

**Dr. Zubaidullo UBAIDULLOEV**

Senior Research Fellow,  
Rudaki Institute of Language, Literature, Oriental Studies and Written Heritage,  
Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Tajikistan

## **The revival of Islam in post-Soviet independent Tajikistan**

### **Abstract:**

Islam has been present in Tajikistan for many centuries. Islam is regarded not only as a religion for most of the population of Tajikistan, but as a substantial and organic part of the history and culture of Tajik people. Therefore, despite the historical events and the situation in the country, Islam has always been present in the life of the population since its arrival in the seventh century. Islam survived in Tajikistan during the Soviet period in widely varied forms, because of the strength of an indigenous popular Islam quite apart from the Soviet-sanctioned Islamic administration.

This paper analyses the revival of Islam in Tajikistan since its independence from the former USSR in 1991. It will focus on the following themes: a). Islam and politics in Tajikistan since independence; b). External influence in the country's religious life; and c). Challenges and changes in religious life of the society; d). Resurgence of Ismailia (a branch of Shi'a sect) in Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Province.

The role of Islamic thinking and the role of Islam itself are increasing in the modern political processes of Tajikistan since the independence. The emergence of an independent Tajikistan and other Central Asian nations after about 150 years of Russian and Soviet colonialism and rule has brought a whole region back into the world of Islam. The population of over sixty million people is part of a rich Muslim Central Asian tradition of high Islamic civilization in the Middle Ages are now discovering their roots, which the Soviet regime had been determined to eradicate. The impact of this phenomenon is significant on the geopolitics of Eurasia.

*Keywords: Tajikistan, religion, Islam, Islamic revival, independence, politics.*

## Introduction

People of Tajikistan like other Central Asian nations connected to Islam by their historical roots and have made great contributions to Islamic culture and thoughts. Islam arrived in Central Asia in the seventh century during the conquest of Persia by Arabs. Khurasan and Mawaraunnahr gave to the Islamic world these scholars of great eminence, like Imam Bukhari, Imam Tirmizi, Imam Abu Hanifa, Al-Ghazali, Abu Ali Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Mavlana Jalaluddin Rumi (Balkhi), Abu Raihan Beruni, Al-Kharazmi, Farabi and many others. They brought fame to the region all over the world, were very famous and valuable in the Islamic world and well-known internationally as well. Scientific achievements of Abu Ali Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Abu Musa al-Kharazmi, Abu Raihan Beruni and Al-Farabi made a great impact on the European science, e.g. *The Canon of Medicine* of Abu Ali Ibn Sina was a standard medical text at many medieval universities and Abu Musa al-Kharazmi is known as the founder of algebra. Another great personality Imam Abu Hanifa, is the founder of Hanafi madhab (school) of the Sunni sect of Islam, whose origin was a Tajik / Persian from Khorasan and known in the Islamic world as *Al-imâm al-a`zam* (The Greatest Imam). Hanafi school has the largest number of followers in the Islamic world among the four schools of *Ahl al-Sunna*. The religious legacy of the Greatest Imam Abu Hanifa, particularly in the fields of Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) and Kalam (scholastic philosophy) is a brilliant example of the dialogue of civilizations. Mir Sayyed Ali Hamadani, who made a valuable contribution to the spiritual life of the Muslims in Kashmir, had and still has thousands of followers there and died and found a peace in Kulob, Tajikistan. Mavlana Jalaluddin Rumi (Balkhi), a Tajik, who was born in Balkh (today's Afghanistan and Tajikistan), migrated to Turkey at the age of eight, worked and died in Turkey and considered a son and great personality in Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Turkey. Unfortunately, Central Asia, the homeland of such great above mentioned personalities and rich tradition of high Islamic civilization in the Middle Ages, in the twentieth century faced a religious persecution, ignorance and suppression by Soviet policies implemented to destroy the deep roots that Islam had in Central Asia.

The rule of the Soviet Union in Central Asia, including Tajikistan for seventy years has proved that any ideology or cultural policy artificially cannot be forced onto people. President of Tajikistan H.E. Emomali Rahmon has emphasized, that "Seventy years of the history of the Soviet Union, which mainly supported only a limited national

independence have proved that any cultural policy or ideology artificially forced onto people is bound to fail.”<sup>1</sup> For this reason, the forced atheistic policy of the former USSR (Soviet Union) brought to Muslim nations of Central Asia failed. Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian republics have seen a revival of Islam. The process of Islamic revival began rapidly, due to the fact that Islam has always had deep roots in the region (see, e.g., Khalid 2007; O’Dea 2006; Rashid 1994).

An estimated 99% of Tajikistan’s citizens are Muslims. From this amount, 97 % of the country’s Muslims belong to Hanafi school of Sunni sect of Islam. And the remained part, about 3 % of all Tajikistan Muslims belong to an Ismaili branch of Shi’a sect of Islam. Almost all of Ismailis of Tajikistan reside in the remote Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Province. There is no religion-based conflict between these two groups. The Imam and leader of the world’s Ismailis Aga Khan has a good relationship with the government and people of Tajikistan. Since independence of Tajikistan, Aga Khan organizations have made valuable contribution not only to the development of Badakhshan province, where the majority of people are Ismailis, as well as in many other parts of country with Sunni population. There is a small Christian religious minority (mostly ethnic Russians and other Soviet-era immigrant groups), Zoroastrians, Bahais and Bukhari Jews.

This paper tries to review the role of Islam in post-Soviet independent Tajikistan’s society and politics, the relation and policies of secular government toward religion, especially Islam and its revival. The paper will also examine the measures taken up by the government of Tajikistan in terms of the religious life of the people.

An attempt will also be made to analyze the threat posed by both Islamic fundamentalist groups (see, e.g., Olcott 2007; Naumkin 2005) and new non-traditional religious groups to the security and stability of the newly independent Tajikistan.

## **Islam and Politics in Tajikistan**

Since the fall of the USSR and independence of predominantly Muslim Central Asian countries, history of Islam in the region, the role of Islam in the society, Islamic revival since independence, Islam and politics in these newly independent countries of Central Asia has drawn much attention of international scholars (see, e.g., Dudoignon and

---

<sup>1</sup> Rahmonov, Emomali. *The Tajiks in the Mirror of History*, Volume 1, *From Aryans to the Samanids*. London: River Editions Ltd. p.11.

Hisao 2001; Naumkin 1993).

Soviet Union's efforts and atheistic policy to secularize society, especially in Muslim regions of Central Asia and Caucasus were largely unsuccessful. The post-Soviet era and early independence period of the countries of the mentioned regions has seen a significant increase in religious practice and religious renaissance in the region.

Tajikistan obtained independence in 1991 since the disintegration of the former USSR. The first years after independence and the years of the civil war was the hardest period in the history of Islam in Tajikistan. Tajikistan was the only among the Central Asian countries, which faced a bloody civil war during 1992-1997. One of the main factors of Tajik civil war was the ideology and power struggle between the newly revived Islamists/democrats and pro-Russian secular group. Some scholars characterized the civil war of Tajikistan as "a battle between Islamic fundamentalists and the forces of secularism and stability" (see, e.g., Djalili, Grare, and Akiner 1997). But United Tajik Opposition was not consisted of only Islamists under the Islamic Renaissance Party. It was an alliance of democratic, liberal and Islamist forces and it was a coalition of opposition parties, like Islamic Renaissance Party, Democratic Party of Tajikistan, Rastokhez movement and La'li Badakhshon party and their armed supporters. Most of these parties identified themselves by ideology, e.g., promoting 'democracy', 'Islamic values' or a revitalized 'Tajik nation' (see, e.g., Akiner and Barnes 2001).

During the first years of independence Islam became as a political movement in Tajikistan. Islamic renaissance in Tajikistan played an important role to response the ideological vacuum since the collapse of communism. Despite of the fact of civil war and instability in country on early 1990s, it was a significant period of religious Islamic revival, renaissance of Islamic practices and ceremonies, and the opening of new mosques all over the country. It was also the time for the appearance of a political Islamic organization on the political scene. For example, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan was the key party within the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) during the civil war. The peace agreement was signed in 1997 in Moscow between Emomali Rahmon (then Rahmonov<sup>2</sup>) – Tajikistan's president and Sayyed Abdullo Nuri - the leader of the UTO, who at the same time was the chairman of the Islamic Renaissance Party of

---

<sup>2</sup> Najibullah, Farangis. "Central Asia: Name Debate Reflects Region's Mixed History", PAYVAND, <http://www.payvand.com/news/07/apr/1055.html> (accessed October 24, 2012).

Tajikistan. The Tajik Peace Agreement was achieved by the efforts of both the UTO and government, as well as with support and efforts of the UN, Russia, Iran and other countries. The peace process and negotiations during 1994-1997 transformed the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) from its radical and militant direction towards a moderate and peaceful agenda. The IRPT now is the only legally registered religion-based political party in whole Central Asia. The IRPT now as the main oppositional party is working for basic principles of Islam to be adopted into the cultural and political context of Tajikistan. Currently, the IRPT complies with the country's constitution, which backs the secular system in Tajikistan. 97 percent of Tajikistani Muslims belong to Hanafi school of Sunni sect of Islam. According to Muhiddin Kabiri the Chairman of the IRPT, the Hanafi school of Sunni sect does not support the idea of theocratic governments, so no one should rule a country in the name of God. It's people who rule countries. Therefore, according to Kabiri, the IRPT is not seeking to create an Islamic state or an Islamic republic in Tajikistan. Instead, it wants to create an Islamic society and most important goal is the creation of a society that lives with Islamic values.<sup>3</sup>

Tajikistan according to its constitution is a secular country, so for this reason the government does not fund religious organizations and does not allocate finance/budget for building masjids (mosques) and madrasas, because they are religious organizations. At the same time, the law does not prohibit local private or outside investments in constructions that are not politically associated, like masjids and madrasas. Funding for building masjids and madrasas comes from private citizens as well as from outside sources, such as Muslim countries. Tajikistan and other countries of Central Asia were reopened to many different world influences with the end of regional isolation of the Soviet era. It was a time when Tajikistan had more contact with Muslim countries and integrated into the Islamic world.

Tajikistan since its independence has lacked a state ideology and has been hesitant to develop one. The serious step the Government of Tajikistan put for the purpose of revival of the national identity, that it declared 2006 the year of Aryan Civilization, taking into account the religion of Tajiks before Islam – Zoroastrism and considering Zardusht – Zoroastrian prophet as a Tajik from Bactria (today's` Afghanistan and

---

<sup>3</sup>Najibullah, Farangis. "Islamic Party Leader In Tajikistan Says He Supports Secular System",RFE/RL, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Islamic\\_Party\\_Leader\\_In\\_Tajikistan\\_Says\\_He\\_Supports\\_Secular\\_System\\_/1823086.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Islamic_Party_Leader_In_Tajikistan_Says_He_Supports_Secular_System_/1823086.html) (accessed October 24, 2012).

Tajikistan). With this action the country's leadership connected Zoroastrism religion directly with Tajik national identity.

At present Tajikistan officially bases its statehood on general democratic principles and stresses that no any ideology can be recognized as the State ideology. Although Tajikistan is secular state according to its constitution, however state and government have given a special place to the Hanafi madhab (school) of Sunni Islam and a new Law “On Religion and Religious Organizations” adopted by Majlisi Oli (The Parliament) on March 2009 favors the Hanafi school of Islam. President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon, who has called Imam Abu Hanifa an “outstanding son of the Tajik people”,<sup>4</sup> signed a decree on September 15, 2008 announcing 2009 as Year of Imam A’zam Abu Hanifa in Tajikistan. On this occasion, on the eve of 1310<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Imam Abu Hanifa the Government of Tajikistan organized an international conference formally titled “Heritage of Imam Abu Hanifa in the Context of Inter-Civilization Dialogue: Past and Present” which took place in Dushanbe the capital city of Tajikistan on October 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup>, 2009. Some 500 delegates from 46 countries of the Muslim and non-Muslim world participated in the conference, the majority of whom were Muslim clerics, thinkers, religious scholars, specialists and researchers on Islam<sup>5</sup>. By organizing such kind of event Tajikistan’s government pays attention to the Hanafi madhhab as a cultural phenomenon, it will be able to give a direct orientation to the national self - cognizance and take religious tolerance toward cultural identity of other peoples living in Tajikistan as a basis for the strategy of the national unity. Tajikistan leadership using of nation’s rich religious heritage and with the rise of the national self-consciousness fosters contacts with many countries of the Islamic and modern world, joins to the values of the civilized world and broadens its ties with other civilizations.

The constitution provides a freedom of faith and religion. However, government’s recent policies on religious affairs restrict this freedom<sup>6</sup>. The secular government has full control of religious life in Tajikistan. In recent years hundreds of unlicensed masjids, which were not registered by the relevant authorities were closed down by the

---

<sup>4</sup> Speech of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan Mr. Emomali Rahmon at the International Symposium on “Imam A’zam and the modern world” [http://www.president.tj/eng/news\\_051009a.html](http://www.president.tj/eng/news_051009a.html) (accessed November 14, 2009)

<sup>5</sup> See ASIA-Plus, 23.09.2009, <http://www.asiaplus.tj/en/news/44/57186.html> (accessed April 19, 2010)

<sup>6</sup> United States Department of State, *2011 Report on International Religious Freedom - Tajikistan*, 30 July 2012, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/topic.464db4f52.4a97c09c2.5021057e6e.0....html> (accessed October 26, 2012).

government. There are different reactions from the people and religious groups. Many people in such predominantly Muslim nation believe that this policy is against the religion of Islam.<sup>7</sup> In June 2011, Tajikistan lawmakers of Majlisi Oli passed a law that would, among other things, prohibit children younger than 18 from attending religious services at masjids.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, later the same year the President of Tajikistan Mr. Emomali Rahmon signed this controversial law and it was published in the state-run print media on August 2<sup>nd</sup> 2012 and came into force.<sup>9</sup> According to Paul Quinn-Judge, project director for Central Asia at International Crisis Group, this kind of government's approaches and measures could be 'disastrous'<sup>10</sup> for Tajikistan. An influential Islamic leader and politician former First Deputy Prime Minister of Tajikistan Haji Akbar Turajonzoda has expressed his concern on 'secular extremism' in Tajikistan and according to him a 'talk of Islamic radicalism in Tajikistan is a lie'<sup>11</sup>

Some recent policies of government on religion and religious affairs:

1. The children under the age of 18 are banned from attending Islamic services at masjids (mosques)<sup>12</sup>;
2. According to the order of the country's president from August 2010 the government returned Tajikistani students who were studying religion in foreign Islamic institutions without the approval of the government<sup>13</sup>. Several groups of such students were returned from Egypt, Iran, Syria etc.

---

<sup>7</sup> United Press International, Inc. "Tajik govt. targets unlicensed mosques", Sept.8, 2007, [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/2007/09/08/Tajik-govt-targets-unlicensed-mosques/UPI-36341189286715/#axzz2D6sDZNCj](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/2007/09/08/Tajik-govt-targets-unlicensed-mosques/UPI-36341189286715/#axzz2D6sDZNCj) (accessed on November 24, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Schwirtz, Michael. "On the Rise in Tajikistan, Islam Worries an Authoritarian Government", The New York Times, July 16, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/17/world/asia/17tajikistan.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed October 17, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Tajik President Signs Law Banning Children From Mosques", August 03, 2011 [http://www.rferl.org/content/tajik\\_president\\_signs\\_law\\_banning\\_children\\_from\\_mosques/24285911.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/tajik_president_signs_law_banning_children_from_mosques/24285911.html) (accessed October 17, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Orange, Richard. "Tajik ban on children in mosques could be 'disastrous'", The Telegraph, 23 Jun 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/tajikistan/8594032/Tajik-ban-on-children-in-mosques-could-be-disastrous.html> (accessed on October 17, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Schwirtz, Michael. "On the Rise in Tajikistan, Islam Worries an Authoritarian Government", The New York Times, July 16, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/17/world/asia/17tajikistan.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed October 17, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> United States Department of State, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report-Tajikistan, July-December, September 13, 2011, [http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010\\_5/168253.htm](http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010_5/168253.htm) (accessed October 26, 2012).

3. Ministry of Education's new Dress Code of 2007 prohibits of female students wearing hijab<sup>14</sup> in schools and other educational institutions. Only the women who study at the Islamic Institute and madrassas are allowed to wear the hijab.
4. This Ministry of Education's dress code also prohibits teachers of schools and other educational institutions under age 50 from having a beard. Teachers whose age is above 50 and who have a beard, their beard must be within 3cm<sup>15</sup>.
5. Religious homeschooling is forbidden and government closed all private religious schools<sup>16</sup>;
6. Selection and assignment of imams and imam-khatibs of masjids only by the government, according to the new law on religion<sup>17</sup>;
7. A fatwa of the Shuroi Ulamo (Council of Ulama) from 2004 prohibits women from praying in masjids (mosques). Council of Ulama members promoted official government policies regarding women praying in mosques, stating that according to the country's Islamic traditions, women should pray at home<sup>18</sup>.
8. A fatwa of the Shuroi Ulamo (Council of Ulama) from November 2012 on establishing the limit or length of beard for Muslims. According to this new fatwa and rule, the beard must be within the person's fist<sup>19</sup>.

These policies met with strong critic and opposition by the local and foreign Islamic leaders, who expressed their concern that these policies might radicalize the Islamic groups within Tajikistan and might cause an antigovernment resentment.

## **Foreign influence in Tajikistan's religious life and arrival of non-traditional religious groups**

---

<sup>14</sup> UNHCR, Refworld, 24 August 2010, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,RFERL,,TJK,4562d8cf2,4cb83e61c,0.html> (accessed October 26, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> United States Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2010 – Tajikistan, November 17, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010/148805.htm> (accessed November 17, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> United States Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2009 – Tajikistan, October 26, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2009/127372.htm> (accessed November 17, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> United States Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2005 – Tajikistan, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2005/51585.htm> (accessed November 17, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> Турсунзода, Мехрангез. “Совет улемов Таджикистана установил размер бороды для мусульман республики”, ASIA-Plus, (Tursunzoda, Mehrangez. “Tajikistan's Council of Ulama established the rule on the length of beard for country's Muslims) <http://news.tj/ru/news/sovet-ulemov-tadzhikistana-ustanovil-razmer-borody-dlya-musulman-respubliki> (accessed November 17, 2012).

Tajikistan has retained a strong sense of its Islamic heritage despite periodic attempts by the Soviet authorities to repress religious sentiment. Russians and other Slavic people who moved to the country during the Soviet period, brought Orthodox Christianity, but the two faiths have coexisted equably and peacefully. There is a new factor in the religious life of the country since independence in 1991 - an arrival of foreign religious missionaries mainly from Christian Protestant groups. Muslims of Tajikistan and other Central Asian countries since independence face new challenges due to the arrival and activities of non-traditional religious groups, especially Christian missionaries, which flooded into the region as never before (see, e.g., Van Gorder 2008). This phenomenon led to some of locals switching their faith. These missionaries of Christian organizations come from South Korea, the United States and other places. That has created hostility among Muslim clerics and local people, some of whom accuse the evangelists of “buying” conversions through material enticements, in a country where poverty is high. According to those clerics the newly arriving missionaries really are taking advantage of the impoverished position and vulnerability of the population. Some government officials expressed opinions in the press that minority religious groups, especially non-traditional religious groups like Christian missionaries undermine national unity. In this regard, on 25 July 2005, the government’s Committee for Religious Affairs announced a temporary ban on three foreign religious organizations - the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Union of Evangelist Baptists and Korean Sonmin Grace church. Recently, the Government banned two locally operating Christian groups - the Abundant Life in December 2008 and again the Jehovah's Witnesses in January 2009.

The religion of Tajiks was Zoroastrian before Islam. Therefore, there are attempts from the Zoroastrian communities and organizations of other countries for the revival of the old local religion. The issue of arrival of new and non-traditional religious groups and missionaries is a big problem in Tajikistan’s post-independence new society. On the one hand country’s legislation provides freedom of faith; on the other hand, government needs to preserve national stability and security. There are many negative reactions by the population and clerics, due to the fact that the propaganda of these newly arrived movements, especially Christian missionaries is often conducted in a very aggressive way. In one night, these groups put up a lot of their posters. The issue is that Tajikistan was the poorest among other USSR republics, remains in the same position now and became in much worse economic condition since its civil war soon after independence and lack of

investment. The new missionaries often use this factor as the weak point, providing material and financial assistance to new local converts.

Tajikistan has signed all thirteen of the anti-terrorism conventions. The government has recognized the following as the terrorist and extremist organizations and banned their activities in Tajikistan, such as Al-Qaeda, Taliban, Al-ikhwān al-muslimūn (Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt), East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) - an Uyghur organization in Xinjiang, China, Islamic Party of Turkestan (former Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan), Lashkar-e-Tayiba, Pakistan's Islamic Group (Jamiat-e-Islam-e-Pakistan).<sup>20</sup> Government based on secularity of the state takes measures against spread of religious fundamentalism and extremism from mainly three neighboring countries Afghanistan (Taliban), Pakistan (Jamiat-e-Islam-e-Pakistan etc..) and Uzbekistan (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan). The 'war against terrorism' is now permitting Tajikistan and other Central Asian states to control all aspects of religious life. The Government bans groups it considers "extremist" or it believes will "threaten social harmony," and it targeted Islamic fundamentalist organizations in particular. For example, Hizb ut-Tahrir and its activities were banned and authorities arrested many of its members. In 2009 the government banned the Salafiya<sup>21</sup> movement. The government considers such movements as a threat and political religious groups, who want to overthrow the secular governments in the region.

## **Resurgence of Ismailia in Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Province**

Ismailia is a branch of Shi'a sect of Islam. Ismaili teachings became known in Central Asia during the 10th century, through the work of influential philosophers, natural scientists, thinkers and poets, including the preeminent Ismaili thinker Nasir Khusraw, known and respected across the region for his contribution to philosophy and the sciences of the time as well as to Persian poetry. The Ismailis of Tajikistan, a religious minority concentrated in the remote eastern mountainous Badakhshan province, have come a long way since Soviet times, when they were afraid even to have a picture of their spiritual leader the Aga Khan on display at home. The Present Imam, who is 49<sup>th</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> MFA Tajikistan, "The Republic of Tajikistan and counter terrorism" <http://www.mfa.tj/index.php?node=article&id=185> (accessed October 24, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Najibullah, Farangis. "Salafi Ban Reflects Tajik Officials' Growing Fear", ASIA-Plus, 09.01.2009 <http://www.asiaplus.tj/en/articles/179/2921.html> (accessed April 16, 2010)

Imam and spiritual leader of the world's Ismailis became the first Imam in the known recorded history of the Ismailis to have traveled to Tajikistan and Kyrgyz Republic at the invitation of their governments on May 1995, which followed to many other visits to Tajikistan afterwards. As a result of Soviet atheistic policy Ismailis of Tajikistan were forced to practice their faith in secret for decades like the major Sunni Muslim population of the country.

The sudden collapse of Communism and Soviet Union meant that the Ismailis were able to practice their faith freely, and even meet their imam and leader. In return, the Aga Khan agencies like Aga Khan Foundation (AKF), and others invested large sums of money to help their remote mountain communities survive and develop. However, much of AKF's activity took place away from the view of many Tajiks simply, because the Pamir plateau is an isolated place far from the capital city and other major cities of Tajikistan, located on the Afghan border with China and Pakistan in close distance.

Since independence, the Sunni majority of Tajikistan has come face to face with the Aga Khan's engagement with the country. In this part of the world Central and South Asia, the Ismaili faith is also strong in adjacent mountainous areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Aga Khan is thus of central importance to his followers, and many elderly Ismailis are grateful that they have lived long enough to see him.

The Imam has brought his followers in Tajikistan a lot more than a spiritual renaissance, since the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) as an international development agency working in areas as diverse as infrastructure, healthcare and culture. This is achieved by supporting the establishment of programs and institutions that allow the government, private sector and civil society to play complementary roles in increasing prosperity and creativity within a pluralistic society. Many Badakhshanis credit him with saving them from starvation after the collapse of Soviet economics and infrastructure, and in the ensuing civil war. The Aga Khan Development Network has funded huge amount to build the University of Central Asia in Khorugh (Tajikistan), four bridges over the Panj river in Tajikistan connecting with Afghanistan, energy company Pamir Energo, hydropower stations, First MicroFinanceBank , etc. The Ismaili Centre, Dushanbe was opened on 12 October 2009 by Emomali Rahmon, President of the Republic of Tajikistan, and Imam Aga Khan IV. It is the first such center in Central Asia. Ismailism in Badakhshan province (Pamir area) of Tajikistan is an interesting, but comparatively neglected field in research and studies on culture and religion of the minor

ethnicities within the divergent Islamic civilization, especially of Central Asia (see, e.g., Ioliev 2008).

## **Conclusion**

Islam in Tajikistan has had a long history and the Tajik people have lived with Islam for quite a long time starting from the seventh century, sharing its values, its culture and life. The renaissance of Islam in Tajikistan and other countries of Central Asia has had a different impact in different areas depending on freedom of religious policy and the interest in Islam. The impact of cultural and educational aspects of Islam is growing in all parts of Central Asia, including Tajikistan.

After the Soviet disintegration and independence of Tajikistan, in the absence of political control and weak social infrastructure, Islam proved to be a unifying force in Tajikistan and other Central Asian societies. In this regard, Cheldelin, who has examined religion, government and civil society in Tajikistan, has noted “Islam has a particular influence on Tajik society, yet it cannot be the foundation for violation of the principle of secular governance. It is necessary to broadly discuss and propagate the idea that religion and secular governance can coexist and constructively cooperate in the sociopolitical composition of the society and that the two are necessary for the health and well-being of Tajikistan citizens.”<sup>22</sup>

A peaceful co-existence of major Sunni Muslim population of Tajikistan with minor Ismaili Shia population is a successful case of religious pluralism.

The government of Tajikistan has a good relation and cooperation with international Islamic organizations, like the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC, headquarters in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia), the Organization of Economic Cooperation (OEC, headquarters in Tehran, Iran), the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO, headquarters in Rabat, Morocco) and the Islamic Development Bank (IDB, headquarters in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia)<sup>23</sup>.

The secular government of Tajikistan under the pretext of struggle against extremist threats continues to have a full control of religious affairs, religious education

---

<sup>22</sup> Cheldelin, Sandra I. “RELIGION AND EDUCATION IN TAJIKISTAN: TOWARD TOLERANT CIVIC SOCIETY”, Final Report September 1, 2005 to August 31, 2007. Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, 2007, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan. Membership of the Republic of Tajikistan in International Organizations, <http://www.mfa.tj/index.php?node=article&id=361> (accessed November 24, 2012).

and worship in the country. This creates paradoxes and challenges in the society and people's religious life. In this regards, Islam and current secular state in Tajikistan now are in a complex relationship. Despite government's recent restrictions and mentioned policies on controlling religious life and affairs, the recognition and support of political Islam in Tajikistan is rising.

It is necessary to note that there is a serious dispute between traditional Islam and new movements of Islam brought to the country as a foreign influence from the Islamic world.

In Tajikistan, which is a predominantly a Muslim nation and where 99% of the population are Muslims, a new phenomenon and challenge since independence is the arrival and activities of non-traditional religious groups, especially Christian missionaries. Arrival and activities of these Christian missionaries have created hostility among Muslim clerics and local people, some of whom accuse the evangelists of "buying" conversions through material enticements, in a country where poverty is high. According to the opinion of some officials these non-traditional religious groups like Christian missionaries undermine national security and unity.

Today, with the opening up of Central Asia since its independence from the former Soviet Union to the world and international community, Islam is again beginning to play a major role in the society, politics and culture of the area, which was a significant part of the historical Silk Road and Islamic civilization.

## **Bibliography**

- Akiner, Shirin. *CENTRAL ASIAN AND CAUCASIAN PROSPECTS: Tajikistan: Disintegration or Reconciliation?* London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2001.
- Cheldelin, Sandra I. "RELIGION AND EDUCATION IN TAJIKISTAN: TOWARD TOLERANT CIVIC SOCIETY", Final Report September 1, 2005 to August 31, 2007, Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, 2007.
- Djalili, Mohammad-Reza, Frederic Grare, Shirin Akiner. *Tajikistan: The Trials of Independence*. London, New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Iloiev, Abdulmamad. *The Ismaili-Sufi Sage of Pamir: Mubarak-i Wakhani and the Esoteric Tradition of the Pamiri Muslims*. New York: Cambria Press, 2008.

- Khalid, Adeb. *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan. "The Republic of Tajikistan and counter terrorism", <http://www.mfa.tj/index.php?node=article&id=185> (accessed October 24, 2012).
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan. Membership of the Republic of Tajikistan in International Organizations, <http://www.mfa.tj/index.php?node=article&id=361> (accessed November 24, 2012).
- Najibullah, Farangis. "Central Asia: Name Debate Reflects Region`s Mixed History", PAYVAND, 2007, <http://www.payvand.com/news/07/apr/1055.html> (accessed October 24, 2012).
- Najibullah, Farangis. "Islamic Party Leader In Tajikistan Says He Supports Secular System", RFE/RL, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Islamic\\_Party\\_Leader\\_In\\_Tajikistan\\_Says\\_He\\_Supports\\_Secular\\_System\\_/1823086.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Islamic_Party_Leader_In_Tajikistan_Says_He_Supports_Secular_System_/1823086.html) (accessed October 24, 2012).
- Najibullah, Farangis. "Salafi Ban Reflects Tajik Officials' Growing Fear", RFE/RL,, January 09, 2009 [http://www.rferl.org/content/Salafi\\_Ban\\_Reflects\\_Tajik\\_Officials\\_Growing\\_Fear/1368347.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Salafi_Ban_Reflects_Tajik_Officials_Growing_Fear/1368347.html) (accessed October 24, 2012).
- Naumkin, Vitaly. *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Between Pen and Rifle*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005.
- Naumkin, Vitaly. *State, Religion and Society in Central Asia: A Post-Soviet Critique*. London: Ithaca Press, 1993.
- Olcott, Martha B. "Roots of Radical Islam in Central Asia", CARNEGIE PAPERS, Russian and Eurasian Program, CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT for International Peace, Number 77, 2007.
- Orange, Richard. "Tajik ban on children in mosques could be 'disastrous'", The Telegraph, 23 June 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/tajikistan/8594032/Tajik-ban-on-children-in-mosques-could-be-disastrous.html> (accessed on October 17, 2012).
- Oxford Islamic Studies  
Online, [http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e309?\\_hi=5&\\_pos=5#match](http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e309?_hi=5&_pos=5#match) (accessed April 16, 2010)
- O'Dea, C. *Tajikistan (The Growth and Influence of Islam in the Nations of Asia and Central Asia)*. PA: Mason Crest Publishers, 2006.
- Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Tajik President Signs Law Banning Children From Mosques", August 03,

- 2011 [http://www.rferl.org/content/tajik\\_president\\_signs\\_law\\_banning\\_children\\_from\\_mosques/24285911.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/tajik_president_signs_law_banning_children_from_mosques/24285911.html) (accessed October 17, 2012).
- Rahmon, Emomali. Speech of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan Mr. Emomali Rahmon at the International Symposium on “Imam A’zam and the modern world” [http://www.president.tj/eng/news\\_051009a.html](http://www.president.tj/eng/news_051009a.html) (accessed November 14, 2009).
- Rahmonov, Emomali. *The Tajiks in the Mirror of History*, Volume 1, *From Aryans to the Samanids*. London: River Editions Ltd.
- Rashid, Ahmed. *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism? (Politics in Contemporary Asia)*. London: Zed Books, 1995.
- Rashid, Ahmed. *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism*. Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Schwartz, Michael. “On the Rise in Tajikistan, Islam Worries an Authoritarian Government”, *The New York Times*, July 16, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/17/world/asia/17tajikistan.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed October 17, 2012).
- UNHCR, Refworld, 24 August 2010, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,RFERL,,TJK,4562d8cf2,4cb83e61c,0.html> (accessed October 26, 2012).
- United Press International, Inc. “Tajik govt. targets unlicensed mosques”, Sept.8, 2007, [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/2007/09/08/Tajik-govt-targets-unlicensed-mosques/UPI-36341189286715/#axzz2D6sDZNCj](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/2007/09/08/Tajik-govt-targets-unlicensed-mosques/UPI-36341189286715/#axzz2D6sDZNCj) (accessed November 24, 2012).
- United States Department of State, *2011 Report on International Religious Freedom - Tajikistan*, 30 July 2012, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/topic,464db4f52,4a97c09c2,5021057e6e,0,...html> (accessed October 26, 2012).
- United States Department of State, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report-Tajikistan, July-December, September 13, 2011, [http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010\\_5/168253.htm](http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010_5/168253.htm) (accessed October 26, 2012).
- United States Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2010 – Tajikistan, November 17, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010/148805.htm> (accessed November 17, 2012).
- United States Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2009 Report – Tajikistan, October 26, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2009/127372.htm> (accessed November 17, 2012).

Uyama, Tomohiko ed. *Empire, Islam, and politics in Central Eurasia*. Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University, 2007.

Турсунзода, Мехрангез. “Совет улемов Таджикистана установил размер бороды для мусульман республики”, ASIA-Plus, (Tursunzoda, Mehrangez. “Tajikistan’s Council of Ulama established the rule on the length of beard for country’s Muslims) <http://news.tj/ru/news/sovet-ulemov-tadzhikistana-ustanovil-razmer-borody-dlya-musulman-respubliki> (accessed November 17, 2012).