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# Preparedness for an Uncertain Future

**"The Only Thing We have to Fear is Fear Itself"**

*by Professor Mark Meirowitz*

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"ADVANCING DIVERSITY"

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# Interview With Professor Adeeb Khalid

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***Question:*** *Your academic researches and career on Islam in Central Asia well deserve great respect. In the early 1990s, researching Islam in Soviet territories was not something expected to study, especially considering the strict secular stance of communist ideology against religion, Islam. Thus, we wonder that if there is a specific moment that led you to study this subject. If there is, it has to be quite motivations as you have accomplished to make a pile of literature about Islam and nation-building in Central Asia. Could you please share your moment when you decided to establish your academic carrier on this subject?*

Adeeb Khalid is Jane and Raphael Bernstein Professor of Asian Studies and History at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, where he has taught since 1993. He works on Central Asia in the period after the imperial conquests of the 19th century, with thematic interests in religion and cultural change, nationalism, empires and colonialism. He has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, and the John W. Kluge Center at the Library of Congress.

He is the author of The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia (University of California Press, 1998), Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia (University of California Press, 2007), and Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR (Cornell University Press, 2015). He is currently working on a history of modern Central Asia for a general audience.

***Adeeb Khalid:***

I started graduate school in 1986. No-one could have imagined then that the USSR would fall apart before I finished my doctorate or that the archives would open up and we would be able to travel to Central Asia and do research there. I had planned on doing my dissertation using published materials that were available outside the USSR. Instead, I was able to work in Moscow and Tashkent and use a trove of materials I had only dreamed about when I started in 1986. However, even before the new possibilities of research appeared, I was dissatisfied with the Sovietological literature (the only kind available then) on Islam and Muslims in Central Asia. It saw Central Asian Muslims simply as victims of both tsars and commissars; it was not grounded in any scholarly understanding of Islam; and it was largely averse to any comparative analysis. I decided to work on Muslim modernism at the turn of the 20th century in Central Asia. Muslim modernism was a worldwide phenomenon, engendered by the new conditions (of military weakness,

European encroachment, and outright colonialism) that Muslim societies experienced in the 19th century. There was a substantial literature on its manifestations in Egypt and South Asia (and many other places), but nothing on the Russian Empire. I wanted to see how that phenomenon developed in Central Asia. This was my doctoral dissertation and my first book on Jadidism.

That project covered only the imperial period. I had intended to continue my research past the revolution of 1917 and it was that project I was working on when 9/11 happened. I began to see all sorts of news stories about the potential of Central Asian (Uzbekistan in particular) becoming the next Afghanistan. These prognostications were based on complete ignorance of Central Asia's modern history and of Islam's career in Soviet conditions. That is when I decided to write about the contemporary period. The result was my book, Islam after Communism. It was the real-world events of 9/11 that took me out my historian's comfort zone of the period between 1865 and 1930 and plunged me into more recent history.

***Question:*** *Due to federal structure of the Soviet Union, allowing people to talk and educate themselves in their own language, and Comintern Meeting with representatives of communist parties from all over the world, there has been a general understanding that the communist Soviet Union actually accelerated nation-building processes of post-Soviet independent states in Central Asia. How do you think Islam has been involved in this nation-building process?*

***Adeeb Khalid:***

Yes, our understanding of the nationalities policies of the USSR has been turned on its head since the era of glasnost and perestroika. The Soviets did not "invent" nations out of the blue, but they helped crystallize national identities. In Central Asia, national projects had appeared among the Jadids before the revolution of 1917. They sought to "modernize" and "rationalize" Islam. Under Soviet conditions, these national projects shifted considerably. For the Soviets, religion was bad, an opiate of the masses at best. There was no explicit place for Islam in the various national identities of Central Asia that crystallized in the Soviet era. In actual practice, however, Islam continued to be an important part of Central Asian national identities but in a new way: it became a marker of national difference more than a set of moral imperatives. (In some ways, this is analogous to what took place in Turkey during the Kemalist era. As Soner Çağaptay has shown, the Kemalist elite had to be (ethnically) Muslim but not too Muslim (in terms of observance). Especially during the later Soviet period (under Khrushchev and Brezhnev), Islam, or, rather "Muslimness," had become a source of national identity.

Things changed after perestroika allowed the return of religion to the public sphere. The last three decades have been a period of substantial change. Islamic practice has become commonplace again but, I would argue some of the Soviet-era understandings about religion's relationship

to politics remain in place and continue to make Central Asia distinct in the broader Muslim world.

***Question:*** *The Turkish ethnicity in the Russian Empire has always been an issue between the Ottoman and Russian Empires. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, for the first time in history Turkey put together a solid policy and tried to get connected to the newly independent ethnically Turkish states but failed to do so. However, Turkey has eventually managed to build good relationships with both Russia and the Central Asian states. Do you think that the relationships between Turkey and the Central Asian states are sustainable? And, to what extent the relationships between Turkey and the Central Asian states are conditioned to the relations between Russia and Turkey?*

***Adeeb Khalid:***

Historically, the project of pan-Turkism has been complicated. Pan-Turkism has been a bogeyman for the Soviets as it was for Tsarist officials (and their British counterparts) before the Russian revolution. Many actors in Turkey were also invested in the idea. Central Asians were always far less interested in the project, and their historical experiences under Soviet rule further distanced them from it. The first Turkish initiatives (under Turgut Özal) to rebuild pan-Turkic connections with the post-Soviet states of Central Asia were not terribly successful. The relations that have resulted have been less comprehensive than many had hoped for in 1990–92 and they vary from country to country. We need to think about these relations in a differentiated manner—Turkey's economic reach is not identical to its cultural reach, and neither of these are directly related to diplomatic connections. The cultural outreach was in great part the work of the Gülen movement, which is now discredited. It had less success in Uzbekistan, the most populous country in Central Asia than anywhere else.

***Question:*** *The 21st century began with islamophobia debates because of Jihadist groups' terror attacks, especially the 9/11. However, some of your researches are about jadidism in Central Asia since the 1990s. How do you think they separate their own religious stance from radical religious groups in their neighbours? We are asking this question with regard to one of your article called "A Secular Islam" in 2003.*

***Adeeb Khalid:***

Jadidism today is important only as a memory of a past historical phenomenon, one which has more salience for Uzbekistan than for the other countries of Central Asia. It is often misunderstood in current official discourse, which seeks to find a version of Islam that would fit with nation-consolidating projects in each country. The main hope is to come up with a version of Islam that is properly "national," that represents the national character of each Central Asian nation. All others can be denigrated as

"foreign," "extremist," and "radical." On the one hand, this is not unusual—all states seek to define a proper and acceptable version of Islam. (In Turkey, this task is handed over to the Diyanet.) On the other hand, the way this works in practice is peculiarly post-Soviet, for it makes use of Soviet notions of national identity, of Soviet understandings of religion and its ideal relationship to the state, and takes place in a peculiar post-Soviet institutional context. My "Secular Islam" article was written in 2002 (it was published in 2003 and became the basis for my Islam after Communism [2007]). Things have changed quite a bit in the almost two decades that have passed since then. Islam is a more established part of social life in all Central Asian countries; Islamic education is more established and Islamic ritual and practice far more widespread than they were in 2002. Still, I would argue that the Soviet legacy still shapes Central Asians' attitudes toward Islam.

***Question:*** *In the last decade, Russia has been intervening into states which were once part of the Soviet Union, as Georgia and Ukraine, whereas there has no military intervention into the Central Asian states since the end of Soviet Union. What would you say, by this perspective, about that Russia does not feel threatened from the Central Asian states but feel opposite from the states which tried to establish a strategic alliance with the EU or the West in general?*

***Adeeb Khalid:***

Central Asia exists in a different geopolitical arena than Ukraine or Georgia. Russian interests are differently defined in Central Asia. The biig change was the acquisition of air bases by the US in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in the aftermath of 9/11. I don't think Central Asia is a big part of Russia's threat scenario. The bigger challenge for Russia in Central Asia is the growing might of China, rather than the US.

***Question:*** *Based on your seminal book of Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia, you have taken us through the historical evolution of Islam's positioning in Central Asia, but you concluded your book with the case of Andijan which you considered as a way expressing discontents in the country but labelled as Jihadist terrorist by the government. Since you penned the book, do you have any idea of yours to change about Islam used as an opposition apparatus in Central Asia?*

***Adeeb Khalid:***

As I said above, things have changed quite a bit since then. The "Islamization" of society — in terms of the ubiquity of Islamic observance and its general visibility — is much greater now than a decade ago. The Andijan uprising and the response to it were in many ways unique to Uzbekistan. Developments in this regard have been different in the other countries of the region. Still, I would argue that the basic parameters have

not shifted greatly. The states still seek to define "proper" Islam and to persecute "improper" versions of the religion. The era of the post-9/11 Islamic militancy past. Now we are faced with the situation created by the Syrian civil war and intervention in it by numerous outside forces. Today, the main concern of Central Asian states and western observers is the appeal of Daesh-style militancy. Again, the region's states find in this new wave of militancy a convenient excuse for cracking down on their opponents but we are looking at a different set of concerns here than in ***2005***.

***Question:*** *As you know, post-soviet republics have had considerable attention by the West, especially by the US as a precaution aiming to prevent them from allying with Russia again. Do you agree if somebody claims that the West failed in this mission and the Central Asian states are still favouring Russia against the West?*

***Adeeb Khalid:***

The US attempt to wean Central Asia away from Russia was misguided and largely foolhardy. The Soviet infrastructure (of transport, education, popular culture) was not going to evaporate according to the wishes of the State Department. It is not a matter of the West's failure, but of structural continuities. In any case, the big story is of the rise of China's influence in Central Asia. The Belt and Road Initiative is an expression of China's ambitions. Even if its implementation does not come to fruition fully as planned, it reflects a transformation of economic realities on the ground. Russia will not disappear from Central Asia, but its challenge will come from China, not the West.

***Question:*** *During the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviets in the cold war atmosphere, the US had used Islam as a countermeasure against communism there and in most of the Muslim countries. When the American-supported jihadist groups or their extensions hit the World Trade Centre in New York, the US took arms against Jihadist groups all over the world. Even a half-century-long history shows that conditions might get reverse and your plans might hurt you, too in the near future. How do you evaluate Russia and America's policies in Central Asia in terms of using or weaponising Islam against each other?*

***Adeeb Khalid:***

Russia or the Soviet Union never weaponised Islam. It was the US that did that during its proxy war in Afghanistan. This was based on assumptions commonly held during the Cold War, that "Islam" was an antidote to Communism. After the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979, this idea was pushed with renewed emphasis by Alexandre Bennigsen and his disciples in a number of works. We are still living with the consequences of those decisions. Archival evidence suggests that the Soviets did not see Islam as a danger until after their intervention in Afghanistan. Things

have changed since then and Islam is now seen as a sign of danger in Russia just as much as in "the West." Domestically (in Chechnya and elsewhere), the Russian state pushes the idea of a "traditional" Islam not very different from that of Central Asian states, but it does not use it as a weapon in its foreign policy.

***Question:*** *We know it might have nothing to do with your area of expertise, but there is a popular debate on post-COVID19 world projections. If you do not mind, Could you please share your precious thoughts about it with us?*

***Adeeb Khalid:***

I really have nothing to say in this. I am still in a state of shock and contemplating the long-term consequences of this pandemic. I have no idea what it holds in store for us.

***Question:*** *Before ending the interview, we would like to take our chance to make you ask a question to yourself. It is because an interview cannot cover all the areas of a life-time academician, like yourself, we would kindly like to ask you if there is an issue that you considered as quite significant, but we miss it to ask. If yes, would you tell us about it?*

***Adeeb Khalid:***

There really isn't anything I think we missed. I am really a historian, most comfortable in the issues and sources of the first third of the 20th century. I was pulled into the larger sweep of that century by a sense of civic duty—to say something about the misconceptions that are routinely peddled in the public sphere. That is one's responsibility as a scholar and a citizen and I have been happy to do it, but I am much happier working with materials from the decade after the Russian revolution. The hopes and ambitions it launched are absolutely fascinating!

*We would like to thank you a lot for your precious time and sincere answers.*


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