

# POLITICS OF ISLAMISATION IN UZBEKISTAN

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## **Abstract:**

A Sudden upsurge of Islamisation with militant and violent versions was witnessed in post Soviet Uzbekistan. Although Islam for centuries has been an important marker in determining Uzbek and Central Asian identity and national consciousness, it has nevertheless been a multifaceted phenomenon, characterized by the divisions along Shia-Sunni suborders, syncretic shamanist practices, popular/official denominations and lately by Wahabi and fundamentalist versions. Post Soviet Uzbekistan suffered from an ideological void, providing an opportunity to external actors to engage with the people having fundamental tendencies and religious orthodoxy, as opposed to Central Asian ethos and incumbent secular regime. Along with external actors of oil rich West Asian states, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan the regional actors Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Hizb-ul Tahreer (HT), Akramiya and the like were instrumental in the resurgence of Islam with violent consequences for the whole region. Prolonged fusion of religion with ethno-nationalism and subsequent Soviet suppression, the tribal social structure, economic depression and repressive policies of Islam Karimove's authoritarian rule are no less significant in determining resurgence of Islam in Uzbekistan.

## **Keywords:**

Uzbekistan, Muslim fundamentalism, IMU, HT, Karimove, Central Asia.

## **Introduction:**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was an Islamic resurgence in Uzbekistan and political Islam began to assume an important aspect in Uzbek social and cultured life.<sup>1</sup> Uzbekistan is primarily considered as a Muslim nation because Muslims account for about 88 % of the population. Majority of ethnic Uzbeks are adherents of the Hanafi sect of Sunni Islam, but the Wahhabi sect has flourished in recent years.<sup>2</sup>

Islam in Central Asia does not have a monolithic structure, various trends, like Sufism or even pre-Islamic faiths like Shamanism, and other religions, particularly Buddhism, exerted influence and wielded power".<sup>3</sup> There are two popular branches of Sufism in the region, the Yasaviyya and the Nagshbandiyya and their adherents are marked as obscurantist cults.<sup>4</sup> Apart from major split between the Sunnis and the Shias, there also exist different doctrinal tendencies like traditionalism,

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<sup>1</sup> Ramakant Dwivedi, "Challenges of Religious Extremism in Uzbekistan", *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies*, Vol.9, No.1-2, Jan-June, 2005, p. 125.

<sup>2</sup> M.H Syed, *World Infopaedia Uzbekistan*, Program Publications, New Delhi, 2007, n. 2, p. 116.

<sup>3</sup> Anita Sengupta, *The Formation of the Uzbek Nation-State: A Study in Transition*, Lexington Books, New York, 2003, p.17.

<sup>4</sup> Nandini Bhattacharya, *Dueling Islam, Soviet and Regional Identity in Central Asia*, Shipra Publications, Delhi, 2008, p. 126.

fundamentalist, and in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, modernist. There is also the inter-play between dogmatic religion, Sufism and popular piety, “official” Islam, and “popular” Islam. All of these streams share one faith, but the social structures in which their common Islamic sentiment developed differed, as did their political experiences.<sup>5</sup>

Islam of Central Asia is a sui generis. It is some what different and liberal from Islam existing in countries like Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Therefore, they easily build relations with the communists during the Soviet era. Some Central Asian Muslims even embraced communism and Muslim Communist Party was also established.<sup>6</sup> Among the Muslims of this region, the Jadids brought new ideas in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century who campaigned against tradition and orthodoxy. An eloquent young Jadid, Mahmud Khoja Behbudiy spoke out vigorously and persistently attacked the personal and social abuses of Islam in his writings like “*The Dispute*” and in the journal “*Ayina*”.<sup>7</sup>

But when independence came in 1991, the Central Asians passed through an ideology crisis. External religious influences and Muslims activists of Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Afghanistan and the United States started penetrating in the region for gaining popularity. However, they failed to acknowledge or respect indigenous Central Asian religious histories.<sup>8</sup>

According to Uzbek president Islam Karimov “we could witness in Uzbekistan over 100 nationalities ... and almost 15 religious confessions are represented”<sup>9</sup> and even though Uzbek government always showed its respect towards Islam as Karimov took his oath on Quran and also did a hajj but what the Uzbek government hated most is the mixing of Islam and politics.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, Karimov recognizes non-religious secular thinking as ‘parallel with religion’. He believes that the interaction between secular and religious thinking will promote the richness, variety and development of the human race<sup>11</sup> and values the crucial role that

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<sup>5</sup> *The Formation of the Uzbek Nation-State: A Study in Transition*, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Ahmad Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, Orient Longman Private Limited, New Delhi, 2002, p. 35, n.3.

<sup>7</sup> Edward A. Allworth, *The Modern Uzbeks From the Fourteen Century to the Present: A Cultural History*, Hoover Institution Press, California, 1990, p. 142.

<sup>8</sup> Russell Zanca, “Explaining Islam in Central Asia: An Anthropological Approach for Uzbekistan”, *Journal of Muslim Affairs*, Vol. 24, No.1, April 2004, p. 105.

<sup>9</sup> Islam Karimov, *Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century*, available at ([www.umid.com](http://www.umid.com)).

<sup>10</sup> *The Formation of the Uzbek Nation-State: A Study in Transition*, p.201, n.11.

<sup>11</sup> John R. Pottenger, “Civil Society, Religious Freedom, and Islam Karimov: Uzbekistan’s Struggle for a Decent Society”, *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 23(1), March, 2004, p. 65.

religion, especially Islam, plays in assisting individuals to ‘overcome the trials of human existence as well as their isolation and alienation from one another’.<sup>12</sup>

The present status of Islam is not orthodox in character as the public opinion surveys reveal that in Uzbekistan, 44% of those claiming to be religious Muslims did not pray at all and 23% did so occasionally. About two-thirds of the respondents who claimed to be religious either did not fast at all or fasted occasionally and even one third Uzbek believers could not correctly translate the sentence, “*There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his Prophet*” from Arabic, though this *shahda* is the first and most important belief in Islam.<sup>13</sup>

### **Islamic Revivalism and Radicalism:**

Islam was the chief marker of the Uzbek identity, though not the only, when Soviets entered the region. Soviet policy towards Muslims was not static but it changed from one phase to another. When the Soviets needed Muslims support they granted concessions to them, otherwise the anti-religious propaganda and repression against the Islam continued to be its main policy.<sup>14</sup> During the preparatory stage of the Bolshevik revolution, Muslim nationalism was protected and encouraged by the party leaders in order to win the support of the Central Asian Muslims. But the moment there came up the question of sharing power with the local Muslim organization; the Soviet system began to show unwillingness and incompatibility between the two ethoses.<sup>15</sup> An organization called “Society of Godless Militants” of Jews and communists had the duty of conducting anti-Islamic propaganda campaign. Several journals were published for guidance and training of the people for the tactics and methods of anti-Islamic propaganda. The different tactics of anti-Islamic struggle were: (i) attack on Islamic custom and rites, (ii) attack on holy places and Sufism (iii) the Ulema were attacked on various anti-people allegations as untrustworthy, exploiters and enemies of people, (iv) the

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<sup>12</sup> John R. Pottenger, *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 23(1), p.66.

<sup>13</sup> Ajay Patnaik, *Nation, Minorities and States in Central Asia*, Anamika Publishers and Distributors (P) Limited, New Delhi, 2003, p. 168. According to one survey, only 20% of the Uzbeks believe that Uzbekistan should be for the ‘Uzbeks alone’ though more than 90% would prefer their children to marry someone of the same nationality. In their everyday life, people identify with the smaller identities and this allows for a lot of heterogeneity in the broader ethnic identity and positive inter-ethnic harmony, (*Nation, Minorities and States in Central Asia*, p.148.). These things clearly indicate the heterodoxy, tolerance and adaptability of Uzbek Muslims.

<sup>14</sup> Ali Muhammad Rather, “Religious Revivalism- A Case Study of Uzbekistan”, *Central Asia: Continuity and Change*, Mushtaq A. Kaw, (Ed.), Srinagar: 1999, p. 238.

<sup>15</sup> *Dueling Islam: Soviet and Regional Identity in Central Asia*.

liberation of women from traditions like child marriages, veil, bride price and for this purpose the so called liberated women were used.<sup>16</sup> Thus, during the Soviet period traditional Islam and its followers went to a drastic decline in Uzbekistan as well as in the whole region.

Soviet particularly targeted Islam because they considered Islam as backward and reactionary. They depicted Islam as a reactionary Mullah-led force supported by British imperialists that was trying to undermine the revolution and prevent progress and education.<sup>17</sup> Under the Soviets, there were campaigns designed to eradicate Islam from Central Asia. The aim was clear: wean the Central Asian from reactionary Islam and convert them into urbanized proletarians. Then the Basmachi revolt came in forefront and indicated that Islam is a mobilizing force and has capability to unify people of Central Asia against Soviet rule.<sup>18</sup> In February 1918 Basmachi rebellions as an Islamic revolt led by Mullahs and clan leaders erupted. It considered of a number of independent guerrilla groups in region.<sup>19</sup> They organized themselves as the “Army of Islam”.<sup>20</sup> They were fighting for a variety of causes: Jihad, *Shar’ia*, Turkic nationalism, anti communism. But, they could not survive for more than a decade and got defeated by Soviets in 1929.<sup>21</sup> In May 1944, the Soviet government created the Council for Affairs of Religious Cults by special decree, which later become the leading Soviet state organ dealing with Islam and Muslims. The Soviets reduced Islam to the legal status of a cult. The policy of “official Islam” was developed by Soviet government and government opened two “official Madrassas in Tashkent and Bukhara in which Mullahs would train in both Islamic and Soviet studies. But, the “parallel Islam” or “unofficial Islam” was working clandestinely in the region.<sup>22</sup> The last anti-Islamic crusade was launched by Mikhail Gorbachev under his “liberalizing” programme of perestroika, in which Islam was perceived as the enemy of modernization a rallying point for anti-Russian feelings amongst Central Asia’s ethnic groups.<sup>23</sup>

When independence came in 1991, the Central Asians, ideologically speaking, went back to the 1920s.<sup>24</sup> Islam was the natural

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<sup>16</sup> Ali Muhammad Rather, *Central Asia: Continuity and Change*, p. 35, n. 3.

<sup>17</sup> *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, p.36, n.3.

<sup>18</sup> Rob Johnson, *Oil, Islam and Conflict*, Reaktion Books Limited, Great Britain, 2007, p.63.

<sup>19</sup> *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, p. 35, n.3.

<sup>20</sup> *The Formation of The Uzbek Nation-State: A Study in Transition*, p.191, n.11.

<sup>21</sup> *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, p.35, n.3.

<sup>22</sup> *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, p.39.

<sup>23</sup> *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*.

<sup>24</sup> *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, p. 35.

choice to fill an ideological vacuum created by the disintegration of the Soviet Union and its Communist ideology. Islam has certain characteristics that make it a credible alternative for many natives as it is a coherent system of legal codes and moral principles.<sup>25</sup>

Accordingly, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was an Islamic resurgence in Uzbekistan and it began to assume an important factor in Uzbek social and cultural life.<sup>26</sup> Thereafter, Islamic activists started acting openly; number of mosques and Madrassas were reopened. However, soon after independence Karimov held almost all powers in his own hands and banned opposition parties, placed tight controls on media, and outlawed public discussion and debate on future policy. By turning his own political survival into state policy, Karimov ensured that the politically active elements, intellectuals, mullahs, new political parties would be forced, like the Islam of Soviet era, to go underground. And with that, all these groups eventually became radicalized and violent and among them many young people looked towards Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia for new ideological inspirations<sup>27</sup> which resulted in the emergence of number of radical and extremist groups. Some of them are following:

***Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU):***

IMU was created by Tohir Yuldashev in 1996. He and his field commander Jumaboy Ahmadjonovich Khojiyev also known as Juma Namangani and Tojiboy were instrumental in expanding and strengthening the base of the IMU in the region.<sup>28</sup> In an interview with the Voice of America, Yuldashev set out the IMU's goals, "the activities are fighting against oppression within our own country, against bribery, against inequalities and also the freeing of our Muslim brothers from prison".<sup>29</sup> He also claimed that "we have a movement of one hundred thousand people. It takes only a spark to burn down a forest, and for that one match is sufficient. We have enough strength to settle the scores with Karimov, and God willing, there are many more thousands of Mujahedeens who share this dream".<sup>30</sup> He traced the origin of IMU back to the Basmachi and called them his grand fathers.

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<sup>25</sup> Shireen T. Hunter, *Central Asia Since Independence*, Praeger Publications, Washington, 1996, p.35.

<sup>26</sup> Ramakant Dwivedi, *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies*, Vol. 9, No.1-2, p.125, n.9.

<sup>27</sup> *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, p. 54, n.3.

<sup>28</sup> Ramakant Dwivedi, *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies*, p. 128, n.9.

<sup>29</sup> J. K. Mohanty, *Terrorism and Militancy in Central Asia*, Kalpaz Publications, Delhi, 2006, p.112.

<sup>30</sup> *Terrorism and Militancy in Central Asia*, p.113.

On 25<sup>th</sup> August 1999, the IMU issued an official communique declaring Jihad on the Karimov regime and calling for its overthrow<sup>31</sup> and bring Islam to Uzbekistan, but that is only the first part of their plan. They have other aims also for the whole of Central Asia.<sup>32</sup>

IMU was banned on 25 September 2000 by the US department of state for being a terrorist organization under its law.<sup>33</sup> The US invasion of Afghanistan after 9/11 had an immediate impact on the activities of IMU, which had established links with Taliban and Al Qaeda as IMU used Afghanistan as a base to launch attacks into Uzbekistan in 1999 and 2000. According to Emmanuel Karagiannis, "the IMU was physically and organizationally devastated by the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan".<sup>34</sup> In the late November 2001, a report said that the group leader, 32-years old Juma Namangani died from wounds received during US bombing in Mazare-Sharif region of Afghanistan.<sup>35</sup> Though, Taliban never participated directly in any of the terrorist activity in Uzbekistan but played a role of co-operator and host to them<sup>36</sup> indicates the relationship of Taliban with IMU.

***Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT):***

Hizb-ut-Tahrir al-Islami or simply Hizb-ut-Tahrir is an active organization in Central Asia. It can be judged by the fact that there are more HT prisoners in Central Asia's prisons than those of any other movement, including the better known IMU.<sup>37</sup> HT is said to have originated in the revivalist movement of Wahabis of Saudi Arabia though it is separated from them on several issues but Uzbek government labeled all Islamic militants as Wahabis including HT members.<sup>38</sup> The first HT pamphlets appeared in Uzbekistan in 1995-96 after a Jordanian named Salahuddin, came to Tashkent in 1995 and set up the first HT cell with the help of two Uzbeks.<sup>39</sup>

HT aims to establish a single, unified Caliphate across Central Asia, from Xinjiang province to the Caucasus so that ultimately the entire Muslim world is united as one *Umma* without national borders. To achieve this goal, they want to topple the Karimov government and HT leaders are confident that they are winning support from within

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<sup>31</sup> *Terrorism and Militancy in Central Asia.*

<sup>32</sup> *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, p.133, n.3.

<sup>33</sup> *Terrorism and Militancy in Central Asia*, p.114, n.39.

<sup>34</sup> Cerwyn Moore, "Combating Terrorism in Russian and Uzbekistan", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 20, No.2, June 2007, p.315.

<sup>35</sup> *Terrorism and Militancy in Central Asia*, n.39, p.114.

<sup>36</sup> *Terrorism and Militancy in Central Asia*, p. 117.

<sup>37</sup> *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, p.116, n.3.

<sup>38</sup> *Terrorism and Militancy in Central Asia*, p.118.

<sup>39</sup> *Terrorism and Militancy in Central Asia*, p. 120.

Karimov's inner circle, and have sympathizers in the army, intelligence services, and the upper echelon of the bureaucracy, like in the custom department-who help to promote their programme.<sup>40</sup>

Though, the extent of the support for the movement is unknown, it has been suggested that its membership in the region may have reached 12,000-15,000, against the leadership claim of 80,000 supporters.<sup>41</sup> The leadership predicts that because the repressions by the Central Asian regimes are so severe that ultimately there will be a war and 'we have to prepare for that'.<sup>42</sup>

***Akramiya:***

Akramiya, another Islamic militant group in Uzbekistan, has been banned by the Uzbek government. It is a splinter group of the outlawed Hizb-ut-Tahrir. It is reported that leaflets distributed by Akramiya encourage suicide bombers<sup>43</sup> and the suicide bomb attacks in Tashkent during March 28-April 1, 2004 followed by suicide bomb attacks in front of US and Israeli embassies in Tashkent on July 30, 2004 were reportedly organized by this group of the HT.<sup>44</sup>

The emergence of these groups has become one of the major threats to the security of Uzbekistan and the followings may be the factors responsible for the turmoil in this region.

Firstly, the continued suppression of Islam by the Soviets was the reason for the Islamic resurgence in the region.<sup>45</sup> According to Alexandra Bennigsen, "Central Asia was deeply distressed by and thoroughly discontented with the Soviet experience and the suppression of Islam was the foremost reason of their anger. As Islam provided the strongest anchor to hold traditional life in Central Asia, the Soviet government was bent upon eliminating its influence root and branch".<sup>46</sup> After the Communism collapsed, the people of Central Asia suffered an identity crisis, and Islam became one of the most important components of new identity that eventually emerged in the region. The rise of Islamic militia, it is argued, was directly rooted in the self-assertiveness of nations searching for a collective identity and the Islamic forces that grew

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<sup>40</sup> *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, p.123, n.3.

<sup>41</sup> David Lewis, "Uzbekistan: Authoritarianism and Conflict," Mekenkamp, Monique, Tangerine, Paulvan, and Veen, Van de Hans, Eds., *Searching for Peace in Central and South Asia*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, London, 2003, p.194.

<sup>42</sup> *Oil, Islam and Conflict*, p.78, n. 28.

<sup>43</sup> M.H. Syed, *World Infopaedia Uzbekistan*, p. 122, n.2.

<sup>44</sup> Ramakant Dwivedi, *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies*, p.132, n.9.

<sup>45</sup> Vitaly V. Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia Between Pen and Rifle*, Rowman and Little Field Publishers, New York, INC, 2005, p.25.

<sup>46</sup> *Dueling Islam: Soviet and Regional Identity in Central Asia*, p.120, n.12.

provided the basis for the revival of Islam on a wider scale in the post-Soviet period.<sup>47</sup>

Secondly, there is lack of one homogenous group with one overriding identity of Islam. Apart from being divided, they are affected by strong ideological and clan/regional loyalties that negate and oppose the unifying appeal of Islam<sup>48</sup> and therefore the search for the collective identity becomes another factor responsible for division in the region. Even if most of the people are followers of the Hanfiya order yet the division between the *jadidist* or modernizers and *qadimist* or conservatives existed in the society long before the Sovietization.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, in June 1989, Uzbek and Tajik youths went on the rampage against fellow Muslims, Mashketian Turks in the Fergana valley, with many deaths and much destruction. The same brought riots, also in the Fergana valley, between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, both traditionally Muslim people.<sup>50</sup>

Thirdly, the economic deprivations also lead to extremism in the region as the poor socio-economic conditions are the cause of Islamic militancy. The general assumption is that poverty, underdevelopment, unemployment and other grievances give birth to extremism.<sup>51</sup> In 1992 acute food shortage led to riots in Tashkent, which were finally put down by military force. In 1994, after Uzbekistan was forced to introduce its own currency, the Uzbek som, inflation rose to 1500%. The rising level of poverty and unemployment as high as 80% in the Fergana valley has become major concerns for the regime, but it appears to be doing little to tackle the issue, as four hundred thousand young people come on the job market every year and 60% of the population is now under 25 years old. These young people are jobless, restless, and hungry and their numbers are growing.<sup>52</sup>

Fourthly, the repressive policies of the Uzbek government towards Islam cause the extremism. The policies of the Uzbek govt. to curb the growth of religious fundamentalism and terrorism, rather than being helpful, in curbing the menace, have contributed substantially to its growth and spread due to the reaction they generate among the suffering masses.<sup>53</sup> Since, independence, the regime has worked hard to reassert

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<sup>47</sup> *Nation, Minorities and States in Central Asia*, p.162, n.22.

<sup>48</sup> *Nation, Minorities and States in Central Asia*, p.164, n.22.

<sup>49</sup> *Radical Islam in Central Asia Between Pen and Rifle*, p.15, n.56.

<sup>50</sup> James Critch Low, "Nationalism and Islamic Resurgence in Uzbekistan", *Central Asia its Strategic Importance and Future Prospects*, Hafeez Malik, (Ed.), The Macmillan Press Limited, London, 1994, p. 244.

<sup>51</sup> *Radical Islam in Central Asia Between Pen and Rifle*, p. 22, n.56.

<sup>52</sup> *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, p.82, n.3.

<sup>53</sup> *Terrorism and Militancy in Central Asia*, p.130, n.39.

the authority of the national board, bringing about another era of “official Islam”. The Muslims directorate has a monopoly over religious instruction and the organization of contacts with the rest of the Muslims world. New Madrassas have appeared under its auspices, and it organizes the Hajj for several thousand citizens every year. In also controls all mosques and their personnel in the country. Mosques not controlled by the directorate, by contrast, are deemed illegal and have in many instances been closed.<sup>54</sup>

Although, Karimov is attempting to build a secular state, but he has prevented the growth of any Islamic opposition that if able to gather mass support could pose a serious threat to his regime. In such a context, the dichotomous nature of his policy towards Islam is clear as are his repressive actions explicable.<sup>55</sup>

### **Response of Uzbek Government:**

#### ***(i) Constitutional and other legal provision:***

There are number of provisions in the constitution which provide some religious freedoms along with several restrictions.

Article 31 guarantees freedom of conscience to all the citizens of the country. Everyone shall have the right to profess or not to profess any religion. Any compulsory imposition of religion shall be impermissible.<sup>56</sup> Instead, Article 61 separates religion from state and defines religious organizations and associations shall be separated from the state. The state shall not interfere with the activity of the religious organizations. Similarly, Article 29 says everyone shall be guaranteed freedom of thought, speech and convictions. Everyone shall have the right to seek, obtain and disseminate any information, except that which is directed against the existing constitutional system and in some other instances specified by law. Freedom of opinion and its expression may be restricted by law if any state or other secret is involved. Furthermore, Article 12 states, public life shall develop on the basis of a diversity of political institutional, ideologies and opinion. No ideology shall be granted the status of state ideology.

There are several other constitutional provisions which oppose the extremism. The Uzbek government also passed a special law to regulate financing of religious institutions and clergymen and also to ensure strict

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<sup>54</sup> Adeeb Khalid, “A Secular Islam: Nation, State, and Religion in Uzbekistan”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 35, No.4, Nov. 2003, p.587.

<sup>55</sup> Tom Everett-Heath, “Instability and Identity in a Post-Soviet World”, Tom Everett-Heath, Ed., *Central Asia Aspects of Transitions*, Routledge Curzon, London, 2003, p. 194.

<sup>56</sup> *Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan*, 1992, [www.press-service.uz].

control over the substance of the sermons in mosques. To this effect Karimov government set up a committee for religious affairs in the republic's council of ministers.<sup>57</sup> This 1998 law on freedom of conscience and religious organizations regulates several protective measures. Article 14 states, with the exception of those working in religious organizations, citizens of Uzbekistan are not permitted to wear "ritual" dress in public places. In May 1998, government further amended provisions of the criminal code and code on administrative responsibility treating the practice of religion. Under Article 84 of the amended code on administrative responsibility, violators of the prohibition on ritual dress are fined five to ten times the minimum monthly wage or subject to administrative arrest up to fifteen days.<sup>58</sup>

**(ii) Reaction of Uzbek President Islam Karimov:**

To Karimov religion strengthens people's faith, purifies and elevates them, and makes adherents stronger in overcoming the trails of human existence. It transfers universal and spiritual values from generation to generation. That is why religion is a natural part of human life. Unfortunately, the religious consciousness, being used not as a constructive power but as a destructive one, causes fanaticism which is accompanied by intolerance towards all others.<sup>59</sup> He argues that Islam has been used for political purposes as some Muslims are aiming to discredit democracy, the secular state and a multinational and multi-confessional society. It would be fatal for the history of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, if Islam and the states of Islamic culture were to be represented as a new "empire of evil" and an overall zone of danger.<sup>60</sup>

Karimov states that numerous Islamic organizations want to impose 'alien spiritual ideals and values' that will disrupt Uzbek society and ultimately return Uzbekistan to medieval obscurantism. He argues that Islamic militants, calling themselves 'fighters for faith', attempt to justify their political activism. He has condemned both International terrorism and religious extremism and fundamentalism and declared them to be greatest threats to Uzbek stability and sovereignty.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, he told to a press conference on 17 April 1998, that one way to avoid religious fanaticism was to integrate with European structures and in the strongest ever gesture statement he, in May 1998, told the

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<sup>57</sup> Nalin Kumar Mohapatra, *Political Culture and Democratic Development in Central Asia*, Bookwell Publishers, New Delhi, 2006, p. 267.

<sup>58</sup> [<http://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/1999/Uzbekistan/uzbek-03.htm>]

<sup>59</sup> *Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century*, n. 18.

<sup>60</sup> *Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century*.

<sup>61</sup> John R. Pottenger, *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 23(1), p.68, n.20.

parliament that he was ready to shoot the leaders of an Islamic fundamentalist movement himself, if MPs lack the courage to do so.<sup>62</sup>

**(iii) Efforts at the International level:**

Efforts at the international level are also made by Uzbek government to curb the terrorism in the region. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has become the first International legal document the Republic of Uzbekistan has joined after gaining independence. Uzbekistan has chosen a path of building democratic and legal state and powerful civil society. Uzbekistan dedicated the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 2008.<sup>63</sup> On November 1999 on Istanbul Summit of OSCE, President Karimov introduced proposal to create an International center in the structure of UNO for the fight against terrorism.<sup>64</sup> In addition, on October 2000, International Conference in Tashkent was organized by UNO, OSCE and Uzbek government for safety justification and stability in Central Asia. Experts from 70 countries and 40 International Organizations worked out proposals on general approaches for reluctant strategy to the international terrorism.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, the meeting of SCO was held in Tashkent on June 17, 2004 to eliminate religious extremism.<sup>66</sup> In short, there are 13 documents of the UNO, directed to counter terrorism. They are 11 conventions and 2 protocols and it is very important to emphasize that Uzbekistan is a participant of all acting conventions and protocols of the UNO on the fight against terrorism.<sup>67</sup>

**Conclusion:**

Islam is an integral part of the lives of the people of Uzbekistan as well as the whole Central Asian region. It helped them to create their indigenous identity and always helped them in difficult and crisis situations. Karimov also recognizes this thing and argues that the cultural values of Islam, its traditions and its huge spiritual heritage greatly contribute not only to the historical evolution of our region but also to the qualitative shaping of its new image.<sup>68</sup> Though, Uzbekistan and the whole region is going through a very crucial phase due to several reasons like Islamic extremism, authoritarianism, proto democracy etc. and most

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<sup>62</sup> *Terrorism and Militancy in Central Asia*, p. 164, n. 39,

<sup>63</sup> [[http://www.jahonnews.uz/eng/documents/decrees/decree\\_on\\_60\\_anniversary\\_of\\_human\\_rights\\_declaration](http://www.jahonnews.uz/eng/documents/decrees/decree_on_60_anniversary_of_human_rights_declaration). Mgr]

<sup>64</sup> [<http://www.gov.uz/en/ctx.scm?sectionid=119&contented=1953>].

<sup>65</sup> [<http://www.gov.uz/en/ctx.scm?sectionid=119&contented=1953>].

<sup>66</sup> Yalman Onaran, "Economic and Nationalism: The Case of Muslim Central Asia", *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 13(4), 1994, p. 134, n. 4.

<sup>67</sup> [<http://www.gov.uz/en/ctx.scm?sectionid=119&contented=1953>].

<sup>68</sup> *Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century*, n.18.

of scholars especially western scholars are holding Islam as the main culprit for this situation because they correlate Islam with problems and conflicts yet Islam per se is not a threat to the security and stability of the Central Asian region rather misinterpretation made by the organizations like IMU and HT for their political gains are responsible for the crisis of this region.