SURVEY OF ARAB AFFAIRS
A periodic supplement to Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints

SAA:29 17 Av 5752 / 16 August 1992

A SPECIAL REPORT

RETURN TO THE SOURCE: THE ISLAMIC REPUBLICS OF CENTRAL ASIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Raphael Israeli

Introductory Questions / The Stakes and the Alternatives / The Iranian-Turkish Competition / The Arab-Iranian Contest / The Arabs and Israel / Conclusions and Consequences

Introductory Questions

The present resurgence of the Muslim nations of Central Asia and the Caucasus, following the dismantling of the Soviet Union, has raised the question of the future course that these emerging states are likely to pursue. One wonders whether their long integration into Russian, and then Soviet, culture has endowed them with a European (though totalitarian) political culture, or rather, as soon as the yoke of their alien rulers is shaken off, they are likely to revert to their Islamic wellspring. Judging from the experience of other Islamic societies that have undergone "revolutions" of all sorts (e.g., the Arab world, and more recently Afghanistan) or a process of modernization under European aegis (e.g., Algeria, Sudan, and much of the Arab world), the newly-emerging Central Asian nations may very well be trekking their way back to the heart of the Islamic world. Is this process tenable and sustainable in light of the struggles in the Middle East between various trends of thought which have been attempting to sway these new nations into their respective orbits?

The new states of Central Asia are looking for models to follow. On the one hand, they look up to Turkey, which is ethnically and linguistically close to them (with the exception of the Tajiks who are Iranian), as an example of a secular-minded Islamic country developing in close collaboration with the West. On the other hand, the fiery model of Islamic Revolution in Iran, which has proceeded in spite of the West, carries a tremendous appeal in Muslim fundamentalist circles. Which course are these new nations likely to follow?

In the wake of the American-led coalition's victory in the Gulf, and the helplessness of the Commonwealth of Independent States (C.I.S.) in the face of the crystallizing uni-polar world, will these new countries inexorably fall into the American orbit, in order to obtain the assistance they desperately need for development, or will they emulate the independent course of Muslim fundamentalists who have been at odds with, and critical of, the West?

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Executive Editor; Mordechai Abir and Raphael Israeli, Contributing Editors. 13 Tel-Hai St., Jerusalem, 92107, Israel; Tel. 02-619281, Fax 972-2-619112. ISSN: 0334-4096.

The new horizons opened to these countries are conditioned not only by the existence, in their immediate vicinity, of fundamentalist Iran, but also by the recent victory of the Mujahidin in nearby Afghanistan, which has also emerged from a long struggle with and a virulent challenge to the Soviet ideological and military machine. Afghanistan has common borders with some of these new republics, and it maintained strong informal links with certain Muslim elements in them during all those years of conflict with Moscow. Will the common experience of the Afghans and the Central Asians, in addition to their religious and ethnic attachments, permit the spill-over of the new mood in Kabul into its adjoining neighbors?

Geo-political factors also play their role in the newly-emerging Islamic republics. Iran borders Azerbaijan as well as the Azeri enclave of Nakhichevan within Armenia. From Iran to Ashkhabad, the capital of Turkemenistan, only 40 kilometers separate the two countries. Afghanistan has common borders not only with Turkemenistan, but also with pivotal Uzbekistan and problematic Tajikistan. Because Afghanistan also borders on Iran, it provides the only territorial continuum between various contenders in the Middle East for an access into the land-mass of Central Asia. Iran also borders on the Caspian Sea, which gives it a unique position of naval access to Azerbaijan, as well as a sea-route to Turkemenistan and Kazakhstan further to the north. The much-talked-about Pan-Turkic Alliance centered on Turkey may therefore be easily balanced by the Caspian Alliance boosted by Iran, or a fundamentalist alliance bringing together Iran and Afghanistan in immediate territorial proximity with the rest of Central Asia. Which of those will prevail?

Not all countries of Central Asia carry the same weight. Kazakhstan, the largest of them in territory, has a population of about 16.5 million, but a sizeable portion are neither Kazakh nor Muslim. They are Russian and European-origin settlers who have made their impact on the cultural and economic life of the country over the past decades. The Kazakhs constitute no more than 40 percent of the population, while the rest are Russians and Muslim non-Kazakhs. Kazakhstan is also the only place in Central Asia sheltering an arsenal of nuclear missiles and space-program facilities which increase its strategic value. Recent discoveries of oil make it the prey of various eager Western developers.

Uzbekistan, the most densely-populated republic (close to 20 million), is also, by far, the most anchored in Islamic history and symbolism. Its great Islamic centers of Tashkent, Samarkand and Bukhara have no rival in Central Asia. Its population is over 70 percent Uzbek, which lends it long-term ethnic stability. It used to be the major cotton producer of the Soviet Union, but due to long years of irrational exploitation of those resources, it suffers from severe land and water pollution.

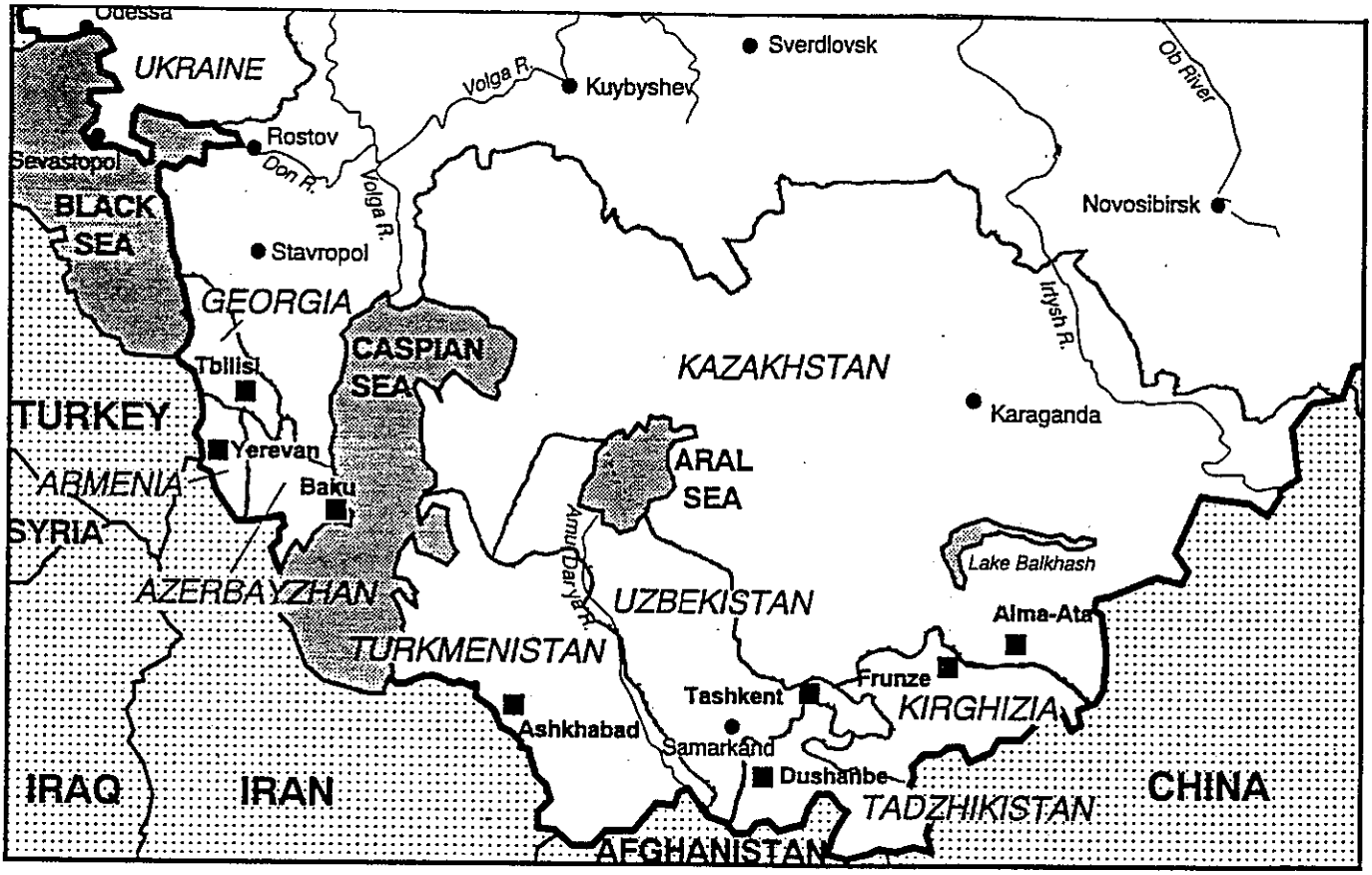
Kyrgystan, Tajikistan and Turkemenistan are poor, and their populations do not exceed 4-5 million each. However, while the Tajiks are ethnically and linguistically Iranian, the others are Turkic. In all three, the indigenous population constitutes more than half the total, which contributes to their ethnic uniformity and stability, in spite of the far from negligible minorities in their midst. Azerbaijan is quite another problem: it is Turkic like most of the rest, but its population is Shi'ite, unlike all the rest. It has a population of some 8 million and substantial production of oil, but it is plagued by internal religio-ethnic strife of major proportions. The Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian enclave in Azeri territory, counters the Azeri enclave of Nakhichevan in Armenian territory. What is more, since most Azeris live in northern Iran, the ethnic affinities on both sides of the Iranian border pose a serious threat to Iran's stability and already conjure up a "greater Azerbaijan" concept that can only be unsettling for Teheran.

In this maze of ethnic, religious, linguistic, factional, communal and economic diversity, strife is almost inevitable. In their orientation towards the Middle East, which of these elements are likely to determine the fate of the emerging new states? If ethnicity and language prevail, then Turkey will lead the competition; if religion and radicalism gain primacy, then Iran might be better positioned; but if economic development and free enterprise cut through all these other leanings, then perhaps large money-holders, like Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, might play a preponderant role.

The Stakes and the Alternatives

Three distinct stages may be seen in the dismantling of the Soviet Union. Like the layers of an onion, the outermost countries peeled off first, beginning with Eastern Europe and Afghanistan, which did not belong to the Soviet Union but were part of its politico-military empire. Then the empire itself dissolved when its constituting republics, including six Islamic republics, peeled off, resulting in the loose and temporary confederation of the C.I.S. Now the turn of the Russian Federation has come, with Tatars, Ingosh and others, Muslims and non-Muslims, seeking self-determination in order to survive in the emerging political chaos.

THE ISLAMIC REPUBLICS OF CENTRAL ASIA



Source: *U.S. Institute of Peace Journal*, Vol. V, No. 1 (February 1992), pp. 6-7.

Confronted with these new developments, which are far from concluded, the Muslim republics of Central Asia have been plagued by problems of self-definition, orientation, and alignment, and are each searching for a new course. The Russian north is considered alien in culture, religion, language and ethnicity; hostile in terms of history and emotional residues; and holds no promise in terms of development and political stability. Therefore, these new republics, reluctant to embrace the faltering communist model of China to the east, can only look south and west.

The expectation that other Muslims in the Russian Federation might rise as a result of the Slavic host-culture's xenophobia only adds impetus to the Middle Eastern orientation that these new states are attempting to forge. Instinctively they are preparing themselves as a base of Muslim-Central Asian resilience to stave off the potential threat of their northern neighbor, and to succor their fellow-Muslims who have remained there after the crumbling of the Soviet Union. In other words, they are reconstituting their eroded onion in a reverse fashion: around the nucleus of the core of Islam in the Middle East they are forming a second layer of their own, and envisaging to crystallize a third stratum from whatever Muslim minority might fall off the Russian Federation.

The common problem of each of these Muslim republics is to choose what course to follow. Those states that seek association with the West, in general, and the U.S., in particular, are attracted by the Turkish model (Kyrgystan's President called Turkey the region's "Morning Star"), but some Islamic elements in those countries would rather follow in Iran's footsteps. They look at growing democracies like Turkey (or Israel), but they are better able to understand the authoritarian regimes of the rest of the Middle East which are much closer, structurally and functionally, to what they have been accustomed over the years. Rich countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran and Libya are potential sources of desperately needed capital, but the examples of resourceless Israel or Turkey may be perhaps more promising in the long run. Isolated Iran (or Iraq) may seem good examples of lonely survivors against all odds, but the conduits to Europe and the U.S. that

Turkey and moderate Arab countries (and even Israel) can provide may be more attractive to the new nations of Central Asia.

The Iranian-Turkish Competition

By far the most fateful and fiercest competition is being waged between Iran and Turkey. The battle for hegemony between these two powers is total and all-encompassing. It is not merely a diplomatic contest, but a sustained all-out effort reminiscent of the Cold War, where all means short of military confrontation (for the moment) seem justified. While modernizing and pro-Western Turkey appeals to the urban elites in the Central Asian Republics, Iran seems to capitalize on popular support in the countryside. The Islam of Central Asia, which had been castrated by 70 years of Soviet rule, may be now attracted to the moderate, secular regime of Turkey where, as in the Western world, faith is left to the domain of the individual. At the same time, however, not a few Central Asian Muslims are fascinated by the process of revival of their faith as a total political, ethical and social order, precisely due to their long deprivation of it.

Turkey, taking advantage of its ethno-linguistic affiliation with most of these new states, has mounted a coordinated effort aimed at establishing a firm foothold in practically all domains. In January 1992, a Turkish diplomatic mission was opened in Baku, Azerbaijan, the first foreign embassy in that capital. Their rush was justified by the need to pursue "skillful diplomacy" to counter "wealthy Saudi Arabia and fundamentalist Iran and Pakistan." Prime Minister Demirel is satisfied that the Central Asian republics regard Turkey as their "big brother," and he has been eager to play that role, fully exploiting the cultural, historical, linguistic and ethnic edge that his country has over all other prospective opponents.

Turkey's growing role has been thrust on her not only by the dismantling of the Soviet Union, but also by the rapid disintegration in the Balkans and the sense of rejection that the Turks have experienced on the part of Europe, to which they have desperately clung in recent decades. They may be members of NATO, but are still on the fringe of the European Community. If they cannot be integrated into Europe, as they have always aspired, they must turn to their Pan-Turkic dreams which make them an independently pivotal power of their own. Turkey has established a general directorate responsible for its relations with the Commonwealth of Independent States as well as with the nations of the Balkans and the Caucasus. In June 1992, a "Symposium of all Turkic-speaking Nations and Minorities" was held in Istanbul, as well as a "Black Sea Conference" which was to create a new focus of power where Turkey would play a determining role.

Ankara's upbeat mood has been reinforced by the enormous intellectual, cultural, economic and political ties that have been woven between Turkey and the new states of Central Asia. Delegations from these countries are flocking to Ankara, and Turkish delegations of all vocations are streaming to Central Asia and the Caucasus. Paradoxically, as Turkey is sensing its marginalization by united Europe, in view of its loss of geo-strategic importance in the post-Cold War era, it is being courted by Central Asians as a conduit to the West. Indeed, since Turkey's commercial relations with the West remain vigorous, the new nations of Central Asia seem convinced that they are much more likely to get Western technology and investments via their experienced "big brother" than otherwise.

Some of these countries are frantically absorbing anything Turkish: the Latin alphabet, textbooks, trade delegations, financial assistance, newspapers and broadcasts emanating from Ankara. Through the 89 weekly hours of satellite broadcasting towards Central Asia, consisting of news bulletins as well as entertainment and cultural programs, the Turks hope to sway the hearts of close to 60 million Turkish-speaking people in those republics. They have also allocated some 6,000 annual fellowships to Central Asian students willing to study in Turkey, granted medical and food donations, and offered technical and managerial aid to government offices as well as private enterprises. All these efforts are backed by the U.S. which hopes that the Turkish alternative of Islam-cum-modernity can keep the emerging countries of Central Asia away from Islamic radicalism of the Iranian brand, which is anti-Western by definition.

Aware that the future of these countries will hinge on their economic progress, the Turks have been stressing this facet of the pan-Turkic revival. Suleiman Demirel has signed a series of economic agreements with the new republics, and President Ozal has visited all of them and assured an ongoing Turkish diplomatic, cultural and economic presence there. This sustained effort, which is systematically supported by the U.S., both diplomatically and economically, is aimed at bringing Central Asia closer to the West. However, this is not necessarily the only possibility, as some Central Asian republics, notably Uzbekistan, are seeking to bring Turkey closer to Central Asia, in the way that Enver Pasha had tried to operate during World War I

when he set out to reconstitute a pan-Turkic Empire.

For Ankara, the stakes are high: if they do not respond to the Central Asians, the new republics might be pushed into the arms of Iran or the Arabs. If they overrespond, they fear they might shift closer to Asia and thereby forego their efforts to be part of Europe. The Greeks would certainly rejoice to see their arch-enemy further alienated from Europe. Hence, Turkey has sought to enlist the U.S. as a partner in their Central Asian strategy, just in case it is abandoned by Europe.

If Turkey offers technology, kinship and links to the West, Iran offers faith, money and history. Not only does Iran assist in building mosques and in allocating grants-in-aid to Central Asian students, but it can also be a successful model of Islamic revolution which has taken root in spite of the West and has restored Islam to its past glory. What is more, Iran can also show that it wields the means to finance development programs in its neighboring countries like railways, pipelines for petrol and gas, and access to the ocean. Iran sends hundreds of Mullahs to run the mosques of Central Asia as well as thousands of Qurans to uplift the spirits of the Believers and to fill the vacuum left by the departure of the failing Communist ideology.

Iran has already made some headway in Tajikistan and in the Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan, where portraits of Ayatollah Khomeini are widespread and Muslim fundamentalism is rife. Iran's appeal also draws encouragement from the radical Islamic Revival Party which was established in Russia in 1987. That party, which projects an image similar to Iran's fundamentalism, held its founding convention in Astrakhan, a Russian city replete with Islamic symbolism, and is now centered in Moscow.

Iran, which has not hidden its ambition to become a regional power in the Gulf and Central Asia, has already built firm bases of support among many groups of the Mujahidin in Afghanistan. It can provide oil to those Central Asian countries which lack it, and is willing to purchase their surplus Soviet military equipment. There are even rumors that Iran might entice nuclear scientists, notably from Kazakhstan, to cross over to Teheran with their knowhow, if not with non-conventional equipment that they might smuggle out.

Iran is also capitalizing on the many ethnic Iranians spread all over Central Asia (in Tajikistan they constitute the majority and in other republics, small local minorities). Similarly, Muslim Shi'ites are more likely than not to be loyal to Iran, either in Azerbaijan where they make up the majority or in neighboring republics which are all dotted with Shi'ite minorities.

The Iranians are also able to provide immediate economic and managerial expertise. Iran has signed an agreement with Azerbaijan, for example, which promises the Azeris a doubling of their oil production to half-a-million barrels a day. Iran has also embarked on a vast railway scheme to link it with Azerbaijan, Turkemenistan and Kazakhstan, which would allow all of these countries access to the Gulf. If Iran succeeds in controlling the oil and gas pipelines, as well as the railways leading from these republics to the Gulf, it will achieve a stranglehold on their economies and control much of their fate.

Iran, which does not have many allies in the world, regards Central Asia as an Allah-sent opportunity to develop a hinterland of its own. It has crucial interest in obtaining a foothold there and in balancing the threat posed by the Americans and their Turkish allies. One of the consequences of this struggle has been Iran's drawing closer to China which, fearing the spillover of pan-Turkism into Chinese Turkestan, has been doing all it can to placate the Central Asian republics while weakening their ties to Turkey.

Nothing exemplifies better the struggle between Turkey and Iran in Central Asia and the Caucasus than the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis, pitting Christian Armenia, an historical foe of Turkey, against Muslim-Turkish-Shi'ite Azerbaijan. For Iran, supporting Turkey's enemy, Armenia, would mean an easier foothold in the Caucasus and possibly favor with the Christian West, yet siding with the Azeris, who are Muslim Turks, might alienate them from Turkey and draw them closer to the Iranian orbit. Furthermore, identifying itself with its Shi'ite Azeri neighbors would signify that Islam takes primacy in Teheran over all other considerations. Meanwhile, the Azeris of the Nakhichevan enclave in Armenia crossed over their common border with Iran in January 1992, and asked to be absorbed by the Azeris of northern Iran.

Iran is afraid lest the Azeris of Azerbaijan (7 million), together with the Azeris of northern Iran (some 20 million), might seek to establish a "greater Azerbaijan" tied to Turkey, economically or otherwise. For that reason, Iran is concentrating its efforts to achieve peace in Azerbaijan first.

The Arab-Iranian Contest

The Arab countries that emerged from the Gulf War of 1991 as America's allies find themselves threatened by a fundamentalist Islam which poses an imminent

danger to their regimes. For Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Syria, Egypt and the North African countries, it has become imperative to arrest the sweep of Islam, for after the success of Islam in the Sudan and its near-success in Jordan and Algeria, they know they are next in line.

Saudi Arabia, using her huge resources and religious influence, has heavily invested in mosques, Qurans, and dormitories for Muslim visitors in Samarkand; in centers of Islamic studies in Tashkent; in religious teachers in Dushanbe; and even in word processors in Arabic in Tajikistan. The Islamic Bank based in Saudi Arabia has also pledged financial assistance to Tajik religious students. According to one report, while in 1989 there were only 18 mosques in all Tajikistan, some 2,000 more have sprouted since. Mosque-building is pursued with great momentum in other republics as well. But the Saudis, unlike the Turks, are not providing a secular and modern alternative to Islamic rule but an anti-Iranian brand of Muslim fundamentalism which might ultimately backfire on them.

In March 1992, Syria's foreign minister visited some of these republics to sign cultural and economic agreements. In early 1992, the Egyptians mounted a major trade exhibit in Baku. However, the main emphasis of the Arab countries is in the religious-cultural domain.

All Arab states are determined to boost the use of Arabic and to revive Islamic symbols and heritage as a means to draw Central Asia back to its source, as well as to sidestep Iran. In 1992 booklets were published in Tashkent stating in Arabic the obligations of the faithful during Muslim festivals, or teaching the Arabic script. On both instances, the explanations were given in Russian.

The Arabs and Israel

All the Central Asia republics have established diplomatic relations with Israel, although for lack of funds there are as yet no resident diplomatic missions on either side. This is noteworthy because, apart from Turkey and Egypt, the rest of the Islamic world continues to boycott and otherwise alienate itself from Israel. However, Israel does have a certain potential appeal to these new nations.

First, most of these emerging states are small in population if not in size, and they may be attracted by the model of a small but relatively successful state in the political, diplomatic, economic, industrial, agricultural, technological and military domains.

Second, the stability of Israel's regime and its democratic nature offer some hope to these new nations that by adopting certain socio-political means, by adapting to the technological and scientific environment of the modern world, and by internalizing certain values, even a small country like Israel can make it into the twenty-first century.

Third, Israel is considered by Third World countries, rightly or wrongly, as a sure conduit to the West in general and to the U.S. in particular. Emerging nations who seek development and foreign investment have usually established diplomatic relations with Israel as soon as they shed their doctrinaire Third World ideology and adopted pragmatic policies.

Fourth, Israel has tremendous experience and know-how to share in the fields of water conservation, agricultural technology, and development of arid areas. Devastated Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, following many years of monoculture which polluted their land and water, are much in need of Israel's prowess in these domains. So are the poor and backward nations of Kyrgystan, Turkemenistan and Tajikistan, who might adopt some of Israel's technologies.

By contrast, the Arab states that are attempting to foil Israel's rapprochement with these new republics offer little or no relief to the plight of the Central Asian republics. Saudi Arabia can provide money and Libya can send imams, but these contributions are hardly of significance for economic development. Nevertheless, many of the regimes in these republics are wary not to rouse local and outside Muslim tempers against their sympathetic approach to Israel and so they adopt a rather low profile. Beyond general statements of support for the Arab cause, it is doubtful whether the Tajiks or other Central Asians are eager to embroil themselves in Middle Eastern politics. Only if they should succumb to Islamic fundamentalism would they be likely to alter their course and embark, like Iran, on one of anti-Israeli virulence.

Conclusions and Consequences

Torn between various orientations and courted by different vested interests, the Central Asian republics are likely to follow a course of action determined by a number of variables. First and foremost is the stability of the present regimes, which almost all emanate from the defunct communist rulers. Paradoxically, only if the present more-or-less authoritarian governments remain in place can they maintain the existing balance between ethnic and Islamic identity, between Turkey and Iran, between Israel and the Arabs, and continue a pragmatic course of development. If

these states should become Islamic, the choices will be more clear-cut and the policies more abrupt with an anti-Turkish, anti-Western and anti-Israeli bias.

The stability of the existing regimes will depend, in turn, on how well Islamic fundamentalism does in other places in the Arab Middle East. If it continues to make advances in the Sudan, Jordan, Algeria and possibly Egypt, this will be a signal that the Islamic wave has not receded and that the newly-emerging states in Central Asia are likely to fall under its sway. If, on the contrary, Islamic fundamentalism is contained in the Middle East, Iran's influence might be localized and the pro-Turkish, pro-Western and pragmatic trend will be strengthened. The question of Islamic revival in the Middle East is closely tied in with the issue of legitimacy of the Arab regimes, and the Central Asian regimes for that matter. It has been the recurring experience in the Middle East (Jordan, Sudan, Egypt, the West Bank, Algeria) that whenever Muslims are given the leeway to express themselves freely, they almost invariably opt for Islam. These regimes, then, have no option but to quell Islam in order to survive, thus underlining the choice of the populace between illegitimate authoritarian rule or legitimate Islamic rule. The Islamic republics of Central Asia are not expected to depart from this pattern.

If the process of disintegration of the Russian Federation continues unabated, then the Muslim minorities (Tatars, Ossetians, Chechens and others) might clamor for independence in the name of Islam, a process which could arouse Muslim sentiment in Central Asia and reattach the latest emancipated Muslims to those of the present Islamic Republics. Then the new onion will be reconstituted around the Muslim Middle East in an inverted process to the one which had allowed the Muslim republics to peel off from the Soviet Union.

The success of the pragmatic Turkish-American-Israeli approach could determine the fate of the republics. If the immediate future offers economic development, democratization, openness to the world, a continued process of urbanization and a peaceful settlement of local conflicts, then the moderate road may prevail. But if chaos, instability, poverty and bitterness make headway, then the Iranian revolutionary model may gain the upper hand.

The settlement of conflicts in the Middle East and of other disputes where Muslims are involved (Sudan-Libya, Iraq-Iran, Syria-Iraq, communities within Lebanon) may bring about a dynamic of peace and moderation in Central Asia. If, however, rifts and battles continue to dominate the Muslim scene elsewhere, the Central Asian republics may be called upon, within the organization of Islamic Conferences or outside of it, to take sides. This is sure to rouse tempers in Central Asia and to produce more chaos.

Very prudently put, the moderate-pragmatic road, headed by Turkey and supported by the U.S., seems to be in ascendence as of mid-1992. But a false start, a diplomatic *faux pas*, a lethargic West, a slow-down in economic development, a slight to the self-respect of these nations, or an unexpected major event where Muslims participate, might turn these trends around. Much care, thoughtfulness, and sensitivity, diligence and sacrifice are required from all concerned to prevent the irreparable slide of Central Asia into Islamic revolution and chaos.

* * *

Dr. Raphael Israeli, a senior lecturer in Islamic civilization and Chinese history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, is a Fellow of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and a Contributing Editor of the *Survey of Arab Affairs*. His most recent books include *Palestinians Between Israel and Jordan: Squaring the Triangle* (Praeger, 1991), and *Islamic Fundamentalism in Israel* (Brassey's, 1992).