

4. Typology of Islamic Groups

4.1. FOLK-ISLAMIC GROUPS

The revival of Islam has manifested itself in the resurgence of Islamic rites in the personal lives of Central Asians and in the increase of visitations to the graves of saints (Kehl-Bodrogi 2006: 236). In the wake of 9/11, this *revival of Islam* can easily be misinterpreted as a strengthening of fundamentalist Islam. A more objective perspective and a more thorough analysis revealed, however, that many different groups have contributed to this revival. To fully understand this phenomenon, these groups need to be differentiated from each other and studied separately. As was demonstrated in the last chapter, ‘extremist’ and ‘foreign’ Islamic groups have gained ground in Central Asia. More importantly, though, is the larger impact which has been made by the increased popularity of the following traditional religious practices:

- Sufism
- mazar-worshipping

Research has shown that Sufism is most widespread in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and to a lesser degree in Kyrgyzstan. In Kazakhstan, however, Sufism is not very popular. It is important to understand that religious folk practices such as the invocation of ancestors and the visitation of holy shrines are traditional practices in Central Asian Islam and are therefore accepted by the majority of citizens in all Central Asian countries. Indeed, these practices are accepted as a part of their Islamic beliefs.

Sufism is always bound to a very hierarchical organizational structure and can become political under certain circumstances. Although there are

many similarities to mazar-worshipping, the latter is less organized and I do not know of any political mobilization of mazar-shayks for example. I assume that the increased influence of folk Islamic groups after the independence of the Central Asian countries was not due to the proselytizing efforts of their members. Instead, the perceived stronger influence can better be explained by the change in the behaviour of the general population which previously had had to hide its religiosity but was now permitted to express it more openly. Thus a large part of the revival of Islam in Central Asia can be attributed to the reemergence of folk Islam in the public sphere which was a result of a greater freedom to express religious beliefs.

4.2. NON-TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC GROUPS

Apart from a reinvigorated folk Islam, proselytizing efforts of Salafi groups further contributed to the revival of Islam in Central Asia. Salafis intend to re-establish a Muslim society as it existed during the life of the Prophet Muhammad and the first three generations of Muslims. While all Salafis undertake proselytizing efforts to achieve this goal the movement is nonetheless very diverse, as I have shown in the previous chapters. In spite of the similarities described in 3.2.1, Salafis can be differentiated according to their relationship to politics and to the means they adopt for their political struggle. There are modernist Salafis who seek to Islamize society through education and embrace modernity; fundamentalist Salafis who are backward-looking and reject any political engagement, and there are also political Salafis who I call *Islamists* because they use Islam as a political ideology. Important to note is that not all Salafis are *jihadis*, who receive the most attention in the (western) media due to their call to violent action (Haykel 2009: 26). Also, when we refer to the concept of *jihad*, we must bear in mind that no other Islamic expression has ever been as misused as often as this one. *Jihad*, which is usually translated as *holy war*, though a closer meaning would be *effort*, is not restricted purely to external conflict and aggression but also denotes the internal and defensive struggle of Muslims (Halbach 1989: 216). As was shown in section 3.1.1 the understanding of *jihad* is an important criterion when differentiating between the different Salafi groups:

“[...] Salafi mainstream ulama consider jihad as a collective rather than an individual duty. They also believe that even if there is jihad, there are rules of conduct during war that should be respected” (Roy 2004: 254).

Jihadis on the other hand regard *jihad* as an individual duty and use this concept to legitimize violence against civilians.

In order to discuss the relationship between Islam and politics in Central Asia, it will be helpful to adhere to the following definitions of the relevant groups:

- I use the term ‘*non-traditional*’ for all those groups who reject Central Asian religious folk traditions, the commingling of religious practice with pre-Islamic rituals and the interwovenness of religion and ethnicity.
- It is my understanding that *Salafis* are those Muslims who have a social utopian non-traditional ideology and attempt to proselytize others in order to purify Islamic society.
- *Islamists* refer to all Salafis who politicize Islam and who use Islam as a political ideology in order to Islamize society.
- *Jihadists* are those Islamists who furthermore justify the use of violence to achieve the same goal.

All these groups share the common feature that they reject the influence of culture and tradition on religion and in this sense can be regarded as non-traditional. Furthermore, they are Salafis (or neo-fundamentalist according to Roy’s definition) as they wish to bring the society back to the ‘true’ faith of the first three Muslim generations. Whereas all groups hope to transform society in one way or another, both modernists and fundamentalists aim at transforming society from the bottom up, whereas Islamists and jihadists try to Islamize society from the top down. I suppose that all jihadists are Islamists, although there might be some difference in the importance they attribute to religion and politics. Whereas Islamists are primarily political and refer to religion as the basis of their political activity, jihadists do the opposite: they are primarily religious and, as Roy maintains, their only political act consists of declaring the religious law to be the law of the land. I assume furthermore, that Islamists can resort to violent means (and become jihadists) although remaining primarily political under certain circumstances.

es (such as during the Tajik civil war, where the IRPT was engaged as an armed conflict party).

I would like to summarize the definitions mentioned above as follows:

Table 2: Typology of Non-Traditional Islamic Groups

	Non-traditional / Rejection of Folk Islam	Fundamentalist Interpretation of Scripture	Political Islam	Violent Means for Political Struggle	Origin
FG	✓				Turkey
TJ	✓	✓			India/ Pakistan
IRPT	(✓)	✓	✓	(✓)	Sowjet Union
HT	✓	✓	✓		Palestine
IMU	✓	✓	✓	✓	Uzbekistan
Actor-Type	✓ = Salafi	✓ = Fundamentalist	✓ = Islamist	✓ = Jihadist	Foreign vs Central Asian

As we will see in the next chapters, Central Asian governments seek to lump all these groups together as negative foreign influences on home-grown Islam. Contrary to Central Asian folk Islam, which is closely intertwined with the Sunni Hanafi School and is open to pre-Islamic customs and traditions known as *urf* and '*adat*', Salafis traditionally refer to the Hanbali school of law. Because of their desire to live a *pure* Islam, Salafis reject such local traditions as *bid'a* (unjustified innovation). However, this does not mean that all Salafi groups in Central Asia are non-Hanafi. On the contrary, most adhere to the local school of law to some degree or simply reject the identification with any legal dimension of Sunni Islam. This is further proof of the heterogeneity of religion. Additionally, not all Salafi groups active in Central Asia have a foreign origin; the Islamist IRP and the jihadist IMU, the only two groups who have openly promoted violent means in their political struggle (with regards to the IRPT this

was the case during the civil war but is no longer true), are genuinely Central Asian groups.

Even though it is true that Salafism has certain Central Asian roots as can be found in groups such as IRPT and IMU, foreign groups such as HT, Fetullah Gülen and Tablighi Jama'at have had a large impact on the new strength of the scriptural interpretation of Islam in the region. As these groups have only come to the region during the last few decades, it is wrong to describe their diffusion as simply a revival of Islam – instead we have to bear in mind that the majority of the Salafi groups have brought new interpretations of Islam to Central Asia. Although the religious policies of the Central Asian states are highly controversial (as we will see in the next chapters), they are based on these proselytizing efforts by foreign and domestic Salafi groups.

