

The OSCE and Islam - A Chance at Self-Fulfilment?¹

Cases of "terrorist acts with an Islamist orientation"² on the southern border of the former Soviet Union are making headlines more often now and are also a matter of concern to politicians and experts. Research analyses report: "In Dagestan the rebels declared an 'Islamic state'; the actions in southern Kyrgyzstan are considered by some observers to be related to groups aimed at achieving the same goal in the Fergana Valley (...)"³ There is concern about a "bridge between the Caucasus and Central Asia with respect to the radical Islamist tendencies on the southern edge of the former Soviet Union".⁴ Within this context, one should remember the civil war in Tajikistan (1992-1997), which was only marginally perceptible to the Western world. Islamists of the Party of Islamic Rebirth (PIR) belonged to the initiating forces in this war, which led to over a hundred thousand victims, a half a million refugees and economic devastation. This was hardly a good starting position to embark upon statehood.

Are the OSCE, the West, Russia and the other OSCE participating States, being confronted with a societal potential and political factors - namely Islam, "Re-Islamization", Islamism and Islamic fundamentalism - which could destabilize their common space and endanger security?

The societal potential to consider here is comprised of 40 different Islamic peoples encompassing a population of around 57 million.⁵ The volume of this concentration is largest in Azerbaijan (Caucasus) and in the five Central Asian states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan with a population of 42 million. The Russian Federation also has a large Muslim population. The data varies tallying between eleven to 22 million people, who belong to over 40 different ethnic groups and who form between eight and 15 per cent of the total population. Estimates assume that in about 30 years, 30 to 40 million Muslims will be living in Russia.⁶

Thus, even *quantitatively* the "Islam factor" plays a role in the Eurasian region of the OSCE, affects the domestic and foreign policy of the countries in

-
- 1 This article is a supplementary result of research funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.
 - 2 Uwe Halbach, *Djihad vom Kaukasus bis Mittelasien?* [Jihad from the Caucasus to Central Asia?], in: Bundesinstitut für ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien [Federal Institute for Russian, East European and International Studies], *Aktuelle Analysen* [Current Analyses] 33/1999, p. 1 (all quotations from foreign-language texts are our own translations).
 - 3 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
 - 4 *Ibid.*, p. 1.
 - 5 Cf. Karl Grobe-Hagel, *Rußlands Dritte Welt* [Russia's Third World], Frankfurt am Main 1992, p. 293.
 - 6 Cf. Aleksei Malashenko, *Islamskoe vozrojenie v sovremennoi Rossii*, Moscow 1998, pp. 7-8.

that region and may become a constituent part as well as disquieting element for conflict situations or constellations.

Changes in the Geo-Strategic Dimensions

With regard to the *external* dimension of this potential, it must be considered that these states, although they are members of CIS, have to a certain extent reverted back to the Islamic world. Having been part of it since the introduction of Islam by Arabic conquerors (651-874), these countries were to a large extent separated from the Islamic cultural circle through Russian colonial policies and subsequently their integration into the USSR. Because they border on the Muslim states of Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey and Pakistan, which build a bridge to the Arab world, the return of the post-Soviet Eurasian Muslim states to the Islamic sphere restored this area to approximately its old historical dimensions. Together they constitute a "powerful Muslim colossus"⁷, which now extends into the OSCE. Even today Tajik politicians are seriously considering building a highway to the Pakistani coast of the Arabian Sea - well aware of the geo-strategic potential deriving from the fact that from their corner at the south-eastern tip of Central Asia it would only take five hours to get to Islamabad by car while it takes five days to get to Moscow.

Against this background, this OSCE region gradually ceases to be what it was when it joined the OSCE after the USSR collapsed and ceases to be what it was when the West first welcomed it: a kind of "Soviet Orient", an Asian adjunct to a European, OSCE-oriented and *secular* Soviet Union. In the shadow of our Western European debates on "core Europe" and "EU eastward enlargement - with whom and how large?" - geo-strategic constellations in that OSCE area where the majority of the population has Muslim roots have shifted almost unnoticed. New elites have emerged through transformations and state-forming. Their interests, their understanding of domestic and external stability as well as security, and their expectations of the OSCE are all changing. When it comes to security and stability, even today these elites often have very different intentions and goals than the West.

Right before our eyes islands of "non-Western" culture have emerged in what has up to now been a monolithic secular OSCE region. This raises new questions: Will Islam through its existence in OSCE States become a part of the destiny of our common political space after all? What does this mean for the OSCE community of shared values and its self-image? How should and how will it deal with these new realities?

Actual practice leaves us with contradictory impressions: Without a doubt the war in and around Chechnya, the recourse to violence, is one of the saddest examples of the political helplessness, which characterizes all those directly

7 Ibid., p. 9.

or indirectly participating in the conflict and contributing to its causes. It is true that the West and the OSCE have ample room for criticism of Russia because of its excessive use of violence. At the same time however, one cannot overlook that even in their own political space they are far from developing a concept on how to deal with the Islam factor, radical Islamist forces and movements for national (ethnic) and cultural self-determination controlled by these forces.

On the other hand, the OSCE has with its concept of "security through democratization" - which is the core of its strategy for Central Asia, *de facto* already begun considering Islam and Islamist fundamentalism⁸ in Eurasia. And even though it sometimes seems that they and their election observers are not completely aware of the fact, it is inevitable that the Islam factor be dealt with in OSCE space. However several critical questions must be posed: How will this be achieved and which goals will be strived for?

To be able to answer these questions, *qualitative* specific regional components of the societal potential, which is linked to Islam in the space in question, have to be taken into account. *Co-operative* OSCE policies cannot be implemented without considering these components. This is particularly true at the point of departure and also for the future prospects of Islam in the societies of the region.

Point of Departure and Future Prospects of Islam

Despite Russian colonialism and later Russian-Soviet cultural imperialism, Islam never stopped being the foundation for and is a lively element of the social relationships and consciousness of the peoples of this region. This is true although it was hard-hit by the destructive sides of the Soviet cultural revolution (which did in fact have constructive sides). In its endeavour to force back the religious influence in Muslim societies, and to make them Soviet, within 70 years this "cultural imperialism"⁹ had repressed classical Islamic literature through alphabet and educational reforms, abolished the Islamic educational and legal systems, and liquidated the religious elite. Despite this, the regulatory traditions and norms stemming from Islam and determining the way of life were maintained. These traditions and norms in the even now essentially patriarchal societies in the Caucasus and Central Asia

8 Henceforth the author uses the term "Islamist" in relation to "political Islam". That is in the sense of political groups and trends, "which intend to introduce and extend Islamic Law - as recorded in the Koran and the written records of the actions and communications of the prophet Mohammed - to all areas of public and political dealings". Stefan Wild, Islam und Moderne [Islam and the Modern Age], in: *Wirtschaft und Wissenschaft* 4/1997, p. 16.

9 In this context, "cultural imperialism" is understood as "the efforts of a (foreign European, i.e. Russian-Soviet - A.C.S.) culture to rule or to expand in order to create a political unit", Ernest Gellner, *Nationalismus und Moderne* [Nationalism and the Modern Age], Hamburg 1995, p. 24.

adapted to the superimposed foreign system along with a traditional "people's Islam", which was tolerated by the Soviets for tactical reasons. Against this background the basic elements of Islam were able to maintain a kind of "parallel existence" adjacent to the ruling political system.

The independence of Central Asian states, the beginning of the transformation of the political system, their state-forming and the vacillating direction of their political development emerging from it, fundamentally altered the circumstances of Islam in two respects.

First its future prospects: Objectively Islam will become a constituent factor in the state-forming process. It is one of the decisive foundations and sources of consciousness of the indigenous majority of the population as well as determining their social relationships, behaviour and norms. The Islam factor must be taken into consideration otherwise the specific social conditions in Central Asia will not allow statehood or the formation of its societal mechanisms (i.e. content of and methods to create party systems, consensus mechanisms, culture, education, the law etc.) and thus the transformation of the system as a whole to function adequately. However, if statehood in Central Asia cannot do *without* Islam, this means that Islam in itself "evolves as a state".

This in turn implies that the Islam factor in the Eurasian region is not an optional variable, to be regarded or disregarded at the will of policy-makers. Through Islam "state evolution" the notion can be derived that Islam not only *has* a future, but that this future is tightly interwoven with its institutionalization in and through the process of state-forming. The upshot of this is that any outside actor intervening in this process will have to deal directly or indirectly with Islam and the part of the political elite, who is attached to it.

Second its politicization: Recently one of the most prominent Islamist politicians in Central Asia told me he was full of admiration for the democracies in Western Europe and even in Russia. He maintained that these democracies and the peoples who supported them drew their strength from each of their own specifically historical forms of "Christianity as a matter of course for the people and their culture".

This statement from a politician, who until recently was a radical Islamist in the Tajik civil war, has the following rational core: He would like to have conditions in his country so that the Muslim population (which makes up 90 per cent of the total population there) can profess their "Muslim identity" as a matter of course in state and society. In other words: He is striving to accomplish state- and nation-forming so that they conform to socio-cultural identity. After this had been pushed to the limits of its existence through an imposed foreign societal model during the last decades, this is a comprehensible desire.

However those political elites, who came to power after the independence of the Central Asian states, not only laid down secularism in the constitutions of "their" states. Step by step they even began deviating from liberalization ten-

dependencies, which had emerged during Perestroika, in the relationship of the state to religions and had given Muslim activists the hope of a "better future". For example in 1991 Islamic fundamentalists in Uzbekistan expected that in the new constitution, their country would be declared an Islamic state.¹⁰ However not only in Uzbekistan were they confronted with policies that rather resembled those of the former "red colonizers" with respect to Islam and which led to curtailing, controlling, marginalizing and outvoting it. Everywhere they were made subject to efforts to minimize the influence of Islam on social policy, which had increased particularly in the early years when the national curiosity of those peoples about their identity was roused.

A determination not to let the "zero hour" go by, at the beginning of statehood, without influencing the decision on the future orientation of the political order of their young state, combined with general disappointment gave rise to Islamist groups, "which were marked by excessive intolerance and extremism towards the existing order".¹¹ In the attitude towards Islam by the "new-old" elites and their political representatives they recognized the same combination of secularism and communism that had always been their major enemy. This led them to a new understanding of their dispute¹² - which until then had been a constant battle, but primarily on the purity of their religion - on the question of whether Uzbekistan should be a "house of Islam" ("Dar al-Islam") and hence of peace or a "house of war" ("Dar al-harb"¹³): that of a dispute between "an unbelieving minority (in the sense of the ruling secular elites - A.C.S.) and a Muslim majority".¹⁴ The Islamists of Chechnya, where Islam is combined with a national liberation struggle, had a similar logic when they used the attempted coup during the summer of 1991 in Moscow as an opportunity to overthrow the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in their Autonomous Republic. In Tajikistan in 1992 the Islamists in a coalition with national but secular democrats made a grab for power. Even after the civil war, the deletion from the constitution of the designation of Tajikistan as a secular state was at the core of the political dispute between the Rakhmonov government and PIR.

The disputes occurring during the process of state-forming in Central Asian OSCE participating States, and also in Chechnya, which were fought out as to the direction the political order should take, confirm to a large extent the statement by Bassam Tibi that the "politicization of religion by the fundamentalists is being directed against the secular national state and is an expres-

10 Cf. Bakhtiyar Babayanov, *Ferganskaya dolina: Istochnik ili jertva islamskogo fundamentalizma?*, in: *Centralnaya Aziya i Kavkaz* 5/1999, p. 130.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

12 Which is why Islamic fundamentalism is known historically and not a new phenomenon for the Eurasian region as well.

13 "Dar al-harb" means "house of discord" in the sense of orthodox Muslims disputing with non-orthodox Muslims or with other religious minorities.

14 Babayanov, cited above (Note 10).

sion of an ideological conflict on concepts of order".¹⁵ This poses the following questions in view of OSCE policies: How can one prevent differences in socio-political orientations and values from winding up in conflict? What must be done to prevent religion (Islam) from being politicized along these differences and changing into radical Islamist fundamentalism? And finally, how can fundamentalism, once it has originated, be transformed into a peaceful, reform movement? Only when this is achieved, will the OSCE also be able to maintain stability and security in its Eurasian region.

However here the OSCE ends up at the centre of the competition on what direction the political order should take. Above all, the forces competing are inner-state actors and the process is a domestic one. However despite all indecisiveness related to this struggle, one must assume that with the Islamic socio-cultural identity of the indigenous majority of the population a preliminary decision with respect to the *direction* of development exists. Islam "state evolution" will inevitably lead to the fact that within the OSCE Christian and Islamic states will exist on a parallel basis. What an unusual metamorphosis and such innovation for the European community of states.

Strategic Consequences

Faced with this prospect, the main strategic question for politicians and policy-makers is not so much whether Islamic fundamentalists gain power or not, tomorrow or day-after-tomorrow. More to the point is to clarify conceptually and instrumentally how to make policies effective and how to furnish them with the right tools in order to enable them to cope with the specific characteristics of the cultures established in that part of the OSCE space as well as coping with the *practical* state-forming process and the processes of the formation of a political order based on these in a manner beneficial to stability and security. Specifically, policies must take into account the dominance of more-or-less traditional patriarchal societies with an Islamic culture, also taking into consideration that a part of their political elites seeks a secular political order while the others are directed towards an Islamic political order.

In view of these complexities, the opinion expressed in OSCE "working groups" that one can treat the Islam factor by merely ensuring that religious freedom and freedom of speech are guaranteed, "fundamentally" does not go far enough. The same is true for an approach, which reduces this issue to dealing with Islamist fundamentalism (as in the case of Chechnya). Moreover the complexities described pose the question to the OSCE and the West of whether their undifferentiated (because it is oriented towards Western democracy standards) criticism of the *currently* ruling elites due to their

15 Bassam Tibi, Religionen und Werte [Religions and Values], in: Internationale Politik 2/2000, p. 29.

"authoritarianism", does not simultaneously alienate those *secular* forces who they *still* have contact with - in a region rich in fossil fuels (and therefore highly interesting to the West). Should we not consider that these may be the last secular elites in power? Will they perhaps be the long-term losers in the power politics games to determine a political order and will forces much harder for the West to handle replace them?

In their dealings with Muslim regions and the Islam factor, the OSCE and the West are moving through much rougher waters than the surface indicates. They have already run aground on certain reefs: They have already alienated their partners on the state level, the ruling secular regimes, with their "criticism of authoritarianism". If one uses OSCE conventions on democracy, rule of law and human right standards as a basis, these regimes are now only partly legitimate and viable. At the same time the OSCE does not have a specific concept for its dealings with "Islamists". Despite this "partner dilemma" the OSCE has taken direct action in the contest to develop a new political order in the countries of this region with a strategy in which the "human dimension (human rights, democracy, rule of law) will continue to be at the centre of OSCE efforts to provide comprehensive security".¹⁶

However, in view of this partner dilemma, who would be a reliable partner for co-operation for the OSCE and predictable in the long-term? Given this strategy, their *political* hand is pretty poor (with the exception of the "cutting edges", i.e. the IMF and the World Bank) for them to avoid making enemies on all fronts. On the one hand, this is because the socio-cultural preliminary decisions on the *direction* developments should take offer the worst perspectives for those options that are oriented towards Soviet, socialist or Western systems. (Chinese policies for reform have a certain attraction as well as the secular orientations of states with Muslim populations like Turkey, Egypt, Iraq or Syria. Even for an Islamic state formation, as has been shown, certain basic social prerequisites do exist which should not be underestimated.)

On the other hand, the OSCE, the West and even Russia are being confronted with increasingly defensive reactions due to apprehensions about heteronomy. Even if the question on orientation towards a specific political order has not yet been answered - and will not be answered in the near future - in the practical policies of state-forming, the ruling elites pursue pragmatic conceptions of "national rebirth" and "strengthening national consciousness" which are strongly oriented towards the traditional and the national. The political and intellectual elites of all ideological colours have already conformed in their rejection of heteronomous "proposals for models" and these conformities could certainly lead to coalitions of secularists and Islamists targeted against the West.

Currently two external "cultural forces" are becoming infused in the vacuum of political order: the West with its model for society on the one hand and the

16 Report of the Chairman-in-Office (Follow-up to the Oslo Ministerial Council "Decision on Central Asia"), Vienna, 15 July 1999, p. 4.

radical Islamists who are demanding the transformation of the Central Asian and Caucasian states and regions into Islamic states and who receive substantial support from the Islamic world on the other. For the most part the Islamists are using two important strategic "destabilizing reserves": the further deterioration of the socio-economic situation for large segments of the population and growing pressure from the West to assume a heteronomous value system again where the Central Asian societies have just escaped such a system or where certain sections of the Caucasus are still subject to one. Between the parameters of "state-forming connected with secularism" on the one hand and "disregard of specific national (religious, ethnic etc.) characteristics" on the other, foreign and domestic radical Islamists set their traps.

What Are the OSCE Approaches?

There is a good chance the OSCE will not fall into these traps: First of all it can draw on the wealth and political potential the plurality and cultural diversity its participating States harbour. Secondly no one can stop the OSCE from drawing conclusions about the effects of the cultural imperialism of Western colonial history and now that of Russian-Soviet nationality policy and their misguided handling of Islamic civilization and culture. Third: It could resolve its partner dilemma by reflecting on its original philosophy of building bridges, as the common child of the European political East and West. In the case of its Eurasian region, this means it must take on the role of an "honest political broker" to be able to help reconcile the contradictions that could drive Islamists and secularists into violent conflict, thus endangering European security in general.

"Islam and the West - this is a cultural challenge, an intellectual exercise and a practical structural problem all in one."¹⁷ That secularists and Islamists are gradually striving to reduce *violent* confrontation through the recognition that they have certain points in common in the formation of their "unpolished statehood" is evident when considering experiences in Tajikistan. Within the framework of the peace process - which however has not been fully secured - the Islamists have gotten involved in a (more-or-less free) dispute with the "secularists" (the Rakhmonov regime) on how to shape their common state and the life of the people (Muslims).

It is only against the background of the "Dar al-harb" of Uzbek Islamists that the transition to the "Great Jihad", announced in March 2000 by the Tajik PIR chairman Sayyid Abdullo Nuri gains its real importance. Nuri describes the "Great Jihad" as "peace and the path of politics" which is to substitute the phase of the "Minor Jihad", the phase of "bloodbath and war": "Only in peace

17 Udo Steinbach, Nachwort [Afterword], in: Kai Hafez (Ed.), *Der Islam und der Westen, Anstiftung zum Dialog [Islam and the West, Encouragement towards Dialogue]*, Frankfurt/M. 1997, p. 219.

can the political parties and the people prove to the almighty God that they are worthy of him (...) Let us all turn to helping the people and to bring progress to our country."¹⁸ That he proclaimed this transition towards an orientation to peaceful reform despite his deep annoyance about the extensive manipulation of election results to the detriment of his party shows his ability to make constructive use of his experience and thus political maturity, which might lead to changes also in the ranks of Islamist politicians. Khoja Akhbar Turajonzoda, who was head of negotiations for the United Tajik Opposition in the UN-led intra-Tajik talks until 1997 and who today is First Deputy Prime Minister, has meanwhile also come to the conclusion that if he wants to avoid the disintegration of his state he must "protect Muslim unity". Henceforth he too links *Islamic consolidation* "with the development and prosperity of the country".¹⁹

If this means that the leaders of the Tajik Islamic movement came to the conclusion that a system could also be changed through peaceful politics and not only through the violent overthrow of a secular regime which they have pursued up to now, then this would be of great importance and would make it possible to engage in politics with Islamists again.

Challenges to the OSCE - Resources towards Self-Fulfilment

The "Islam factor" is a huge challenge for the "old" OSCE because it changes the political cultural parameters of multilateral control of relationships in its region. In Central Asia the specifics of the processes, which the OSCE "must deal with", are that state-forming, system transformation and national consolidation coincide and are linked to one another. Therefore, with a view to Central Asia, this control is to a large extent dependent on whether foreign and domestic actors complement one another in favour of the stability of the ongoing process or whether they are caught up in conflict with one another. The quality of this interplay is in turn moulded by practical answers the OSCE and its participating States find to practical questions, which have already emerged from every-day political life. These affect its programmes for democracy, rule of law and human rights (e.g. the relationship to the unfinished - and in addition, conceivably Islam-oriented - nation state) and the *national* acceptance of *multilateral* OSCE control instruments (as a multilateral organization whose policies should "not be understood as foreign domination, but as collective self-determination"²⁰).

18 Statement of Sayyid Abdullo Nuri of 2 March 2000.

19 Khoja A. Turajonzoda, *Razve islam - eto tolko partiya vozrojdeniya?*, in: *Narodnaya Gazeta* of 25 February 2000.

20 Fritz W. Schrapf, *Demokratie in der transnationalen Politik* [Democracy in Transnational Politics] in: Ulrich Beck (Ed.), *Politik der Globalisierung* [Politics of Globalization], Frankfurt/Main 1998, p. 232.

In the end, the area under discussion is the intercultural dimension of multinational politics in the OSCE. In this respect there are also new issues to consider: To what extent is the valid OSCE paradigm of "one community of shared values" affected, if through the existence of islands of "non-Western" culture, OSCE policies do not find socio-cultural acceptance in parts of the common Euro-Asian space any longer? Under these circumstances, does the OSCE require specific policies of "coexistence and co-operation between different cultures"? If so: How should these be structured?

The reader who is particularly concerned about the complexity of the relationship of the OSCE to its Muslim regions could ask the following question: Was it perhaps a mistake after all to accept these states in a *European OSCE* after the disintegration of the USSR? And: To what extent can the OSCE afford to put its own value system to the test in its relationships to those states? When considering an answer to these questions one should not forget that the West and the East as well as the OSCE, through the processes of reshaping and reforming themselves for the past ten years, have become the creators of fundamental reform processes elicited by globalization and the European integration process, the latter coinciding with systems transformation in post-socialist space. The process of state-forming integrated in this represents a specific dimension not only with respect to the region but also related to the approach to "reforms" in general. It must allow these states the opportunity to look for their own, original, adequate concepts and processes adapted to their specific societal structures, requirements and historical developments to form states in which "transition" and "tradition" are united and not divided.

This is exactly what the colonial powers neglected to do in their dealings with the Muslim societies in their former colonies. This grave error has blessed us today with a huge number of so called "fundamentalisms" that are currently causing concern. If today state-forming is to go hand-in-hand with societal transformation, we must keep an eye on the astonishingly long-term effects of misdirected control on societal processes introduced so long ago.

It should be in the power of the OSCE, in the course of these fundamental reform processes to face the challenges, also in the area of tolerance, and develop a broad plural conception of itself as a "community of values" in which individual "communities of values", whether this means its Muslim or any of the others, are equal partners without having to fear being outvoted and segregating themselves politically. This would strengthen the *co-operative* character of the OSCE. This is where there is a chance to understand the "Islam factor" as a resource for self-fulfilment and to accept it positively.