communism more easily than Christians because they were politically and theologically distinctive.