



# **The current situation in the former Soviet Central Asian Republics**

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## **Geography**

'Central Asia' is a very vague geographical concept, but I shall be concentrating on the five former Soviet states of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. Together they cover an area eight times the size of France. Their total population is about 55 million. However, human settlement is very unevenly distributed. The physical environment in much of this territory is harsh; the potentially fertile areas need a great deal of water. As a result, water management is a critical issue, presenting opportunities for communal effort and cooperation, but also for dispute and conflict.

The largest of the five states is Kazakhstan, which covers the entire northern tier and comprises some 2.7 million sq km (over five times the size of France); it has world-class reserves of oil and gas and over the past decade has attracted large flows of foreign direct investment. There are two mountainous states in the south east: Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. These are relatively small (each comprising less than 200,000 sq kms); poverty is widespread. On the plains, there are two larger states, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (each just under 500,000 sq km). Uzbekistan is by far the most densely populated, with over 25 million inhabitants.

## **Social Issues**

In the Soviet period agriculture was highly developed, but over the past decade a lack of water, seeds, fertiliser and maintenance has meant that agriculture has stagnated. Industry was also strong in Soviet times, but now there is high unemployment, and this, combined with the young population (some 50 per cent of the Central Asian population are reportedly under 16 years of age)

means potential instability. Economically all the states are in the global middle-income band, but wealth is very unevenly distributed. In each state, a small elite has emerged that is rich and, more often than not, politically powerful. A large proportion of the rest of the population, meanwhile, has seen a severe drop in their standard of living and is experiencing real material hardship.

Social services and benefits have been severely cut. The fields that have suffered most are education and health care. In Soviet times both were well developed. Consequently, when the Central Asian states acquired independence in 1992, one of their greatest assets was that they had well educated populations. Today, this is no longer so. Although education is still nominally free, there are many hidden costs (e.g. extra charges for textbooks and equipment, as well as for painting classrooms and providing heating in winter). Poor families can no longer afford to send all their children to school. Girls in particular are often sent out to work at an early age. Many, especially in rural areas, become 'second wives' - a practice that is against the law, but nevertheless widespread. The high birth-rate has exacerbated such social problems. A significant proportion of today's population has been born since the end of the Soviet period. What is filling the educational gap for them? For many, the answer is primitive Islamic education in schools attached to mosques, of the type found in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Meanwhile secular education is available only for hard cash and increasingly for the elite only. Here the contrast with Soviet times is stark.

Despite the multitude of social problems, there are, nevertheless, some relatively encouraging features. One is that to date, there has been very little ethnic hostility. There are two main ethnic groups in Central Asia: Turkic and Persian. The Turkic peoples are represented mainly by the Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Turkmen and Uzbeks; the latter consists almost entirely of the Tajiks. There are also many immigrants, the majority of whom settled in Central Asia during the Soviet period. These include about ten million Russians, mainly in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and over 100 other ethnic minorities. Some came voluntarily; others (e.g. Koreans, Germans, Greeks and Crimean Tatars) were forcibly deported here in the 1930s and 1940s. It is noteworthy that relations between these various groups have rarely been marked by tension: on the contrary, there has traditionally been a high level of ethnic tolerance. The ethnic clashes that occurred at the end of the Soviet period (1989-1991) between Meskhetian Turks and Uzbeks, and between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, were the exception rather than the rule. The same is true of religion. This is a region in which for centuries many different faiths have coexisted, for the most part relatively harmoniously. Nowadays religious tension in the area is a byproduct of religion-state

relations.

## **Regional Issues**

After the demise of the Soviet Union, there were many, both in Central Asia and abroad, who believed that it would be easy for the five new states to create effective institutions for economic and political cooperation, with the strong possibility that this would then lead on to integration. Yet after more than a decade of independence, there is little sign that this will happen in the near future. Given the region's history, this is perhaps not surprising. Central Asia has been united politically only twice, first under the Mongols, then under the Russian Empire and its successor the Soviet Union. It was in 1924, under Soviet rule, that the administrative-territorial units were created that were the precursors of today's independent states. It is sometimes claimed that the new borders were drawn arbitrarily. This is a myth. On the contrary, they were drawn with great care, and wherever possible took account of existing linguistic and ethnic boundaries. As a result, without any movement of population, the great majority of each of the larger ethnic groups was encompassed within the boundaries of its eponymous Soviet republic (e.g. over 90 per cent of the Turkmens were encompassed within the boundaries of the newly created Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic). The only one of the main ethnic groups to lose out in this territorial reorganisation was the Tajik. For centuries, the Tajiks had lived in the towns and cities of Transoxiana and were closely intermingled with the Uzbeks. When Soviet Central Asia was delimited, several areas that the Tajiks had considered to be part of their historic territory were awarded to the Uzbeks. Most notably, Samarkand and Bukhara were incorporated into Uzbekistan. This has remained a grievance for the Tajiks up to the present day. However, it should not be forgotten that the Uzbeks are equally adamant that these cities are 'theirs'. Thus, this disputed territory is a potential cause for conflict.

A more immediate problem is how to regulate the national borders in postsoviet Central Asia. As already mentioned, the very fact that they were drawn in such a way as to reflect ethno-linguistic divisions rather than political or economic priorities meant that they were highly contorted and cut across roads, rivers and pipelines. This was not a problem during the Soviet era, since the borders were completely open and had significance chiefly for local administrative purposes. Today, however, each state has its own strategic concerns and one of the most pressing issues is how to manage cross-border traffic in such a way as to ensure national security while at the same time not impeding the necessary flow of goods and people. The sharp increase in drug smuggling and terrorism in recent years has made this a matter of vital significance. It has also led to a rise in tension. as

neighbouring states have sometimes adopted unilateral policies towards protecting their borders. Uzbekistan, for example, has mined its borders with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in order to deter insurgents and drug smugglers. However, tens of local people have been killed when they accidentally strayed into the unmarked minefields. Issues such as these require a coordinated regional approach, but this will be difficult to achieve given that these states have little tradition of working together.

## **Islamic Revival**

During the Soviet period Central Asia experienced a period of intense modernisation. The programme included free education, the emancipation of women, industrialisation, the modernisation and mechanisation of agriculture, and modern transport. Central Asia was thus pulled almost overnight into the modern age. At the same time society was westernised and secularised, and Islamic education was eliminated. This, rather than the closure of mosques, was arguably the main reason why Islam was effectively sidelined in Soviet times. Islam came to be seen as part of the cultural heritage and for the great majority of the population, religious practices, in so far as they survived at all, were reduced to something akin to folk superstitions. Meanwhile, although some members of the official (Sunni) clergy were eliminated (imprisoned or executed), many supported the new political power. It should be noted that this is very much in line with the behaviour of Sunni communities in other parts of the world, where in general, there are close links between the official religious hierarchy and the political leadership. (By contrast, Shia Islam has often espoused opposition to the state power.)

In the 1970s there was a revival of interest in religion throughout the Soviet Union, and this affected Central Asia too. However, the Islamic revival generally remained low-key until the mid-1980s. Many observers thought that the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (both in 1979) would lead to an Islamic revolution in Central Asia. In fact this did not happen: there was an increase in interest in religion, but no great revivalist upsurge.

When the Soviet Union collapsed and Marxism-Leninism was discredited there was an ideological vacuum, and this was felt most keenly in Central Asia, which had been the most effectively sovietised area of the USSR. The new rulers began stressing a) indigenous nationalisms and b) Islam. However, post-independence Islam was not seen as a unifying factor but as distinctive for each nation or state. The populations were disorientated; yet the tradition of following the leader and accepting the prevailing political system helped to hold these states together. The one exception was Tajikistan. where a civil

war broke out shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The main warring parties were the secularist government and the Islamist opposition. After a fierce but relatively short conflict a peace process was initiated. The peace agreement signed in mid-1997 is still holding today.

In the other Central Asian states there was no open conflict. However, the 'Islamic revivalist' groups that had emerged in the 1970s were opposed to the postsoviet political order. They believed that the new regimes were distorting Islam and using the faith merely as a political tool with which to consolidate their own power. From the mid-1990s some of these groups began to adopt a militant stance. The main centre of activity was Uzbekistan, particularly the densely populated Fergana valley. From here, they gradually extended their influence into neighbouring states, especially northern Tajikistan and southern Kyrgyzstan.

There are today two main Islamist movements in the region. One, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), is an indigenous group. It reportedly has links with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda and is on the US government's list of terrorist organisations. The other is Hizb-ut Tahrir, which originated in Jordanian Jerusalem in the 1950s. It is now outlawed in most countries round the world except Indonesia and the UK. The IMU does not engage in proselytising, but Hizb-ut Tahrir does, in a simplistic and anti-Zionist way, and has thus incurred the opposition of the local political leaders, all of whom are cultivating political as well as economic relations with Israel. The links with Israel started in Soviet times, when Soviet Jews emigrated to Israel; these included many from Central Asia, especially the so-called Bukharan Jews. Hizb-ut Tahrir claims that one of the main causes of the poverty in Central Asia is that the local leaderships are all in thrall to Westerners and Zionists. The political problems of the Middle East are thus being projected into Central Asia: there was no linkage of this kind in the early 1990s.

## **Conclusions**

Many predicted that the Central Asian states which emerged from the Soviet Union would fail to retain their independence. It is in fact quite an achievement on the part of the local leaders that, however imperfectly, they have succeeded in developing some degree of statehood. The next step is to learn to cooperate with each other on a regional basis to deal with issues such as the management of water resources, and to combat international terrorism and drug smuggling. Over the last decade the local leaders have made several attempts to construct effective multilateral organisations, but this takes a long time. Currently, the two most active regional organisations are the Eurasian Economic Community and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. The

former includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Russia and Belarus, and is driven primarily by shared economic interests. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation was initially created to resolve issues relating to border delimitation between China and its immediate neighbours in the former Soviet Union, namely Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan; in 2001 the organisation was joined by Uzbekistan. It has now widened its focus to include regional security and economic development issues.

International engagement in Central Asia is still at a relatively low level. During the past decade significant foreign aid has been delivered to Tajikistan, mostly to help to resolve the problems created by the civil war. More limited assistance has been provided for other countries in the region. A general feature of such programmes, however, is that they tend to be limited in scope and directed towards short-term needs. There have undoubtedly been some successful projects, but many have not been well planned. Consequently, they have produced few tangible benefits for the local populations. Worse, they have tended to create a dependency culture: all too often, local non-governmental organisations wait supinely for the next aid consignment instead of striving to use their own resources. Paradoxically, the bizarre regime in Turkmenistan can be seen as providing greater incentives for private initiative. President Niyazov runs a police state based on the cult of his own personality. Very few foreign organisations are able to function here. Yet at grassroots level, indigenous self-help initiatives are emerging among the impoverished population - in time, this may trigger a process of economic and political regeneration.

In the early 1990s there were hopes that the Central Asian states would make a smooth transition to democracy. This did not happen. With the exception of Tajikistan, where there was civil war, the same leaders remained in place. They soon revealed repressive, authoritarian tendencies. Once peace had been restored in Tajikistan a similar trend was to be observed there too. Throughout the region today there is widespread abuse of human rights. Corruption is rife. There is strong censorship of the media, thus little opportunity for public debate. Uzbekistan in particular has been criticised internationally for the use of torture by law enforcement bodies.

After 11 September 2001, Central Asia suddenly found itself in the spotlight. It came to be regarded as a key link in the war against terrorism, and especially in the campaign to dislodge the Taliban and Al-Qaeda from Afghanistan. Uzbekistan was seen as the West's main regional ally. There was hope at the time that the new link would lead to a softening of the Uzbek regime, but little in fact changed: Uzbekistan sees itself as an indispensable ally of

the USA and hence in no need of reform. There are many who feel that that President Karimov is losing touch with the needs and aspirations of the ordinary people. The whole situation resembles more and more the situation in Iran before the Islamic revolution in 1979 and the coming to power of Khomeini and the ayatollahs. Elsewhere in the region the situation is for the present more stable, but in each state there are dangerous social and economic fault lines and the possibility of serious civil unrest cannot be discounted. Thus, although the first post-Soviet decade has been more peaceful than expected, the real challenges of independence have not as yet been resolved.

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