

Soviet Strategy and Islam

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Foreword

To the great regret of the rest of us, one of the co-authors of this book has not lived to see it in print. Professor Alexandre Bennigsen died in Paris in early June 1988. His loss is deeply felt not only by his colleagues and associates, but by the entire scholarly community concerned with issues relating to Islam in the Soviet Empire and Soviet policies toward the Muslim world. Fortunately during the final months of his extraordinarily productive life, Alexandre Bennigsen was able to follow the process of *perestroika* that had begun under Mikhail Gorbachev and to benefit from the policy of *glasnost'* which has resulted in remarkable revelations about the lives and attitudes of Soviet Muslims. Much of this information has substantiated and given further weight to some of the judgements Professor Bennigsen included in sections of this book that are primarily his work. He expressed the view before his death that while the Gorbachev era opens up new horizons for the rapidly increasing Muslim population of the Soviet Empire it also confronts the leadership in Moscow with new challenges. He concluded that there is little likelihood that the Soviets' revised Islamic strategy will differ in *its fundamental aims* from that they have followed for the past 70 years. We all share that view.

Paul B. Henze
George Tanham
S. Enders Wimbush
July 1988

This book examines the origins, evolution and current operations of one of the most influential Soviet tactics for enhancing influence and prestige in the Muslim world; the use of the official Soviet Islamic establishment as a channel for conveying Soviet propaganda and developing a network of reliable contacts among Muslim élites in the conservative Islamic states, especially in the strategic Persian Gulf region. The book demonstrates how the Soviets utilise 'Islamic Strategy' in situations where other penetration and manipulation techniques are difficult to employ. Marx had little to say about the Muslim world, and most of what he said was negative, and provided no basis for Soviet strategy, which has developed in terms of Russian great-power interests from the time of Lenin and Stalin.

Using the official Islamic establishment in the USSR as a tool, the Kremlin began broadening contacts in the wake of World War II. Krushchev expanded them. Under Brezhnev the strategy became more flexible and the Soviet Islamic establishment more energetic. Although involvement in Afghanistan has been awkward for Moscow and it has suffered a good deal of embarrassment, Brezhnev's successors have not abandoned the basic objective of creating a favourable image of the USSR among Muslims everywhere, but especially in key countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. The second part of the book includes case studies that demonstrate how consistent Soviet interest in the Islamic world has been from the 1900s onward. It concludes with recommendations that US policy-makers consider Islamic issues in a broader context than the narrow Arab-Israeli regionalism that has dominated so much recent analysis of Muslim world developments.

For a note on the authors, please see the back flap