

# Role of Muslim Women in the Islamic Revival of Central Asia: Soviet and Post- Soviet Period

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## Abstract

*In the history of Muslim communities women have always emerged on the public scene transcending the limits of patriarchal societies. Even though the women figures did not have a prominent impact on official history, they provide testimony to Muslim women's will to play a role in the community life, a will which has survived to this day. Likewise in Central Asia, the presence of the Muslim women at the heart of the social order has manifested itself with astonishing vigour. They first served as informal religious preachers in atheistic Soviet era, preserving their faith in whatever way they could, and now after independence, act as leaders, both religious and political, without necessarily being recognized as such. Islam gradually took prominence in CARs society after Gorbachev's Glasnost, which relaxed the Soviet communist oppression towards religious belief and expression. This paper shall highlight the contribution of Central Asian Muslim women towards the revival and survival of their faith under the communist rule and then the post Independence period, and state response to this revival.*

*Keywords: Islam, Central Asia, Otines, Maktab, Soviet Period, Revival.*

## Introduction

Islam in Central Asia got glorified with the support from the state and prominently due to the work carried out by mystics. Uzbekistan for instance became an important Islamic centre for having produced the world reputed theologians - *al-Bukhari* and *at-Tirmizi*.

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Although the *ulema* had a dominating role in the society, the female clergy exerted great influence among women. They used to impart religious education to girls through *maktab* and *madrassa* system along with Persian and Arabic languages and acted as leaders in holding religious ceremonies among women. They also acted as counselors and mediators in processing disputes.

With the advent of Soviet rule in Central Asia, the traditional Muslim institutions got shattered thereby changing the traditional socio-cultural values. From its inception, the Soviet state was envisioned as a secular union of republics and in order to imprint this vision in Central Asia, the Bolsheviks (later known as the Communists) sponsored a socio-political campaign against the Muslims who overtly expressed their religious identity. Assault on legal religious institutions, such as *Shariat* courts, the *waqf* property (religious land endowments) and veiling were the foci of this campaign. The State positioned gender as a center of radical social change. According to it, if Islam was uprooted through unveiling and other means, the Soviet state as a secular union would have an uncontested ability to exercise power over its Central Asian subjects. During this campaign many mosques were closed and some clergy were arrested, exiled, or executed. An important outcome of this campaign was that some religious activities became formalized under state political control and required registration, while other religious activities took place mainly in domestic space. They could not be effectively persecuted or controlled by the state and therefore they became respected conduits of religious knowledge and practice for the local population.

However the Soviet policy towards Islam and Muslims was not static. They used to grant concessions to Muslims, only when they needed their support to face the Islamic world in their foreign affairs, otherwise repression against Islam continued to be its main policy. Islam was severely persecuted and its infrastructure almost totally destroyed. An organization called “Society of Godless Militants” composed of Jews and communists<sup>1</sup> used to conduct anti Islamic propaganda campaigns by developing communist values and convincing the public that their salvation lay on atheistic scientific progress. Also in order to establish credibility among its Muslim subjects, the State presented its own version of Islam. Some selected *Ulema* registered under Muslim Religious Boards, were given training in recognized educational institutions. These *red-ulema*<sup>2</sup> (as they were known) presented Soviet Union as a

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<sup>1</sup> Fanny Brayan, “Anti-Islamic propaganda 1925-35”, *Central Asian Survey*, no.1, (1986), 20

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*,

just state where all religious communities enjoyed equal rights which was of course contrary to existing reality.

### **Role of women in the Islamic revival:**

#### **a) Soviet Period**

In spite of all the drastic measures to uproot Islam from the minds and lives of people, it survived with its traditions and rituals in its original form through clandestine activities, mosques, so called unregistered *Ulema* and persistent activities of clerics who were able to thrive despite all constraints, not only because the population needed them to perform basic rites but also because they were kith & kin to the society. But one of the most important factors responsible for the survival of religion particularly among women during the Soviet rule, at community and *mohalla* level, was the underground activity of female religious figures called *Otin-Oyi*<sup>3</sup> which probably enhanced the resilience & attraction towards Islam. These Muslim women though secularly educated by the Communist party to participate in the construction of communism, did not part with the tradition of living in harmony with their faith and therefore used to perform their activities clandestinely. The *otyns* in the Soviet period seem to have come mostly or wholly from families of sufis, mullas, *seids* and *khojas*<sup>4</sup> and acquired their knowledge of ritual and the Qur'an from their mothers and grandmothers. They were sometimes referred to in the documentation as 'women mullahs' who would read or recite excerpts from the Qur'an and *mavluds* among women. Apart from their roles as practitioners of popular folk Islam, and the supervision and performance of rituals among women, their main job was the education of girls, and to convey some basic knowledge of Islamic customs to the upcoming generation. In the traditionally sedentary areas of Central Asia these much respected 'elder sisters' exerted some sort of social control exhorting the womenfolk to preserve their religion's age-old moral norms and observe such practices as pilgrimages to holy places. Known variously, depending on the area, as *otyn*, *otinchalar*, *atynbu* or *bibiotun*, they existed in every *mahalla* of every settlement<sup>5</sup>. These women were not qualified in the strict sense of the word, for they had undergone no official religious training and the occasional religious text that might have been saved was not sufficient to give them

<sup>3</sup> In vernacular Uzbek, An *Otin* is a female Muslim dignity meant for the welfare of women believers. Responsible for the education of women from birth to adulthood, they are in direct contact with the faithful and fulfill the same function as *ulemas*. In pre-communist era they provided religious instructions in traditional *maktabs* of girls.

<sup>4</sup> Descendants of the Arabs who conquered & Islamicised Central Asia or of those whom they converted to Islam.

<sup>5</sup> Habib Fathi, "Women Clerics of Central Asian Islam", *Central Asian Survey*, vol.16, no.1, London, (1997), 32-34.

any formal or extensive knowledge (in the past their predecessors studied in special *mektebs* for girls). Forced to lead a clandestine existence and with meager means at their disposal to fulfill their duties, the form of Islam they preserved, to quote one western scholar, was one of popular and oral traditions based on the transmission of prayers and rites they had learned by heart and recited without understanding. They took it upon themselves to transmit to their daughters at least a minimum of religious knowledge to play a decisive role in maintaining the tradition and also in safeguarding their faith. It was mostly in the *Mohallas* that they were active after they were deprived of *maktabs* for women. They usually performed their activities in homes where they used to conduct evening classes for imparting religious education particularly to young females.<sup>6</sup> A Soviet ethnographer even listed the *Bibiotun* (synonym for *otinoyi*) as a religious institution for young boys and girls alongside the Mosque, *Maktab* (Islamic Primary School), and *Mazar* (Muslim saint's tomb).<sup>7</sup>

Usually the future *otyn* would be carefully chosen from among seven or eight-year old girls and she would go through stages of preparation similar with that of boys from traditional clerical families, whom their elders destined to become *mullas*. Each *otyn* was responsible for the education of three to five girls, one of whom would usually be her own daughter and one of whom would have to marry within the *mahalla*. From the age of twenty these girls became apprentices, who participated in collective ceremonies, until at the age of forty, they might be allowed to practice as *otyns*.<sup>8</sup> The town of Uzgen (Kyrgystan) had fourteen female religious figures in the mid 1950s. In 1959 a mulla came from Kokand (Fergana, Uzbekistan) to Osh and set up three groups of women under the leadership of such women clergy, who met for daily and Friday prayers. In the Tatar ASSR<sup>9</sup>, in the immediate postwar period, the CARC (Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults) reported the existence of women mullas who led women's prayer services. During the *uraz*<sup>10</sup> in Tomsk in the 1970's, women were likewise reported to be acting as clergy, conducting small *iftars* and reading the Qur'an for groups of women.

Many *otines* have been mentioned who though received secular education but they learned Arabic and hence made their students able to read passages from the *Qur'aan* at a time when a great majority of Central Asian Muslims still could not. Zamira, for instance, a

<sup>6</sup> Habib Fathi, "Women Clerics of Central Asian Islam", *Central Asian Survey*, vol.16, no.1, London, (1997), 32-34.

<sup>7</sup> DAVID E. MERRELL, "Islam and Dispute Resolution in Central Asia: The Case of Women Muslim Leaders", *New Middle Eastern Studies*, no.1, (2011), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Yaacov Ro'i, "Islam in the Soviet Union-From World War II to Perestroika", (HURST & COMPANY, London, 2000), 343

<sup>9</sup> Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic.

<sup>10</sup> From Turkish *urug* meaning fast of Ramadan.

lady of 75 years was a member of the communist party but was initiated as an *Otin* at age of seven by her mother. She received secular education and later specialized in Iranian history. She learned Arabic and after introducing herself as *Otin* at maturity, she was able to introduce her students to written Arabic scripts and teach them to recite a few verses from the *Qur'an*. Similarly another woman called Maryam, a retired 55 year old Tatar woman (from Kazan) specialized in history of the Tartars of Kazan and thereby learned the use of Arabic alphabets enabling her to translate some verses of the *Qur'an* into modern Tatar.<sup>11</sup>

## b) Post Independence Period

Religion has become one of the major components of identity in post Independence Central Asia and religious activity is on the rise now, particularly in women's everyday *mahalla* life. Women try to learn and actualize Islam in deed and thought. Female preachers (*Otynes/ Otinchalar*)<sup>12</sup> voluntarily provide women and girls with religious training.<sup>13</sup> Although *otinchalar* perform functions among local women similar to those which imams do among men, they are not clerics or mullahs as neither the *otinchalar themselves* nor the members of local communities referred to them as such but they are equally important as mullahs and imams. In addition to a set of minimal qualifications like ability to recite the Qur'an, sufficient knowledge about performing a ritual prayer, and a reputation for reason and piety, some of them are familiar with Islamic doctrine, history, and Islamic law (*Shari'ah*) and become local religious leaders through promoting educational and ritual practice and providing social advice articulated in religious terms. *Otinchalar* lead local communities in three areas: teaching, religious practice and socio-religious advice. Those with a higher level of religious knowledge teach women at their home-schools. The acquired religious knowledge allows some of these women to critically assess their religious rights and their social context. But this critical assessment does not manifest itself in production of either clearly gendered or feminist discourses. It does help local women to evaluate their social environment in light of religious knowledge as a first step towards changing their environment, if they chose to do so.<sup>14</sup> Usually each *mahalla* has its own female preacher but sometimes two or three *mahallas*

<sup>11</sup> Fathi, "Women Clerics of Central Asian Islam", *Central Asian Survey*, vol.16, no.1, London, (1997), 36.

<sup>12</sup> A plural form of the word *otincha*, translated as "teacher" a term of self-reference used by the women in C.Asia.

<sup>13</sup> Feride Acar & Ayse Gunes-Ayata, "GENDER AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION-Women of Central Asia, the Caucasus and Turkey", (Boston, 1999), 239.

<sup>14</sup> Svetlana Peshkova, "Muslim Women Leaders in Post-Soviet Ferghana Valley", *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, vol.28, no.1, (University of New Hampshire, 2010), 7.

share one. Religious training in the *mahalla* is not compulsory but voluntary and free. In one of the *mahallas*, women gather once a week in the praying room of the administrative building which belongs to women only on Saturdays. Women are usually taught the Arabic alphabet and introduced to the *Qur'an*, to the fundamentals of *Shari'a* (Islamic law) and to Islamic morality and proper behavior. At both the national level and in the *mahallas*, female preachers are highly respected and consulted. In *mahalla* religious gatherings, after reading the *Qur'an*, women have conversations during which the preacher tells didactic stories about behavior according to Islam usually followed by exemplary cases taken by the audience from their own lives or from what they had heard. These gatherings usually end with a collective prayer, after which women extend their thanks to God. Hence religion in general and religious gatherings in particular have become an integral part of the lives of women, whether they are regular attendants at these gatherings or not. Having religious knowledge leads to the attainment of a new type of social respect and status. Uzbek women particularly try to learn Islam both at the women's sections of the medrese and from the female preachers of individual *mahallas* and then actualize it in deed and thought.<sup>15</sup>

In Uzbekistan, *otinoyilar* have emerged who promote Islamic reform and exert authority based on their greater Islamic learning rather than sacred lineages. They preach a pure Islam, pretending to follow only Qur'an and Hadith, refusing and opposing most of the traditional Uzbek rituals, the cult of saints and heterodox healing methods. In the Ferghana valley of Uzbekistan, *otinoyilar* interpret the *Qur'an*, *Hadith* and the Islamic law and give advice based on their interpretations.<sup>16</sup> Feruza-opa, for instance, was described by some of her students as "the one who brings Islamic knowledge and spiritual peace into the hearts of the believers." Her other students called her a "people's professor." As she said, she taught Islam to some local women and occasionally children. Some local men also came by periodically to get her advice. In her words, her emphasis was on "Muslim" and "Islamic" living, which heavily depended on one's religious education and ritual prayer. For Feruza-opa and women like her, individual and societal transformation through religious education was a slow process beginning with sharing of (religious) knowledge. These women were educated at the Soviet secular schools and had different levels of religious education acquired through family members, home-schools and self-education. Through this sharing at religious ceremonies or during religious lessons they actively engaged in moral renewal in the Valley. They led others

<sup>15</sup> Feride Acar & Ayse Gunes-Ayata, "GENDER AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION-Women of Central Asia, the Caucasus and Turkey", (Boston, 1999), 239-40.

<sup>16</sup> Svetlana Peshkova, "Otinchalar in the Ferghana Valley: Islam, Gender and Power", (Dissertation, Syracuse University, 2006).

towards an ethical ideal of a moral community that knows the difference between evil and good deeds – that “knows Islam.”<sup>17</sup> Feruza-opa stressed the transformative value of education:

*“Our people are ovam hulq (uneducated people). One needs to change people slowly. Otinchalar should also do it slowly, not fast. I believe that people should read the Qur’an more. Those who read will change themselves... We are yet to learn our religion. My mahallah (neighborhood), my students - they do not do and do not allow others to do gnoh (bad/evil deeds) because they know Islam. Mullahs (male religious leaders) also should not read [religious texts] for themselves; they should read for and with the people.... One needs to share what God gives you. If it is illim (knowledge, Ar. ‘ilm) you should share it too. What we can and must do is to tell people about Islam, to share knowledge, to educate each other and ovam hulq slowly”<sup>18</sup>*

Feruza-opa reported that the most important Imam in one city in the Valley called on her several times for advice on religious matters. Many local men also sought blessings and advice from *otinchalar*. Fatima-hon, another *otincha*, insisted on using the Qur'an as the foundation of her teaching rather than accepting the opinions of others such as formal religious leaders as normative:

*“Some say “My relatives did this.... My dad was a mullah, he did that...” I say, God will not care about it. You need to do things God’s way.... I am trying to teach people what is right and good, based on what is in the Qur’an”<sup>19</sup>*

Thus, the *otinchalar’s* religious knowledge enables their and their students to evaluate and when necessary, also challenge the forms of orthodoxy produced by male religious leaders. These women have generated their own discourses about being “right and good” Muslims. These differing discourses on how to feel and act Muslim are contested among *otinchalar* and between themselves and other formal religious leaders. The latter also criticize *otinchalar’s* educational and religious practices as wasteful and un-Islamic. However there are other formal religious leaders, who consult with some local *otinchalar* on matters of Islamic knowledge. As reservoirs of religious knowledge, *otinchalar* are often asked for advice on social and familial matters.

In southern Kyrgystan, *mahalla* women’s councils also help process disputes. In one region of southern Kyrgyzstan the chair of all women’s councils was a hajji (one who has

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<sup>17</sup> opcit.,

<sup>18</sup> Interviewed in 2002.

<sup>19</sup> Interviewed in 2003.

performed the pilgrimage to Mecca) who gives religious and customary advice to women and speaks with husbands who abuse and neglect their wives.<sup>20</sup> Diloram Khamrakulova, for instance, runs a private religious school or *hujeer* at her home in Chekabad village, Aravan District, Osh Oblast<sup>21</sup> (South Kyrgyzstan). Women come to her to learn more about Islam, practice reciting Qur'an and prayers from the heart and observe Islamic rites and traditions in a small and private setting. Khamrakulova told Central Asia Online:

*“Forty girls and women aged 10-60 have come to my home to gain some knowledge of Islam. They are interested, among other things, in what is needed for a person to make a hajj to Makkah or how to keep correctly the Orozo fast during the holy month of Ramadan.”*

Although Khamrakulova is not a religious school graduate herself, she decided after retirement to devote her free time to women's religious education, offering women a place to meet and discuss their faith. As women in southern Kyrgyzstan have shown an increasingly strong interest in Islam and Islamic education, *hujeeers* have been growing in popularity. Kyrgyz Women Peacemakers' Network (KWPN), with UN support in July conducted research on the increasing number of *hujeeers* in the south, estimating that the number of such schools has grown from fewer than 10 to several dozen within the past year. KWPN confirmed an increase in the trend of women seeking to strengthen their knowledge of Islam.<sup>22</sup>

At present the women clerics have been allowed by the state to teach in some mosques and also in some newly formed madrassas like in Kokand and Bukhara (Uzbekistan).<sup>23</sup> The *Otines* have been called upon by the Religious Board to supervise young girls, adolescent girls and adult women as well in religious affairs. Since the *Otines* are not able enough to teach the modern religious education, a new group of women Islamists have taken over, though few in number. They are trained in the reciting of the Qur'an at Mecca. Their ability to recite the Qur'an with *tajweed* attract the common people. The *Otines* go to them and seek their help in learning the *tajweed*. So a great zeal among the young generation of women is observed for learning the *tajweed* and *tafsir* of Qur'an.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> DAVID E. MERRELL, "Islam and Dispute Resolution in Central Asia: The Case of Women Muslim Leaders", *New Middle Eastern Studies*, no.1, (2011), 3-4.

<sup>21</sup> Administrative region within larger Union Republics.

<sup>22</sup> [www.centralasiaonline.com](http://www.centralasiaonline.com)

<sup>23</sup> New Straight Times, Kawalum Pur, April 13, (1993).

<sup>24</sup> Asif Jeelani, "West Asia, Nayee Azadi Nayai Challenge", Delhi, 1995, 38.

## Religious Education and Revival Through *Medrese*<sup>25</sup> and Literature

In the Kokaldesh Medrese of Tashkent which reopened in 1990, there's a women's section which consisted of five groups in three different grades. The women there, were predominantly secondary school graduates and most of them aged sixteen or seventeen. The course of education at the *medrese* is usually four years. There are classes five days a week from 2 to 5 p.m. At this *medrese* unlike others, the Arabic language was taught and books were read in the original as well as from translations till 1995. The graduates of the *medrese* receive diplomas or certificates and become *mudarrisa* who could become religious teachers at secondary schools, translators or imams with the permission of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (*Diniy Nazarat*) and could also call people to Islam.

Another *medrese* in Tashkent, the Yengi Medrese or Ahmadcan Kari Medrese, also provides free and voluntary education for men and women and is supported by a waqf. It teaches ritual prayers and the observance of other religious practices as well, moral (*ahlaki*) and educational (*maarif*) issues, the lives of the prophets, the fundamentals of *Shari'a* and call people to Islam.

Books also complement religious education, popularly read by both men and women. These come under four categories:

- (i) Books which teach the Muslim religion, its rules and requirements, such as *Musulmonchilikdan Ilk Caboklar* (First lessons from Muslimhood), *Islam Dini Nima?* (What is Islam?).
- (ii) Books specifically written for women such as *Akhlu Ayal* (Easy Women), *Hotun* (Well-behaved Women) and *Oila* (Family).
- (iii) General books such as *Ozbek Halki Etnografias* (Ethnography of the Uzbek people), *Ozbek Udumlari* (Uzbek customs and traditions).
- (iv) Books specific to women that were written in the Soviet period to emphasise the ideas of Marx and Lenin about women's emancipation but are criticized now.

The religious books mentioned above are widely read by the *mahalla* members especially by women and constitute the basis of discussions in *mahalla* gatherings. Although women interpret differently the level of knowledge that such books reveal, yet most of them approve the necessity of their presence, seeing them as one of the basic needs of Muslims who were deprived of proper religious knowledge under Soviet rule for so long.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> A school with a frequently but not absolutely religious focus.

<sup>26</sup> Feride Acar & Ayse Gunes-Ayata, "GENDER AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION-Women of Central Asia, the Caucasus and Turkey", (Boston, 1999), 241-46.

### **Islamic revival during the Perestroika<sup>27</sup>:**

There is a unanimous consensus in the literature that Central Asia started experiencing religious resurgence since the Glasnost, which accelerated after independence.<sup>28</sup> During the *Perestroika* (1980s) Central Asians would identify themselves as Muslim since they were born into a Muslim family, and were adhering to the cultural rituals such as the Islamic wedding ceremony and funeral. They would only be familiar with a few prayers, and not observing the fast or daily prescribed prayers was not considered a great fault<sup>29</sup>. Islam became more a marker of cultural and ethnic identity than an active spiritual commitment for most Central Asians. The chief manifestations of allegiance to the faith were circumcision, marriage and burial. Also, there was widespread observance of pilgrimages to the graves of holy men. In popular understanding such practices were considered to be in keeping with Muslim belief, but in fact were syncretic accretions. Knowledge of Islamic doctrine, of prayers, and even of the basic Muslim profession of faith (*Kalimah*) was limited to a small number of predominantly elderly individuals. However in the 1980s only, there came an Islamic resurgence, the impetus for which came from two directions. First was a revivalist movement located mainly in rural areas of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, particularly the Fergana valley, characterised by scholastic conservatism. Its disciples were harassed and spasmodically punished by the state authorities. Many of its disciples included clerics from the official Muslim establishment. Secondly some of the younger followers began to call for an active struggle to cleanse society of its impurities including such heretical practices as pilgrimages to the saints of holy men. Hence a bitter schism opened up between the purists (known as *mujaddidiyya* or renewers) and the conservatives<sup>30</sup>. The former were dubbed 'Wahhabis' first by their opponents and then more generally in the Soviet press, thereby insinuating that there was a treasonous link to a foreign power. Soviet sources started believing that *wahhabis* were behind all anti-soviet fundamentalist movements. Religious scholars of Iran were also blamed in particular for sending religious literature to the Central Asian republics for spreading the

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<sup>27</sup> The literal meaning of perestroika is "restructuring", referring to the restructuring of the Soviet political and economic system. Perestroika is often argued to be the cause of the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

<sup>28</sup> Eren Tatari and Renat Shaykhtudinov, "State Response to Religious Revivalism in Post-Soviet Central Asia", *European Journal of Economic and Political Studies*, vol.3, no.2, 6.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Eren Murat Tasar, "The state's Conceptualization of Islam in Soviet Central Asia, 1954-64", *Central Asian Survey*, Vol.20, No. 3, (2004), 2.

Islamic faith among non-believers as well. It was also affirmed that the electronic media of Iran propagated anti-soviet and pro-Islamic ideology.

### **State response to the revival**

Parallel to this development was the government's policy to adopt a conciliatory attitude towards the religious establishments during the period of *perestroika* (the second half of the 1980s) in response to two quite different concerns viz the perception of Islam as a potential menace which was to some extent inspired by the writings of western scholars, who frequently stressed that the rapid demographic growth of the Soviet Muslim population would endanger the stability of the Soviet Union and secondly the urgent need to improve economic performance, as the state was suffering a systemic crisis and blame was largely laid on human failings particularly on corruption, fraud and other malpractices. Therefore in an attempt to change the moral climate, religious leaders were coopted to help fight these social ills. Now, instead of increased repression, there was an effort to work with the official Muslim institutions to promote 'Central Asian' orthodoxy<sup>31</sup>. Much emphasis was placed on the historic tradition of Islam in the region. Islam began to be presented in a positive light, with much emphasis on its ethical values. Many mosques were opened (more in 1989-91 than at any time in the previous seven decades) and there was a dramatic rise in the availability of religious literature and facilities for the study of the Quran. This policy of accommodation towards Islam was further marked by the promotion of younger men (several in their early thirties) to leading positions in the official Muslim institutions. These included Muhammad Sadyk, Akbar Turajonzade, Ratbek Nysanbai-uly and Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah<sup>32</sup>. Products of the postwar period, they were loyal Soviet citizens, but also devout Muslims. They were firmly committed to the twin aims of increasing knowledge and practice of Islam among the population at large, and also to giving the faith a greater public role in society. This generation of Muslim leaders did not see a possible contradiction between their goals and those of the secular authorities. Rather, they seized the opportunity to appropriate the space that had been opened up by the change in official attitudes in order to pursue their own agendas. Moreover like the '*Wahhabis*', one of their priorities was the promotion of purist Islam, cleansed of the superstition and syncretic accretions that characterised the religious practice of the majority of the population. Thus, the interests of members of the official Muslim hierarchy and of the

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<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Shireen Akhiner, "The Politicization of Islam in Post Soviet Central Asia", *Central Asian Survey, Religion, State & Society*, Vol.31, No. 2, (2003), 3.

unofficial '*Wahhabis*' converged. Working within different organisational frameworks, their efforts were often complementary. The result of this overt government support was that the Muslim official hierarchy gained greater public visibility, as well as increased influence in society. Yet any form of collaboration was still kept secret, since the government regarded the '*Wahhabis*' with suspicion and hostility.<sup>33</sup>

In Tajikistan, the head of the official Muslim administration Qazi Turajonzade made an energetic attempt to reintroduce a Muslim discourse into public life. His aim was not to create an Islamic state (since so few Tajiks had any real knowledge of the faith) but to train the teachers and clerics who could educate the masses. Working within the framework of Soviet law, he founded an Islamic Institute in Dushanbe (1990). He also succeeded in publishing numerous booklets on Islam and opening over a hundred community mosques. It was, too, in Tajikistan that the first (and to date only) Islamic political party, the Islamic Rebirth Party (IRP) was established in Central Asia. Thus, on the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union, in this one republic, Islam was not only beginning to play a significant role in public life but was also operating with a degree of autonomy that was not to be found elsewhere in the region.

## Conclusion

Though it's difficult to judge the overall impact of the female clerics and other revivalist groups on society at large, be they purists or conservatives, they are said to have attracted masses of followers and generated a new interest in Islamic thought. The religious revival and survival by *Otines*, though was generally welcomed by the public at large, but there was too little time for any actual transformation to take place. By the end of the Soviet era there was widespread consensus that now Islam must play a greater role in society, but there was no clear concept as to what that role should be. Therefore for the overwhelming majority of the population, Islam was still primarily understood and observed in terms of tradition and symbol. The change in government policy and the growing influence of official and unofficial Muslim organisations were also very tentative and lasted from the late 1980's to the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991.

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