

Islamic Education in Contemporary Central Asia: Reviewing Ideas,

Curriculum and Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

The definition and function of Islamic education are still a hot debate in Central Asian Muslim societies. Islam is a significant characteristic of these societies, and the governments approach the idea more utterly. The entire region is earmarked by a distinctive aspect of Islamic civilization that shaped the political and socio-economic structure of this region. This distinction corresponds to a spectacular culture with much broader intellectual traditions rooted in Inner Asia than those of Iran and the Middle East. The study of Islam in Central Asia not only represents various socio-political issues but also discusses contemporary intellectual revival (*Tajdid*) in the Islamic education system. The Soviet imposition of the teaching of scientific atheism in public schools meant that there were virtually no educators who were familiar with secular, social scientific curricula and teaching methodologies on the study of religion. The lack of pedagogical tools for teaching social scientific approaches to religion led to the widespread view that religion can or should be understood only in doctrinal terms. Not surprisingly, critical and comparative approaches to the study of religion, still in a nascent stage of development, have not found much of a following. The extreme *Salafist* elucidations of Islam, as well as leaden approaches of traditional viewpoints, are also a challenge to Islamic education in Central Asia since 2005. In 2010, Central Asian scholars of Islam became aware of the potential dangers of an overly narrow religious education and regularly express these concerns due to the isolation of much of the region from prestigious centres of Islamic learning, including *Jamiaal-Azhar* of Egypt, Arab Institutions and reputed Indo-Pak religious seminaries. In the given context, this article assesses the contemporary discourse of Islamic education in Central Asian Muslim societies, as well as its socio-political implications and significant challenges for designing a balanced pedagogical framework in Islamic education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic education in Central Asian Muslim countries is on the threshold of spectacular dynamism due to the diverse socio-religious and academic advances. However, the definition of 'Islamic education' and reshaping it with the idea of modernization (*Tajdid*) is still at battle with the traditional impression (Abdalla, Amr, et al. 2006). For centuries, Central Asia had been a popular destination for Muslims seeking religious and spiritual enlightenment (*al-Tarbiyah*) in cities such as Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, Khurasan, Andejon, Farghana, etc. The splendor of these and other cities can still be observed in present-day Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan. Previously, regional and imperial politics often interrupted religious and sociocultural scenarios that had an impact on religious education as well (Abusulayman, A.A. 2007).

Soviet rule in Central Asia, however, tightly controlled, and effectively blocked, Muslims from traveling abroad for religious education or maintaining any contact with Muslim organizations worldwide. It is often felt and observed that the dissolution of the Soviet Union left behind a religious vacuum in Central Asia which neighboring Muslim countries tried to initiate a series of educational programs including modernized (*Tajdidi*) religious curriculum framework and education models(A.Khalid-1998). During the Soviet period, Islamic institutions were mostly destroyed and legitimate spiritual leaders were driven underground. Even after the Soviet government established the Central Asian Spiritual Administration of Muslims (SADUM) in 1943 to oversee and guide Islamic activity, those Imams who had survived the Stalin repression of the 1930s and were allowed to preach functioned only under close KGB surveillance and control (M.B. Olcott, 2007). Even beyond 2005, Imams, Mullahs, and guardians of sacred sites generally lack sufficient education and competence to meet the needs of increasingly observant or spiritually needy populations seeking guidance (A. Bennigsen,1989). The Soviet imposition of the teaching of scientific atheism in public schools meant that there were virtually no educators who were familiar with secular, social scientific curricula and teaching methodologies of religion (Muminov,2002).

The lack of pedagogical tools for teaching social scientific approaches to religion led to the widespread view that religion can or should be understood only in doctrinal terms (*Ta'lim al-'Aqaid*) (Kayadibi, Saim and Ahmad Hidayat Buang, 2011). Beyond 2001, The enthusiasm with which Muslims in this region are professing Islam and self-consciously seeking to live by the "true" principles has reinforced this view, possibly at the expense of tolerance of religious diversity. Not surprisingly, critical and comparative approaches to the study of religion, still in a nascent stage of development, have not found much of a following (Z.Baran, 2005). A small segment of Central Asian scholars of Islam and clerics ('Ulama) are aware of the potential dangers of an overly narrow religious education and regularly express these concerns. The governments of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan have made some efforts to limit (what they perceive) to be the negative effects of religious education at home. They have sought to address declining tolerance by developing plans to standardize religious curricula (A.Abduvakhitov, 1993). Since Central Asian governments cannot control religious curricula in other countries, they instead try to monitor those who study; where, for how long, and what they learn in the seminaries (*Madrasas/Jamias/Dar al-'Ullums*) outside their domain. As such, the results have been mixed or less understood. This is largely since the vast majority of those studying abroad do so illegally, or at least outside the government channels (M. Noor Sulaiman Syah,2016).

The Soviet policy of limiting the public debate and display of religion, and its continuation to some degree in post-Soviet society, has inflated the value of some religious knowledge and practices like the *Hajj* pilgrimage and *Ziyarah*. In certain situations, those who acquire an above-average Islamic education can secure a following, and the threshold is fairly low. At the same time, because the level of knowledge about Islam as practiced elsewhere in the world is low, the religious information that returning Central Asians are bringing home from a wide range of Muslim countries is diversifying Islam in both practice and belief (A. Muminov, 1999). The diversification of Islam is creating both challenges to and opportunities for state control of Islam and religious curriculum in

the educational institutions. On the one hand, state actors are often at a loss about how to interpret new manifestations of religious practices and tend to react with suspicion and hostility. This attitude towards the returning graduates has been very alarming as well as unworkable so far as the modern phase of Islamic education is concerned (Ahmed, Farah. 2012).

The Government decrees (orders) banning the wearing of certain kinds of Islamic headscarves (*Hijab*) for women in universities and public discouragement of travel to countries like Pakistan and Iran for Islamic education are just two examples of suspicion (Tanwar, M.2017&Al-Atas, N.1991). On the other hand, governments see diversification opportunities to exploit the differences to fragment religious constituencies or political parties that criticize the state. For example, in 2008, the Tajik government temporarily tolerated a campaign led by *Salafi* groups to discredit prominent Muslim clerics ('*Ulama*) and activists on certain issues and state policies regarding Islamic education. Central Asian states' insistence on Hanafi creed as the only appropriate form of Islam for the region while simultaneously reminding citizens to uphold their constitution's principle of separation of religion and state (i.e., a peculiar Foreign Religious Education and the Central Asian Islamic Revival form of "secularism") creates locally specific tensions. This paradoxical situation effectively establishes a sort of state religion against which dissenting Muslims define themselves (Rasheed, A.1994).

2. METHODS

This article is a systematic analysis of the socio-religious acumens related to Islamic education, pedagogy and curriculum in the contemporary Central Asia. A descriptive analytical approach has been taken up to envision the contemporary discourse depicting position as well as attitude of the Muslim Societies, especially in context of the Islamic education and reform.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Attitude towards Islamic Education

In the contemporary era, Islamic education has numerous elucidations in Central Asian Muslim states. As the Salafist approach to the interpretation of Islam is the available brand of anti-establishment globally, its impact could also be seen in context of the Central Asian societies, however, the Hanafi School of thought, still is the prominent school of adherence to majority of the population (Ahmad Rasheed 2000). Although, Salafism appeals to many young Central Asians because they do not trust the authority of a religion whose practice and thought have been moulded by decades of Soviet and post-Soviet socialist policies. Consequently, they seek models external to their own political systems and societies (Rasheed, A. 2000). The absence of a flourishing intellectual dimension to Central Asia's current Islamic revival, however, presents a serious challenge to those who seek to check the spread of intolerant versions of Islam in this region. The intensity of the Islamic revival (*Tajdid*) is by no means uniform across Central Asia or even across regions within a given country. In all of the larger capital cities, for example, there continue to be sizable populations, especially among the urban, educated national elite, who have little interest in religion or religious education. The existence of nominally Muslim communities that are either indifferent to religion is more common in Kyrgyzstan than in Uzbekistan or Tajikistan. Increasingly, however, interest in Islam is spreading through kin and professional networks, probably faster in urban areas than in rural ones. Islamic trends in each of the three countries have developed in different ways, as have state efforts to control Islam. Each state's distinct approach to religion has weaknesses in its ability to counter the spread of extremist ideologies and in trying to keep up with the idea of Islamization (Rasheed,A. 2000).

On the strategic grounds, the Uzbek government has advanced farther than its neighbouring states in developing institutions of Islamic education and scholarship that focus separately on secular and theological approaches to Islam. In Uzbekistan, the *Madrasas* are required to teach some secular topics, while secular public schools are only beginning to teach about world religions. Meanwhile, the Uzbek state's means of control over clergy and religious activity has a chilling effect on nearly all public dialogue on religion and scholarly creativity (Karimov, I. 1995). For example, scholarship on aspects of Central Asian Islam, past or present, which lies outside of current policy trends is interpreted as advocacy and therefore is seen as a challenge to the state. Consequently, otherwise creative scholarship and the debates that tend to accompany it are often suppressed. The FormallIslamic education is manifestly one of the principal ways general ignorance about Islam might be overcome in a society where informal education has become eroded (Karimov, I (1998). Given the frequent allusions to the 70 years of Soviet rule during which knowledge of Islam generally waned, it is relevant to examine how far people took steps to rectify this collective ignorance or amnesia. Again surprisingly, at least on the surface, it appears that many Muslims did not take the trouble to do so. In an estimation, 44% said they had at no point attended religious lessons or read religious literature, 20.8% said they had done so once or twice, and 23.8% – several times; 9.3%, however, admitted to doing so regularly. Of those who gave one of the two last answers, 62% were 30 and under and 40.6% had higher education (Karimov, I.1998).

While sundry frameworks for imparting Islamic knowledge surfaced with the change of regime in the early 1990s, the anti-Islamist turn the Central Asian governments have adopted since 1997-98 included in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan the prohibition of undertaking Islamic studies outside the few remaining government-sponsored and supervised institutions of Islamic learning (Olcott, M.B&Ziyaeva, D (Sept. 2008). Some incidents were very much annoying. In the spring 2008, two Imams of a mosque in Namangan (Uzbekistan) were sacked for 'illegally' teaching religion to teenagers, and other Imams were warned not to commit a similar offence. The regional head of the Muslim Board was also removed for his negligence of the event. In the early post-Soviet period the opportunities for study in government-initiated institutions or those sponsored by the Muslim religious establishment which cooperated with the government were infinitely greater. For example, religious instruction was given in many 'registered' mosques, both regular *mektebs* and *medreses* and Sunday Schools. The majority of these institutions have meanwhile been closed down, although Islamic instruction was not part of the school curriculum in state schools in any of the Central Asian countries (Olcott, M.B&Ziyaeva, D (Sept. 2008).

Islamic Education and Pedagogy: The Contemporary Phase

The Muslim states in Central Asia are far away from the structure and design of the research and curricula prevailing in the institutions of the contemporary Muslim world. Islamic Education and Islamic Studies both, have been emerging interdisciplinary field of research, teaching and professional development. Although having a different orientation in the Eastern and Western academia, there are now state-sponsored 'Islamic Religious Pedagogy' departments at major universities in Europe, America, and South East Asia (Franken, Leni, and Patrick Loobuyck. 2011). The motive behind this new interest appears to be largely socio-academic as well as political, reflecting the policy makers' attempt to address the rise of religious extremism and the desire to engineer a ' Islamic religious authority' through 'officially' training Muslim intellectuals and leaders to lead with. Such a top-to-bottom approach, however, has resulted in the creation of an academic approach without proper theoretical integrity, methodological rigor and pedagogic diversity. The forerunners of the classical modes and modules of education protest against these novel discourses mainly in the Muslim-dominated regions again marks non-validity of designs to a larger extent (al-Atas, N.1991 &Franken, Leni, and Patrick Loobuyck. 2011). The Lack of conceptual clarity is evident in frequent unqualified depictions of the field as 'Muslim Education', 'Muslims in Education' or 'Islamic Religious Pedagogy', and even simply as 'Religious Education'. Furthermore, Islamic

Education (*Talim al-Din*) has often been confused with 'Islamic Studies', often labelled as an approach of Western framing of the study of Islam that came out of the Eurocentric discourse of Orientalism and which is still believed to be not free from controversies. The notion of '*Talim*' (imparting Knowledge) and '*Tarbiyah*' (Guidance) offers an imagination of education as an inclusive, holistic and embodied process of facilitating human flourishing that goes beyond the confines of a cognitive focus implied by the word 'study' or a mere religious/moral instruction and training (Al-Atas, N. 1991 & Boeve, Lieven. 2012).

The modern definitions to 'Islamic' education have emerged at the backdrop to a strong reaction to what is perceived to be 'materialistic' secular Western education introduced during the post-colonial modernization process in newly established European-style Muslim nations including Central Asia (Coles, Maurice Irfan. 2004). It appears that the desire to 'Islamize' Western science and knowledge systems has largely shaped these attempts that originate in a deeper reactionary politics of resentment informing the Islamic revival and reform movements worldwide. It was mainly due to the self-censoring climate of political correctness after the 9/11 that the idea appeared to have suddenly been abandoned (Halstead, Mark. 2004). Currently, a more politically pleasing word, 'integration', seems to be frequently invoked within the discourse on educational reform in global Muslim societies (Halstead, Mark. 2004).

Developing integrated models of Islamic Education within the context of contemporary Muslim societies requires the presence of a critical dialogue with the diverse traditions of education in Islam as well as modern educational theories and pedagogic models. There is a large gap in the existing literature addressing these crucial issues. Most of the literature, largely produced by Western anthropologists, ethnographers and historians since the turn of the last century, stressed, often with admiration, the 'embodied oral/ aural features' as well as the 'impressive textual literacy' within traditional forms of Islamic Education. This empathetic line of research has also shown deep awareness of the challenges facing Muslim societies in meaningfully and effectively reconciling their educational/religious heritage with their fast-changing lived reality that has been increasingly dominated by Western secularism and its economic, social and cultural institutions (Hardaker, G & Sabki, Aishah, A, 2018-19). Within the highly politicized context of the post-9/11 world together with the rise of religious extremism, researchers adopting a political analysis framework focused their attention, with deep scepticism, on traditional forms of Islamic nurture and schooling such as *Madrassas* (*Madrasa/Maktab*) within the context of Central and South Asia and the '*Pondok/Pesantren*' in South East Asia. Such researchers largely claim the presence of a widespread culture of 'indoctrination' in these institutions which shapes extremist or 'Salafist/Jihadist' mindsets. But, depictions of indigenous educational practices within Muslim societies as a cultural capital or hindrance in facilitating positive change also require critical reassessment (Hardaker, G & Sabki, Aishah, A, 2018-19). However, what is beyond dispute is that the traditional and Western cultures of education have failed to be reconciled and integrated.

As a direct consequence, Muslim societies continue producing generations of young people with dual mindsets and often with an experience of a 'dual alienation' within the reality of a persisting culture of religious and secular authoritarianism (Sahin, Abdullah (2015). The absence of a dynamic educational culture greatly hinders wider social, political, and economic reforms vital for addressing concerns over human rights, poverty, and unemployment. It also faces the issues of gender inequality, intolerance towards religious/ ethnic diversity within Muslim societies and social discourse. The dynamics behind the failure of fundamental internal educational reform needs an urgent critical and realistic assessment, especially in context of the Central Asian Muslim societies. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where the populations were late and superficial in turning towards Islam and where a strong proportion of the population is still Slavic, globalised Islam has only a limited hold, unlike Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, where Islam had a heavy impact on these old Muslim societies living in the heart of Islamic cultural capitals such as Bukhara and Samarkand (Simpson, E. Sapper 1999).

Challenges in Central Asia: Designing Curriculum and Pedagogy

In post-Soviet Central Asian Muslim Societies, Islamic education has always been a subject of debate due to scarce understanding and approach of both, the governments as well as the people. This trust deficit has encouraged Muslim aspirants to emigrate for attainment of the '*Pure*' Islamic education instead of the secular/ Soviet design defamed due to its atheist character and anthropological setting (A. Muminov 1999). The Islamic Pedagogy (*al-Manhaj al-Islamiyah al-'Asariyah*) refers to the educational values, concepts, and perspectives rooted in the Islamic tradition that inspire and inform renewed thinking within Islamic schools and educational settings. The Islamic pedagogy challenges the increased technicising of teachers work and insists on centering educational values of holistic (mind-body-soul) education wherein education of the soul (*al-Ruh*) is paramount. Pedagogy in this sense is a human science, a philosophy of education that addresses the big questions around the purpose of education and schooling thereby informing the way we teach or instruct (*al-Tarbiyah*). But it isn't simply the art of instruction. Pedagogy here refers to the education values that inculcate instructional practice and civilizational aspect of any community. The Islamic pedagogy in education includes concrete educational values, concepts and methodology that encompasses the universal character (Al-Atas, N.1991&Ahmed, Farah 2012). The following are the key concepts upon which the entire structure of education rests:

- *Fitrah* (Pure state) is the state all children are born in
- *Amanah* (Trust) is the religious responsibility one holds as a parent or educator
- *Tarbiyah* (Guidence) is an essential aim of education
- *Ta'dib* (Refinement of character) is equally an aim of education
- *Tazkiya* (refining one's spiritual self, self-discipline) is central to holistic education
- *Niyyah* (Intention) informs the purpose of learning
- *Ilm wa Aml* (Knowledge and Action) is a critical interplay in learning
- *Ihsan* (Excellence) defines how a learner approaches learning
- *Muhasabah* (Introspection) defines the purpose of evaluation
- *Tafakkur* (Purposive thinking) is a critical process in transformative learning.

The Central Asian Muslim societies have been experiencing a trust deficit in context with the idea and application of Islamic education since 2005. Although several models have been incorporated since 1991, however, a quest is being felt especially by the tradition-rooted Muslims to incorporate a faith-oriented (*Dini*) system based upon the firm classical foundations. These basic concepts are the basis of what makes Islamic education distinct. In the given context, Islamic institutions aren't simply distinct because they belong to Muslims, or because Islam as faith formation is taught, or because the institutional environment reinforces Islamic values and religious observances. Islamic institutions are distinct because they are rooted in a pedagogical tradition in terms of educational philosophy of Islam. When an Islamic Institution claims that their ultimate aim is to nurture *al-Tarbiyah* then the educational approach of nurturing *tarbiya* is what distinguishes that institution from the 'Other' (Ahmed, Farah 2012).

The education models prevailing in contemporary Muslim societies are heavily influenced by a variety of socio-political occurrences so far as the pedagogical discourse is concerned. Central Asian Muslim societies are struggling between the West Asian, Turkish and South Asian Islamic education models (Al-Sharaf, Adel. 2013). The Turkish Islamic model, which aims to create a better understanding as well as a circle of influence in contemporary Muslim societies has taken a lead in Central Asia. Thus, the *Diyanet*, the official Turkish organization of Islam management in Turkey, financed mosques, and theology faculties in these countries and distributed Islamic literature extensively, without neglecting the creation of new religious structures by encouraging students to come to Turkey. The private movements, however, were the ones that particularly worked well for the re-Islamisation of Central Asia and the Caucasus. The most active and effective in the region being Osman NuriTopbas' *Nakchibendi*, (*Naqashbandi*), Nurci Model and Fethullah Gülen's neo-

brotherhood circle. The disciples of the latter had created dozens of modern schools that were secular, but striving indirectly towards the moral preaching and the spreading of a moderate Islam and that which was mixed with Turkish nationalism, ensuring in this way, the support of the Turkish embassies (Zine, Jasmin 2004). The strength of these Turkish movements lies in the fact that, everywhere else except in Uzbekistan, they also enjoyed favorable consideration from the local official authorities, which see Islam in Turkey as a barrier against Iranian or Saudi-Arabian Islam, as they were perceived as more radical and politically dangerous. The Iranian and South Asian (Indo-Pak) efforts to nourish and establish their point of view could also be felt (Sahin, Abdullah. 2018).

Simultaneously, with Iran and Turkey, the third wave of re-Islamisation originated from the Arabic peninsula and, to a lesser extent, from the Indian sub-continent as well. Referred to in a caricatured way, using the term, "Wahhabite", is a reference to Mohammad Abdal Wahhab (1703-1792), founder of religious revival (against *Bid'ah*), a 'Puritan' fundamentalism that is present in Saudi-Arabia, also known as Salafism, which follows several fundamentalist and radical trends (A. Abduvakhitov 1993). This austere form of Islam, dominant in most of the Gulf countries (now in Pakistan and Afghanistan as well), established itself in Central Asia including the Fergana Valley, but also in the Caucasus, Dagestan, and Chechnya, where its instrumental role in the war against the Russians allowed national cohesion. In this region, dominated by Islamic brotherhood (*Ikhwani al-Muslimun*) and the amalgamation of other Islamic denominations, borrowing anti-Islam practices, the moving towards Salafist Islam intimidated the authorities by its political dimension, which was capable of challenging the powers. This is the reason for which the state machineries, inheritors of the Communist Party, did not hesitate to take over traditional Islam once again and promote it to the status of an official religion. These foreign processes did not forget the local origins of the Islamic revival in any way, which were already at work at the end of the Soviet era. The ambivalence of the Soviet regime towards Islam meant that even under repression, certain 'Ulema led an intense theological activity and trained certain disciples, who are today the players of the Islamic revival in the region (A. Abduvakhitov 1993).

Thus, the traditional Islamic educational institutions, largely transplanted through centuries, have been established to reproduce the identity narratives in the lives of young Muslims, but these institutions encourage empirical/hermeneutic and innovative perspectives in curriculum, pedagogy, and inter-religious values (Muminov 2009). Furthermore, young people's religious agency has increasingly been shaped by prolific popular Online Islamic Education activities where an exploitative form of 'Islamic cyber religious/spiritual authority' is spreading fast. The reality of inter-generational change, the capacity of formal/informal Islamic Education to facilitate competent knowledge and understanding of Islam (Islamic literacy), mature faith development, and acting as a cultural capital are areas of scholarly interest and concern for Muslim societies. The rapidly growing sector of Islamic schooling as well as traditional seminaries (*Dar al-Ulumi Hawaza*) and hybrid Muslim higher education institutions, all, face similar concerns; lack of evidence-based practice, as well as inadequate curriculum development, teacher training provision, management and leadership. Moreover, the power relations within these institutions and the politics of secular suspicion towards Islamic schooling need further analysis (Memon, Nadeem A., and Mariam Alhashmi. 2018), the approach that can have better possible results for initiating a reformatory process.

Status and Future Discourse

The future of Islamic education in the region needs a spherical approach. The permissive state regulation of religion diminished the effects of radical extremism in Kazakhstan, whereas dismissive state regulation of religion increased the level of radical extremism in Tajikistan. The lack of Islamic educational institutions seems to threaten the stability and the long-term sustainability of Islamic revival in post-Soviet Muslim Central Asia (Memon, Nadeem A., and

Mariam Alhashmi. 2018). Further, the lack of Islamic educational institutions can potentially produce unprecedented social, political, and security challenges in the region. The Islamic educational institutions appear to play a central role in educating *Imams* and developing in them a rich global outlook, so that they may be not only versed in Islamic knowledge but also literate in social and scientific discourses of the 21st century. In this respect, Islamic educational institutions may be instrumental in educating and imbibing the indigenous Islamic culture with a non-radical mindset. Consequently, this may serve as an effective antidote against radicalism. Dismissive state regulation of religion toward Islamic education, in the case of Tajikistan, appears to undermine national security by attracting radical elements seeking to export radical ideologies (Emmanuel Karagiannis 2006). Moreover, the lack of access to mainstream Islamic learning seems to increase the chances for radicals to recruit from un-informed or ill-informed Central Asian youth. The findings support and claim that state-sponsored suppression of Islamic education (or in our terms, dismissive state regulation of Islamic education) is leading to radicalization of Tajikistan's Muslim youth. On the other hand, permissive state regulation of religion seems to promote mainstream Islamic learning, in the case of Kazakhstan, by allowing the youth to seek formal education in Islamic studies and thereby develop educational backgrounds, which may allow citizens to objectively evaluate various claims about Islam in general (Heathershaw and Roche's (2011)). It is important to acknowledge that increased state regulation of religion may also increase the likelihood of abuse or discrimination of religion by state security institutions. However, when assessing the costs and benefits of government regulation and state funding of Islamic education in the wake of rising religious radicalism, permissive state regulation of religion may be the right strategic policy to provide financial support to build and sustain Islamic educational institutions at this initial and transitional stage in the post-Soviet Muslim Central Asia (Heathershaw and Roche's 2011).

While the Islamic revival (*Tajdid*) has been generally accepted as a positive development within the framework of identity-building and "reclaiming" traditional cultural heritage, the fear of Islamic resurgence appears to emanate from Islam's potential to mobilize elites and masses in a political movement (e.g., as an Islamic political party) to challenge the incumbent regimes. Thus, fearing a threat to the secular regimes of Central Asia, many authoritarian regimes including Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, currently employ restrictive policies concerning Islamic practices and institutions to maintain the political status quo.

The Islamic Educational Institutions (IEIs) fulfil three major functions that can potentially deter the spread of religious radicalism by: (1) Providing a source for the mainstream teachings of Islam; (2) Offering opportunities to study both aspects of *Shari'ah* (Islamic law): *'Ibadat* (worship, prayers and rituals) and *Mu'amalat* (social relations); and (3) Affording an effective antidote to radicalized Islamic teachings and interpretations having foreign support (Zine, Jasmin. (2004)).

Above all, educational opportunities for teaching and learning the moderate messages of Islam must emanate from institutions (*Madaris*) perceived as legitimate and reliable, that employ qualified and locally trained educators (*Mu'alimin*). In this regard, educational institutions (*Madaris*) can play an important role in meeting the popular demands for rediscovering Islam in the contemporary Central Asian Muslim societies. The *Madrasah* system was once widely established in the region from Naishapur in Khurasan, to Balkh and Bukhara in Central Asia. Today it remains widespread in Afghanistan and is progressively returning to many of the Central Asian states, with the exception of Turkmenistan, where the government has actively discouraged *Madrasahs* as part of its efforts to control Islam.

Madrasah studies traditionally focus on religious law (*Fiqh*), the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (*Hadith*), classic logic (*Mantiq*), literature (*Ullum*), and interpretation of the Quran (*Tafsir*). Some also teach elementary mathematics and the discoveries of the classic Muslim astronomers. In recent years, some Central Asian states have also encouraged *Madrasahs* to broaden

their curriculum to include studies of modern sciences and to offer some educational opportunities for girls (Sultan Sarwar&JawadOmid Report 2005 & 2023).

Setting the Scene& Impressions

Dr. Abdul Hakim Juzjani, Professor of Law at Tashkent Islamic University, says: "*The Madrasahs once fostered scientific as well as religious studies, over time they gradually became more exclusively focused on theology*". Dr Abdul Salaam Azimi, a former president of Kabul University says: "*The interpretation which says that the practical sciences, like chemistry, physics, and algebra, do not belong in religious teachings prevailed. The scholars believed that they were not obliged to study [the practical sciences] any more, and that the only [necessary] knowledge is religious knowledge.*"

The later also adds that some scholar'st went to the extreme of arguing that "*if God cures all diseases, there is no need for medicine*". Other factors including foreign invasion and domination also contributed to the *Madrasah* decline as centres of broad learning. The civil wars and the Mongol invasion of Central Asia followed by Russian colonization of much of Central Asian societies and, finally, the marginalization of religious institutions under communism were severe blows. "National and religious institutions sustained big blows and losses during the expeditions of Russia into the region and following the creation of the Bolshevik state." Juzjani Adds: "Large (collections chronicling) achievements in the arts and science were looted, books were closely monitored, the people who had books with red or yellow pages [religious books] used to be taken to court, or sent to exile in Siberia or, if the book was about religious doctrine the owner used to face even harder punishments during the Soviet era (Sultan Sarwar&Jawad Omid Report 2005 & 2023)."

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, both governments in the region and *Da'wah* groups (Private Islamic Charitable Organizations) elsewhere in the Muslim world provided resources for restoring and reopening *Madrasahs* which created a competition for influence in which regional governments said foreign groups were seeking to spread fundamentalist Islam to the region. Most governments have since taken over, or put tight restrictions on, all *Madrasahs* on their territory. The tight restrictions reflect some governments' view that *Madrasahs* can become centers of extremism as their directors hold radical views. In Uzbekistan, some directors have been removed from their posts. *Madrasahs* have also been barred from receiving funding from states like Saudi Arabia, which are perceived as promoting a fundamentalist form of Islam potentially threatening the status quo (Sultan Sarwar&JawadOmid Report 2005&2023). In Uzbekistan, Tashkent limits religious school graduates to competing for positions as Imams in state-controlled mosques. Their studies are not considered adequate to enter the state's civil bureaucracy, in contrast to graduates of the secular state education system's Islamic University of Tashkent.

Muslims, in Central Asia, on average, are knowledgeable about the technical aspects *Ibadat*, very few are versed in its *Mu'amalat* (everyday life and its social implications) (M. Noor Sulaiman Syah Stain Kudus 2016). It is relatively easy to teach the basic tenets and daily rituals in Islam. However, it is more challenging and perhaps more important to contextualize Islamic teachings in the modern social, political, and economic realities of the 21st century. Therefore, Islamic educational institutions can play a central role in providing opportunities to learn about contemporary applications of concepts pertaining to personal matters, religion and social relations. However, finding reliable books, brochures, and other printed resources on Islam, which espouse moderate interpretations has been a challenge in most Central Asian states (Sahin, Abdullah. 2016). Consequently, in addition to live recruiters, the impact of cyberspace preaching is on the rise, featuring extremist websites, blogs, and the online forums publishing unverifiable *fatwas* (rulings on specific issues) and justifying various radical actions of social networks which openly promote extremism (M.Noor Sulaiman Syah Stain Kudus 2016). As a matter of fact, Islamic educational institutions can be among the most effective tools for impeding the spread of radicalism due to insufficient knowledge of religion and culture. Young Muslims who do not have much prior knowledge of Islam are more susceptible to accepting radical teachings as "genuine" Islamic

teachings as they often hear them for the very first time from radical preachers (Abdalla, Amr, et.al. 2006). One of the main reasons why religious extremists target teenagers is because “the youth do not yet have fully formed ideals and they are easier to manage.” In the very first encounter, the radical preachers present their ideology as “true Islam” and make a seemingly convincing case for the target individual to obey the call from God. Without any background knowledge, pedagogy, and intellectual design for evaluating claims about Islam, those exposed to radical preaching may develop sympathy for their views. On the other hand, those who are versed in the core tenets of mainstream Islamic teachings may potentially be less likely to be dogmatized by a radical ideology.

4. CONCLUSION

The Central Asian Muslim societies have taken a different position in defining and imparting Islamic education to their population. Modernizing Islamic education is a concern of both the governments and the people. Still, it is challenging to overhaul the traditional institutions due to their age-old classical imprint. In Contemporary Central Asia, the governments link it to the extremist socio-political implications. Countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and Pakistan liberally provided Islamic literature, pedagogic and curriculum models and funds for the construction of mosques and religious schools in the region soon after the Soviet collapse. This resulted in influencing the groups involved in restructuring the socio-political institutions. Islamic organizations and groups like IUM (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan), *Hizb al-Tahrir*, TIP(Turkistan Islamic Party), and Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) of Tajikistan all have been involved in spreading their models of education in collaboration with the international Islamic *Da'wah* groups. Believing that the core of contemporary secular education, as the Central Asian Muslims claim, is based on materialistic ideologies where body, life and physical sciences take precedence over soul (*Ruh*), afterlife (*Aakhirah*) and belief system ('*Aqidah*). Hence, the curriculum and pedagogy are altogether parallel from the conceptual to the applied level. Since, in Islamic history, there has been no explicit categorization of secular and religious education, oftentimes, we find ourselves confused about prioritizing one over the other while living in the modern world. The societies that we live in today are designed to facilitate material and logical existence while keeping the physical body at the centre. The nourishing of the soul (*al-Tarbiyah*) has become secondary. Modern education systems have evolved around the same logical concepts. Any theory requires proof to be validated. Only ideas that can be validated through experiments have scientific value. This whole system relies on the principle of cause and effect. Therefore, in general, there is no place for religion, soul or (spiritual) value in modern education. These concepts are secondary and optional for a contemporary student due to his belief in scientific outlook and pedagogy.

Islamic education deals with this dichotomy; it struggles to reconstruct the entire educational system in Islamic countries while simultaneously trying to highlight the importance of science and technology. Besides the emergence of the concept of secular, education is free without good ethics that causes the soul of a Muslim out of ethics that Islam has outlined. For that must be held in all aspects of cultural modernization, especially in the field of education. Modernization or renewal of Islamic education has its roots in conceptual / thought forms and institutional / Islamic institutions as a whole. In other words, the modernization of Islamic education cannot be kept away from ideas and programs of modernization of Islam. The most basic framework that lies behind the modernization of Islam in general is the modernization of Islamic thought, and institutionalization is a necessary condition for the rise of Muslims throughout the world in modern times. The *Madrasah/maktab* education in Central Asian societies is still in the traditional mode, and the majority of the adherents think any step forward is *Bid'ah* (innovation). If taken from the point of view of ideas of renewal of Islamic thought in the world of education, at least three aspects need to be renewed, namely, objectives, methods, and content. The goal of modernizing Islamic education is to change the mindset of Islamic society from traditional education to a more modern mindset. The

modernization method of Islamic education is the way it is used to direct the transformation of conventional educational mindset into modern educational thinking patterns in the framework of critical and scientific thinking. This can be achieved in the context of Central Asian Muslim societies as well. The contents/materials are all things related to traditional education in a way that is more scientific and modern. These three aspects are a necessity for the Islamic education in the contemporary times. Thus, if the concepts of renewal are applied in contemporary Islamic education, the results would possibly be positive, especially in the context of Central Asian Muslim societies.

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