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كاتب العام للرابطة الإسلامية العالمية - دارها

لرطب والمصاحف

RUSSIAN MUSLIMS: A REPORT

On the invitation of the University of Wisconsin and the support of Dr. Abdullah Naseef, I attended the Third International Conference on Central Asia, held at Madison, Wisconsin, USA between April 27 - 30, 1988.

Altogether fifty scholars and experts on Central Asia from various parts of the world attended the Conference. According to the Chief Organizer of the Conference, Dr. Kemal H. Karpat, the noted Turkish-American scholar, it was the first time that such a Conference dealing with Muslims in Central Asia had been organized in the United States where a great deal of interest is taken in Soviet Russia, but not necessarily in the Soviet Muslim Republics. It is European scholarship that has shown more sustained and focused interest in Muslim affairs in the Soviet East.

Dr. Kemal is now determined to make American academia more interested and involved in Muslim Central Asia.

Another notable feature of the Madison Conference was the presence of more than a dozen Soviet Muslim scholars from the various Soviet Muslim Republics. These scholars, perhaps for the first time, were allowed to participate in such numbers in a Conference outside Soviet Russia, and especially in America, without any apparent Russian escort. Included in the group were three women scholars. This event was credited in the Conference to the concerted efforts of Dr. Kemal Karpat.

The Soviet participants presented written papers on different aspects of Muslim life in Central Asia. Two of them were quite fluent in Arabic, three others spoke communicable English. All of them were fluent in Russian and in one or more of their ethnic languages. All of them were also able to communicate in Turkish.

So communication was no problem.

Soon after the first day, seven of the Soviets expressed a desire to have copies of the Holy Qur'an. Since I did not have with me that many copies of the Holy Book in Madison, I promised to arrange to mail them on my return to Jeddah. But they emphasized that foreign mail has a difficult time with the censors in Moscow. Usually, published material from abroad is not delivered to the addressees. It is diverted instead to the Union Library in Moscow, where it lies buried and out of reach.

I therefore arranged through a source in New York for the Soviet delegates to receive copies of the Holy Book prior to their departure to Moscow from there on May 6.

I mentioned above that the Soviet Muslim delegates were unescorted. But I must also note that among themselves they were well-organized, disciplined and restrained, especially in public appearances. The leader of the group, either appointed by Moscow or elected among themselves, I never found out, was Professor Oktay Efendiev of the Moscow Oriental Institute. He spoke, besides Russian and other local languages, Arabic and English fairly well. He appeared to be a serious scholar, but kept a trifle aloof from the other Russian Muslims and was even more reserved in public. Privately, I had a long talk with him about his work and the state of scholarship in the field in the USSR.

The other members of the delegation appeared very close and cordial among themselves. They mostly moved around in small groups. In any discussion or conversation where more than one of them was present, there was noticeable a certain reserve. This may be due to their inexperience of such international gatherings. Or it may be that there was among them an official overseer who would be required to report on the trip on their return to Moscow.

However, in one to one meetings I found them very open, warm and friendly.

Fortunately, many of the Soviet Muslim scholars were already familiar with the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs. Some had acquired through visiting non-Soviet scholars earlier issues of the Journal Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs (JIMMA). They were very anxious to obtain more recent issues. In fact, they grabbed whatever copies of the Journal I had with me, which were not too many. I have subsequently arranged for more copies to be mailed to all of them from the London office, from where, I am told, mailings to USSR are not subject to the same stringent scrutiny as from elsewhere, especially Saudi Arabia.

All the recipients of the Journal promised to send us their comments and contributions. One scholar right there and then gave two articles to be published in the Journal.

Since over the years the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs has devoted a great deal of attention to Soviet Muslims and since the Journal from quite early in its career has had access to several Russian scholars and institutes, it was not difficult to develop a rapport with the Soviet Muslim delegation.

From what I gathered in private conversations with them and from the presentations and discussions in the conference, I put down below in a very simplified way the state of Islam and Muslims in the USSR today.

THE STATE OF ISLAM - MUSLIMS IN RUSSIA TODAY

Caution: The following is a very simplified statement of current trends in USSR.

Before the October Revolution of 1917 in Czarist Russia, different national and ethnic groups among Muslims, although conscious of their ethnicity and nationality, still emphasized and held primary their Islamic identity. Like Muslims elsewhere in that period, they fought among themselves, pursued their group interests, tried to overwhelm and overpower each other whenever possible, took pride in their language and culture, were fiercely conscious of being Tatar, Uzbek, Azeri and whatever, but when it came to an encounter with non-Muslims (or white Russians in this particular case) they were Muslims first and Muslims last. They also continued to cohabit and live together in each other's territories and domains.

The first thing that the Russian Communists did was to undermine this Islam or Ummah-consciousness. They divided the whole Muslim area into ethnic republics. So the territorial link among Muslims was severed. Now the Azeris had their own state, the Tatars their own and so on.

Along with this came the massive anti-religion campaigns, vigorously organized from Moscow.

These two developments together had a very negative influence on religious consciousness of the Central Asian Muslims. They, for all practical purposes destroyed Islam as religion in the USSR. It is self-deceiving to think otherwise.

However, since over the centuries, starting from the 7th C C.E, the culture of these Turkish people had also been Islamized, when Islam as a religion was destroyed, Islam as a culture survived. So that in all these Muslim republics, Muslims continued to adhere to customs, social traits, birth, marriage and death rites and dress etc in tune with their culture, more as a matter of habit than as a conscious religious requirement.

When European scholarship discovered Muslim Central Asia, desperate by this time to find evidence of the failure of Soviet Communism, they seized upon these remnants of Islamic culture among Soviet Muslims, and cried out triumphantly that the Communist god had failed; Islam has survived in Central Asia. At best this was a half-truth. But, it made the capitalist West happy, and it put the Muslim world into sleep - the sleep of complacency. Alhamdulillah, the Muslim world said, Islam thrives in Central Asia. Islam actually was breathing its last in Central Asia.

There is no need to go into intervening history here. We are all familiar with developments starting in the 1970s to the present. All that needs to be said here is that without any action on the part of the Muslim world, things have started changing in Central Asia.

The shortsighted and brutal treatment by the white Russian establishment of its non-white ethnic minorities created resentment and a desire to return to their own roots. In this rebellion among Muslims, cultural Islam became the rallying point. Up to the 1970s only older people in their sixties and seventies had some commitment to religious ritual and were particular about Islamic culture. Among the young Islam as religion was already history and Islam as culture an old and conservative tradition, a hold-back from the past.

With the re-birth of national self-consciousness especially in the 1970s, these remnants of Islamic culture

suddenly gained significance. They began to appear as an indispensable ingredient of their self-definition. The young especially looked into their past and wanted to know more about how their ancestors had lived, what did they cherish and uphold; and they became determined to revive these historical symbols in order to emphasize their distinct roots and distinguish themselves from the white Russians.

I repeat. This awakening is not a religious awakening. It is not the revival of Islam as religion. It is the revival of ethnicity, of nationality, of asabiyya.

But in Central Asia ethnicity, nationality and asabiyya all trace back somehow or the other to Islam. To be a Turk is to be a Muslim is to be possessor of a Book, a code etc.

This is where our opportunity lies.

With glasnost or the opening up of Russia this ethnic consciousness has come out quite powerfully in the open. In the presentation of Sulaimanov, a young Uzbek poet in the Conference, I could distinctly detect an intense and focused pan-Turkism. I discussed this with many scholars and they agreed.

So what the various Muslim groups in Soviet Russia want today is : to be able to live freely as Uzbeks, Tatars, Azeris etc. They wish to discover their national roots, read their history and take pride in it, think, write and speak about their past and their problems in their own languages and to revive their ethnic pride and identity.

If glasnost continues, this movement is likely to grow too and become a force. It will assert itself and wrest concessions from the Soviet Center. It has the sanction of the spirit of the time and may become irresistible.

But if it succeeds, it will be a consolidation not of Islam, but of Muslim ethnicity (Muslim because ingredients of Islam are mixed up with the ethnic culture:) not consciously Muslim, but consciously Uzbek, Tatar etc.

It may move beyond the narrow ethnic boundaries of Uzbek, Tatar etc. and become focused on Turkishness, develop Turkic pride Turkic identity and acquire a more pronounced Turkic personality. But this again would be cultural Islam, because as noted above Turkish culture overall is permeated with Islamic symbolism. It would be self-conscious Turkism not self-conscious Islamism.

So, if we in the Muslim world, are interested in ensuring that the current resurgence in the Soviet East should bring our brothers back into the fold of Islam we have to take the above analysis seriously and plan accordingly.

For this a few initial steps are suggested below:

SUGGESTIONS : GENERAL

1. The Rabita should as its headquarters in Makkah form a Central Asian Committee that would monitor developments in Central Asia on a daily basis. It should have a think-tank that formulates policies and strategies of Islamic action in that region. etc etc.
2. The Rabita should send at least two goodwill delegations to Soviet Russia annually. Under present circumstances, this has become very possible.
3. Rabita should invite more Soviet Muslims for its seminars and conferences. In these invitations the focus should

Shift from the various Spiritual Boards and Directorates to Soviet Academies and Institutes. This is where the action now is. The Spiritual Boards represent only a holding action. Their dynamism and man-power resources are quite restricted. Their influence inside and abroad is limited. Soviet Muslims scholars and young students are now allowed to travel abroad. They know what they want, and, more importantly, they know how it get it. They are more willing to take risks and face challenges.

The Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs has an extensive list of such individuals and organizations and it can obtain more. This information would be placed at the disposal of the Rabita.

4. For the Hajj rites too the Rabita should encourage a wider participation of Soviet Muslims from different backgrounds. For this it should make direct contact over and above those through the Spiritual Boards.

#### SPECIFIC

1. Although the faces of many Soviet Muslim delegates to the Madison Conference lit up at the mention of Makkah and Madina, one of them Professor Gasum Mahmedoglu Kerimov of the Moscow Oriental Institute expressed an open desire to participate in the Hajj this year. He preferred for obvious reasons that the invitation should be primarily for the annual Rabita seminar that is organized at the time of the Hajj. In the academic setting in Moscow an invitation to a seminar would sit well with the authorities and is more likely to be approved.

I have already submitted the details of this to the Secretary-General.



2. Further, it is my recommendation that the Rabita should also send out a Hajj invitation for this year to Dr. Kemal Karpat, Professor and Head, Dept of History, University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA, whose name has been mentioned earlier in this report. Dr. Karpat is a Rumanian born Turkish Muslim who is now domiciled in the US and who is perhaps the most distinguished Muslim scholar with international repute in the United States. His family is still in Rumania and he has close contacts in many countries of Eastern Europe and of course in Turkey. Of late Dr. Karpat has shown signs of a deep commitment to Muslim causes. He is at present also actively involved in the situation of Bulgarian Muslims. His coming to the Hajj would, I feel, reinforce these sentiments in him and also make available to the Rabita a very valuable source of contact and influence in Muslim communities in Eastern Europe.
  
3. Through consultation with Dr. Karpat and others the Rabita should setup immediately a network for distribution of the Holy Qur'an in Eastern Europe and the Soviet East.

I wish to keep this report brief. Longer reports tend to end up in some closed file somewhere. I have more suggestions that I would be able to present once a Central Asian Committee is formed and action is contemplated.

#### CONCLUSION

The estimated population of Soviet Central Asia is close to 50 million and growing. This is a very significant number and it needs the prompt and focused attention of the Muslim world. At the moment it is passing through a critical period in its historical development. A window of opportunity has opened up. For how long, nobody knows. If this opportunity is lost then, Allah forbid, we may have to delete this group of 50 million from active membership in the Ummat-al-Islam.

I attach a list of the names of the Soviet Muslim participants in the Madison Conference.

Respectfully submitted.

Syed Z. Abedin.

Encl:  
List of names of Soviet Muslim  
Delegates to the Madison Con-  
ference on Central Asia.

LIST OF SOVIET MUSLIM PARTICIPANTS IN THE  
THIRD INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE HELD AT  
MADISON, WISC. APRIL 27 - 30, 1988.

1. Tursun Sultanov  
Leningrad,  
Institute of Oriental/ Studies,  
USSR
2. Akhror Mukhtarov  
Tadjik Academy of Science,  
USSR
3. Roziia Galieвна Mukminova  
Inst. of History, Tashkent,  
USSR
4. Eldar Namazov  
Inst. of History, Baku,  
USSR
5. Rauf Huseinov  
Inst. of History, Baku,  
USSR
6. Hasan A. Guliev  
Inst. of History, Baku,  
USSR
7. Arif A. Abbasov  
Inst. of History, Baku,  
USSR
8. Y.G. Abdullin  
Academy of Sciences, Kazan,  
USSR
9. R.A. Ubadullaeva  
Inst. of History, Tashkent,  
USSR
10. Oktay Efendiev  
Oriental Inst., Moscow,  
USSR
11. Gasum Mamedoglu Kerimov  
Oriental Inst., Moscow,  
USSR
12. Abrar Gibadullowich Karimullin  
Academy of Science, Kazan,  
USSR
13. Karaeva Asiyat Ismailovna  
Cerkessk,  
USSR