

“Saudi and pro-Salafi lobby are already active in most countries of the region; according to critics, some government decrees and decisions adopted in recent years in the religious sphere look as if they were written at the suggestion of the Salafis, or in close consultation with them”, - an expert from Tajikistan, Parviz Mullojanov, on the geopolitical aspects of Salafization in Central Asia, specially for cabar.asia.



Over a period of more than 70 years of Soviet history, the Central Asian region was essentially developing apart and in complete isolation from the rest of the Muslim world. This separation was not only purely geographical, territorial or political; it was also about religious, spiritual and ideological isolation. While in Muslim countries, outside the “Iron Curtain”, a process of religious modernization, adapting to new challenges and conditions of the modern world was actively underway, in the Soviet Union religious denominations, including Islam, fought for their survival. Soviet authorities steadfastly followed the postulates of Marxism-Leninism, according to which religion was to disappear completely as a social phenomenon, receding not only from the spheres of education, law and politics, but also the everyday life of ordinary people. As a result, religious activity went underground, and by the end of the Soviet period society was already quite secular, distinguishable with a low level of religiosity.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly independent republics began establishing direct relations with the countries of the Near and Middle East, as well as with foreign Islamic foundations and organizations. This process was bound for two courses: first, geopolitical, that is, through international relations, establishment of diplomatic relations, economic cooperation and so on. Second, there was an active ideological influence when various religious movements with an entire set of religious, political and philosophical views, developed in the countries of the Near and Middle East over the previous decades began to penetrate and spread across Central Asia. And this was already a mainly one-sided influence, when young independent Central Asian states acted as an object, where after the collapse of communist ideology there emerged an ideological vacuum. Under these conditions, the post-Soviet states were not ready for such external influence, they could not understand the specifics of the modern Muslim world, where geopolitics and ideology were so tightly intertwined with each other. Meanwhile, it is in this relationship between geopolitics and ideology that one of the main reasons for the unexpected appearance of the phenomenon of religious extremism and fundamentalism in post-Soviet Central Asia lies.

Accordingly, the question is how precisely the geopolitical and ideological situation in the Muslim East today affects the state of affairs in the post-Soviet space and in the Central Asian region.

Geopolitics and Ideology in the Muslim East

Throughout modern history, the Muslim world is distinguished by a growing confrontation between two geopolitical and ideological poles – Iran and Saudi Arabia. Lately, new centers of influence, such as Turkey, Kuwait, and Pakistan have emerged, which, to one degree or another, have also become involved in this confrontation, acting as independent players. The confrontation between the Saudis and the Iranians was initially of a covert nature, but over the last decade it practically turned into an open cold war; mutual bitterness has grown to such a degree that it has had the most negative impact on stability in the entire Muslim world in general and in countries where Muslims make up a significant percentage of the population. In order to understand the causes and factors of the divide and the degree of their influence on the Muslim world, let us consider the positions and interests of each of these two geopolitical poles separately.

Saudi Arabia

Surely, in the Muslim world, Saudi Arabia is one of the main geopolitical players, both because of its economic potential and control over the main shrines of Islam. A significant role is played by the fact that the majority of Muslims in the world are Sunnis, which initially allowed Saudi Arabia to claim a leading role in the world Islamic community.

That is precisely why, from the very beginning of its foundation, Saudi Arabia's domestic and foreign policy has used religion as its main tool, in the form of *Wahhabism*, a religious and political movement created in the 17th century and named after Muhammad Al-Wahhab, one of the most radical followers of Salafism. Today Wahhabism is the official ideology of Saudi Arabia; in fact, it is a kind of "tamed form" of Salafism, since Wahhabis (unlike many Salafis of the last wave) recognize the leadership of the ruling dynasty of the Saudis in the country. Accordingly, the Saudis, in every possible way, contribute to the spread of Wahhabism outside the country, in other states, viewing it as a key mechanism to advance their geopolitical interests and establish leadership in the Islamic world. At the same time, as their main adversary and rival, the Saudis regard not as much the secular regimes as other Islamic movements and organizations – primarily Shiites, but also traditional Sunni clergy, representatives of other *madhhabs* (primarily the more moderate Hanafites and Shafi'ites)^[1], Sufi *tariqas*, representatives of political Islamic parties, and so on. Here, the interests of the Saudis directly coincided with the aspirations of most other

Salafist groups - as mentioned above, Wahabis and Salafis rely on the same ideological base, they are equally distinguished by the sharp rejection of other Islamic movements. It is not surprising that, ultimately, the Saudis moved to a broad support of the Salafi movement as a whole, seeing it as an ideological ally in the struggle against other Islamic schools of thought.

Supporting the promotion and consolidation of Salafism in the whole world, the dynasty of the Saudis also solves their internal problems. The matter is that, at the beginning and the middle of the 20th century, Saudi Arabia saw a number of uprisings of the most radical, revolutionary part of the Salafis, which posed a serious threat to the ruling dynasty. In this regard, the Saudis made the only apt decision - they redirected the revolutionary energy of the most radical fundamentalists abroad, to create a worldwide jihadist movement - and thus to secure their rule inside the country and establish themselves as a single leader in the Muslim world.

Therefore, with the beginning of the "oil era" and, acquiring its financial might, Saudi Arabia spent tens of billions of dollars on "Salafizing" the Islamic *ummah* and fighting against other competing Islamic movements and organizations. To this end, numerous funds, banks and other financial structures were created, directly or indirectly connected with the ruling dynasty. At the same time, considerable funds are channeled not only to the creation and direct support of Salafi circles and cells, but also to religious education, propaganda, organization of special courses for young adults and children, distribution of literature, control over mosques and madrassas, etc.[\[2\]](#)

Since 1979, after the Islamic revolution in Iran, the attention of the Saudi sheikhs has been shifted to Iranian Shiites. Apart from purely ideological reasons, hostility towards Iran was explained by the intensified competition after the Islamic revolution, between both countries for influence in the Islamic world. In addition to that, the Shiites constitute up to a quarter of the population in Saudi Arabia, and they live in the most oil-rich areas. The authorities of Saudi Arabia accuse Iran of supporting the local Shiite minority, primarily in Bahrain and Yemen, where they constitute a significant part of the population. As a result, anti-Shiite rhetoric and propaganda over the last twenty years has become dominant for Saudi Arabia, and the entire Islamic community is involved in the confrontation between the Saudis and the Iranian ayatollahs.

In the last decade, the development of the Salafist movement has effectively slipped out of the hands of the Saudis; as a result, political Islam today is divided into three main branches:

- a) Political Islamism, whose representatives do not deny coexistence with a secular state, participation in elections, legal, open political struggle, etc .;
1. b) Salafi organizations associated with the Saudis (effectively “Wahhabites”), recognizing their dominant role in the Islamic world;
 2. c) the so-called “neo-fundamentalists”, the most extremist-minded groups, (al-Qaeda, ISIL, IMU) who deny everything that was created after the 7th century AD, the period of “righteous caliphs”: the parliamentary system, the institution of elections, secular state, modern scientific disciplines, including Islamic philosophy, pre-Islamic history, modern culture (theater, music, singing), etc .;
 3. d) there are also groups that formally distance themselves from Salafis and politics, but profess a literal approach to the interpretation of the Quran and the Sunnah; their positions in many respects ideologically converge with the positions of neo-fundamentalists.

In general, in the modern Islamic movement, the initiative is increasingly shifting to the supporters of the very literal approach, characterized by a particular radicalism, intolerance of other religions and Islamic schools of thought, any manifestations of dissent, rejection of any form of progress seen as incompatible with Islam.

The Islamic Republic of Iran

In comparison with Saudi Arabia, Iranian leadership’s capabilities in geopolitics and export of its version of the “Islamic revolution” turned out to be very limited. Thus, declaring war on both the West (USA) and the East (USSR), the Iranian regime soon found itself practically in complete geopolitical and economic isolation. On top of everything else, the country’s economy was seriously damaged during the ensuing Iran-Iraq war; later, international sanctions were added to this, the effect of which lasted until 2016.

Under the circumstances, Iran’s foreign policy was forced to be as pragmatic as possible, when the problems of finding a way out of geopolitical and economic isolation came to the forefront, and issues of ideological order faded into the background. Thus, in the 1990s the Iranian regime was interested in improving relations with Russia, because it was about cooperation in the development of its nuclear program. Accordingly, as early as the early 1990s, Iran significantly limited its support to the Tajik opposition, and at the first opportunity joined forces with the Russian leadership to establish a peace process in Tajikistan.

Moreover, the fact that Shiites are a minority both in the Islamic world and in most of the

Muslim states played a role. As a result, for all the years that have passed since the Islamic revolution, the Iranian regime has not been able to spread its influence beyond the Shiite community; and most foreign Shiites did not accept the slogans of the Islamic revolution. Therefore, in countries with predominantly Sunni populations, the Iranians were forced to use other tools to promote their interests, with no relation to religion. For example, in Tajikistan, the main emphasis was placed on the commonality of language, history and culture, cooperation with the national intelligentsia, on the promotion of projects in the field of economy and energy. Despite this, in general, the geopolitical successes of Iranians in the Central Asian region have so far remained very modest - unlike Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Kuwait.

In this regard, the main trend of Iran's propaganda today is to prevent its isolation from the rest of the Sunni Islamic world and the struggle against Salafism, as the main instrument of Saudi influence. Therefore, if Saudi Arabia seeks to exacerbate the Sunni-Shiite relations and thus isolate Iran, the strategy of the Iranian regime, on the contrary, is aimed at reducing and mitigating the existing contradictions in every possible way, presenting Salafis and Wahhabis as enemy No.1 of Sunnis and Shiites alike.

“Salafization” of Central Asia and “soft power” of the Saudis

It appears that, in this confrontation between the two geopolitical poles of the Islamic world, the preponderance is for the most part on the side of Saudi Arabia. In this regard, there is a rather controversial situation in the region - on the one hand, according to a number of studies, the growth in the number of supporters of radical groups in the region has relatively stabilized.^[3] This led many researchers to assume that the danger of religious radicalism in the region is artificially exaggerated - largely due to the efforts of local governments, seeking in this way, to justify the policy of a “hard hand” against their political opponents.^[4] But, on the other hand, according to the latest field research, radical ideas of the Salafi character are now more widespread among the religious part of the population.

In my view, this contradiction is explicable in the following way. The most radical extremist organizations today are indeed under strict control and are unlikely to challenge the authorities. At the same time, today the religious situation in the region is characterized by an increase in the activity and influence of Salafi propaganda. This means that the “soft power” (propaganda machine) of the Saudis proved to be more successful; and its effectiveness can be explained as follows:

First of all, in recent years the very strategy of religious propaganda has changed, which has become more flexible, subtle and versatile. It is not just the wider application of the

Internet and modern technologies, but also a deeper knowledge of local realities and specifics. Thus, the Salafi propagandists today do not openly oppose the Hanafi madhhab, which is historically upheld by practically all Central Asian Muslims. ***The main focus is on injecting Salafi views and ideology into the Hanafi clergy and gradually radicalizing the religious community from within.*** This is done through graduates of Saudi-sponsored religious institutions, by training a network of preachers, penetrating and bribing the positions of *imam-khatibs* in mosques, conducting propaganda through the Internet, satellite TV and radio channels. The most vivid example of such propaganda is the satellite channel “Visoli Haq” broadcast from London in Persian, whose financing, according to the British press, was carried out directly through the Embassy of Saudi Arabia in the UK.^[5] In the cycle of their programs dedicated specifically to Tajikistan, the channel focused on anti-Shiite and anti-Iranian propaganda, intermingling it with regular appeals for jihad against the Tajik government. Apparently, Tajikistan, due to its linguistic and cultural affinity for Iran, is regarded by the Saudi leadership as a potentially “weak link” in the region; consequently, hence the special attention to this country. In this connection, it is noteworthy that the cycle of “Tajik broadcasts” on the channel was suspended soon after the relationship between Tajikistan and Iran entered a cooling phase.

Salafis and Saudis have learned to make use of various Islamic missionary organizations; taking advantage of the fact that the selection process for preachers in many similar organizations is not strict, representatives of Salafit organizations increasingly penetrate into their structures and propagate their ideas under the guise of legal missionary activity.

In their leaflets and Internet resources, jihadist organizations urge their members “to join legal Islamic societies like Jamoati Tabligh in order, on the one hand, to “dissolve into them”, and on the other, to be able to influence their activities from within”.^[6] At the same time, any criticism or disagreement with Salafis is treated as “kufr” (unbelief) and Shia propaganda, and dissenting clergy or simply critics are accused of Shiism, *shirk* (paganism) or declared “Iranian agents”.

In a situation where most of the so-called “open” Salafis are registered and are “on the hook” of law enforcement agencies, such a strategy aimed at undermining the Hanafi and other traditional madhhabs from within is most effective. Indeed, in recent times, it has become increasingly common to hear typical calls and slogans of Salafis from the mouths of leading representatives of the clergy, spiritual administrations, who are officially considered to be respectable Hanafis. This applies not only to anti-Shiite utterances, but also public statements against celebrations of the New Year, Navruz, the birthday of the Prophet, the tradition of giving national names, music, singing, folk customs, *adat*, the Sufi traditions, *mazars*, caring for the graves of deceased relatives, etc. Lately, in the sermons of the

Hanafi clergy, one can hear more often the expanded use of the *takfir* - accusations of unbelief, proclamation of a person as non-Muslim for the slightest misconduct or deviation from the rules. Meanwhile, according to the Sunni tradition, a person who has committed even great sins does not become an unbeliever, but becomes a sinful Muslim (*fasiq*). The accusation of unbelief (*kufr*) on the slightest of reasons is the main principle and distinctive feature of Salafism and modern jihadist organizations, such as ISIL or Jabhat-an-Nusra. This also applies to the increasingly frequent use of *hadeeth* in the sermons, which are considered unreliable in the Islamic tradition; but are freely used and interpreted in their favor by the Salafis and representatives of the Khanbali madhhab. The list of such, essentially Salafi pronouncements and statements in Central Asia is constantly multiplying and expanding; this shows that the Salafi ideology is gradually penetrating the environment of the local clergy and the religious community as a whole, radicalizing it from within, causing schism and strife between different Islamic movements, madhhabs and ordinary Muslims.

Another reason for the success of the Salafist propaganda in the region is the skillful and well-established strategy of working with the authorities, state bodies and officials. In theory, Salafism denies any cooperation with a secular state; in practice, today the emphasis is on creating a lobby in the power structures, manipulating the authorities' fear of the Islamization of society, pushing through the necessary decrees and decisions regarding Islamic organizations and societies competing with the Salafis. Moreover, as soon as the state takes such restrictive measures against religion or individual religious authorities, Salafi Internet resources and preachers use them as arguments in anti-government propaganda, accusing local authorities of putting pressure on Islam and of disbelief.

Apparently, Saudi and pro-Salafi lobby are already active in most countries of the region; *in the opinion of the critics, some government decrees and decisions adopted in recent years in the religious sphere look as if they were written at the suggestion of the Salafis or in close consultation with them.* Representatives of traditional Islam in the region today frequently say that the Salafis manage to provoke the authorities to repressive actions and decrees, to crack-downs on their most active critics and potential rivals with the hands of state bodies. It also becomes possible due to an astute strategy and carefully chosen slogans - on the one hand, on their websites and in public statements, the Salafis talk about the support of the authorities and political leadership; on the other hand, the main course of their activity today is to undermine the authority of the traditional, moderate clergy, which they declare to be in conformity and cooperation with the authorities. Such slogans as "There are no parties in Islam", "There are no madhhabs" or "Power from Allah", "Down with Sufis, Down with Conformists" are very well perceived by officials of religion, many of

whom during the Soviet time taught scientific atheism or wrote guidelines on how to combat religion. However, as a matter of fact, such slogans lie within the framework of the fundamental Wahhabist and Salafi ideological principle, derived from Abdul Wahabb, the founder of Wahhabism: “one ruler, one authority, one mosque”;^[7] the problem is that as a ruler the Salafis see the Caliph (not a secular leader), as a power the Salafi caliphate without any parties and dissent (not a national state), and as a single mosque, the Salafi doctrine. All those who disagree with this formula, by definition of Abdul Wahhab himself, should be equated with heathens, they “should have been killed, their wives and daughters violated, and their property confiscated”.^[8] Already during Abdul Wahhab’s lifetime, a large-scale attempt was made to implement the literal approach - at his command, upon the capture of Medina and Mecca in 1804, hundreds of local residents and clergy were accused of disbelief and executed, the grave of Prophet Muhammad was plundered, many of his Companions’ (*ashab*) graves destroyed; later, in 1925, the grave of his mother was destroyed and burned, and today the most radical Salafists insist on destroying the grave of the Prophet himself.

Today, almost all fundamentalist trends and groups - from the so-called “peaceful” Salafis (or “Madhalits”) to the Wahhabis and ISIL adherents abide by a similar ideological base. The difference between them is only in tactics and strategy, as well as in the degree and timing of violence - jihadists stand for immediate jihad and the destruction of all dissenters (we see the full and literal application of this postulate by ISIL in Syria), whereas the Madhalits and the Hizb ut-Tahrir members postpone the use of violence (armed seizure of power and the establishment of the caliphate) for a period after the successful salafization of most of society.^[9] According to opponents, the strategy of “peaceful” actions is as follows: “The first phase is the capture of the cultural and educational spheres, the second one is the seizure of the sphere of spiritual affairs, the third is entry into power structures, the fourth is the seizure of power”. ^[10] Therefore, from this point of view, the division of the Salafists into “peaceful” and “non-peaceful” is very conditional and temporary.

In this sense, modern Salafism is not so much religious as it is a political project, within the framework of which society is offered a political alternative to the existing political system and radical social reform. The problem is that the reform proposed by the fundamentalists does not denote forward movement, but rather a u-turn to the model of the early Middle Ages. At the same time, the model sought is based on the literary / literal interpretation of the Quran and the Sunnah, that is, the rejection of Islamic philosophy and traditions that have developed over the last millennium. This rejection takes root in the hard and irreconcilable conflict of the Salafis, not only with the secular part of society, but also with the majority of Muslim believers. A particularly potential danger of such a divide is in

Tajikistan, where the Islamic tradition has always been closely linked with Sufism, and a part of the nation traditionally professes Ismailism.

However, the main danger from the penetration of Salafi ideology into the region is not as much about a possibility of a divide in the Muslim community, as it is about an ideological undermining, a transformation of the local Hanafi madhhab from within. Such an internal transformation, for example, can be seen in the case of the Taliban movement in the neighboring Afghanistan, the leaders and supporters of which still call themselves “true Hanafi”. Yet in essence, according to their ideology and actions (the interpretation of the Koran and the Sunnah, the banning of music, musical instruments, chess, the Internet, the destruction of pre-Islamic monuments), many Taliban members are in fact no longer Hanafi in the traditional sense of the term, since on most issues they agree with the most Radical fundamentalists. Moreover, the problem is that such radical views and the literalist approach are spreading increasingly in the Afghan society, beyond the Taliban movement itself; all this expands the social base of extremists in the country and undermines the foundations of traditional moderate Islam.

What Is To Be Done? Summary and Conclusion

The current situation shows that the unilateral reliance on tough actions in countering religious extremism has in many ways already reached the maximum of its effectiveness. Thanks to the pressure they apply, the regional authorities today successfully drove the most odious extremists underground. However, in the sphere of ideology, the reliance on force does not work, while the focus of the activities of radical organizations today is increasingly being shifted to the sphere of ideology and the Internet space. As a result, we see that in this sphere radical organizations are in many respects one step ahead of their ideological opponents and competitors.

In the circumstances, the authorities of the Central Asian republics should also make appropriate changes in their strategy and course of action. Firstly, the authorities need to balance their religious policies, develop a comprehensive approach, concentrate their main efforts precisely on the sphere of ideology, the Internet and IT technologies, on preventive actions. Secondly, it is necessary to optimize foreign policy, (this concerns, above all, Tajikistan), separate geopolitics from ideology, neutralize the impact of the Saudi (that is, Salafi) lobby. Thirdly, it is necessary to reassess the actual situation, in order to identify the main trends and tendencies. Unfortunately, today the situation is developing too rapidly, so researchers and politicians simply do not keep track of it. Already on the basis of this, the governments of the region should develop their own “soft power” that could successfully neutralize the influence of the propaganda machine of radical organizations.

The issue of counteraction in the field of the information space is a separate one - it would be wrong to allow Salafis, both external and internal, freedom of action in the information space and education. It is well known that those who educate Muslims, form flows of information and knowledge for them, also own their minds. The situation when supporters and propagandists of the literalist approach (no matter what they call themselves - "peaceful Salafis" or Hanafis) occupy the positions of *imam khatib*, Madrasah or Islamic University teachers, is fundamentally unacceptable, as it poses a threat with real radicalization of the religious part of society.

In this regard, the authorities and the expert community must develop a number of clear criteria for determining the degree of radicalism of an individual citizen or organization. Such criteria should be used by law enforcement and state bodies in their activities. Otherwise, in the absence of such criteria, an ordinary Muslim can be accused of adherence to Salafism, only on the basis of his appearance or style of clothing. As a result, such excesses occur, as in Tajikistan, where police officers on their own initiative detained on the street and forcibly shaved beards of "suspiciously" looking young men. In fact, this practice leads to a completely opposite effect, namely, to an increase in the number of unreasonably affected people and the expansion of the Salafi social base.

Speaking about the external factor, one should also take into account thousands of people from the Central Asian republics, who are presently fighting on the side of ISIL in Syria and Iraq, as well as in North Afghanistan in the Taliban structures. It is possible to assume with a high degree of probability that sooner or later at least some of them will come back to the region. Moreover, in the light of the last defeats of ISIL in Iraq, and the recent statement of al-Baghdadi^[11], the possibility of their return in the next few years looks increasingly probable. In this regard, it will depend precisely on the regional authorities, the adequacy of their policies, whether the extremists will find themselves isolated upon their return or whether they will find ideological allies and a broad social base in the local religious environment.

References:

[1] The Saudi Wahhabis themselves officially belong to the Hanbali madhhab, which is a state denomination in Saudi Arabia; however, many Salafis today deny all traditional madhhabs.

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organization of religious universities, madrassas and schools in Saudi Arabia and abroad, as well as Salafist publishing houses and media around the world, issuing fatwas mandatory for all Salafis. The activities of Hayat al-Da'wa are financed by the Saudi government, as well as a number of large business groups and Funds of the Gulf States.

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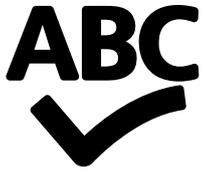
[9] Salman Farid “Traditional Islam lost the war for the minds of Muslim youth” 21-01-2013, <http://navoine.info/traditional-islam-lost.html>

[10] “Traditional Islam lost the war for the minds of Muslim youth” <http://navoine.info/traditional-islam-lost.html>

[11] The leader of ISIL recognized defeat in Iraq and urged his supporters to retreat to the mountains or return to their countries to continue the struggle.

Author: Parviz Mullojanov, a political scientist (Tajikistan, Dushanbe)

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