

SHAVKAT IKROMOV. REISLAMIZATION OF MUSLIM LIFE IN CENTRAL ASIA AT THE END OF THE 20TH CENTURY // *The article was written for the bulletin "Russia and the Moslem World."*

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Abstract. The author describes changes in the religious life of Muslims of the former Soviet republics that took place during the period 1989–91. At this particular time a delegation of representatives of the Organization of the Islamic Conference headed by Sheikh Muhammad Nasir Al-Abudi visited the republic. The text was prepared on the basis of the sheikh's diary entries, which were subsequently published in Arabic and aroused great interest in Muslim countries.

Introduction

The policy of perestroika in the USSR influenced the religious situation in the country. Thus, religious confessions received a wide path to freedom of worship. This especially affected lives of Muslims of Central Asia, Azerbaijan, Dagestan and Chechnya. The number of mosques has increased, the opportunities for religious education have increased, the conditions for implementation of the main postulates of Islam have improved, as well as cooperation with foreign Muslim countries.

Such processes intensified even more after the collapse of the USSR. This was a natural process, as Central Asia has historically been an integral part of the Islamic world. Soon, these newly independent states were recognized leading Muslim countries and Islamic traditions began to revive in them, which for many years were in the sidelines.

In Arabic literature, processes related to Islam in the region are perceived as “reislamization.” These processes in the region were monitored with great interest by the Arab States, in particular the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). Just before the collapse of the Soviet regime and in the first years after it, the Saudis sent dozens of missionaries and special delegations to Central Asia and Azerbaijan. The purpose of these missions was to create a sphere of influence in the Central Asian region. Among the delegations and missionaries who came from KSA, a special place is occupied by the trips of Sheikh Muhammad Nasir al-Abudi, a government leader and public figure, one of the leading scientists of the Kingdom.

Sheikh Muhammad Nasir al-Abudi

Sheikh Muhammad Nasir al-Abudi is a famous scientist. He is especially respected among the Arab scientific community and the royal family of Saudi Arabia. The scientist wrote more than 220 works on history, geography, language, literature, genealogy and politics. One of the classic genres of Al-Abudi is especially popular: travel notes, there are 125 published works in this genre.¹

Sheikh Al-Abudi worked for the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) for 11 years. As assistant secretary general, he traveled to Muslim communities around the world. His visits took place both in countries with the largest Muslim communities and in countries with a small number of Muslim population.² The mission of Al-Abudi was not only to accomplish the tasks set by the OIC, but also by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

In OIC, Al-Abudi was responsible for analysing the general situation in countries with a predominant Muslim population, including the conditions created to respect the principles of Islam by Muslims, the preservation of Islamic cultural heritage, education in Islamic knowledge, and the attitude of the authorities towards Muslims. He was also charged with promoting the idea of Arab and Islamic unity. Al-Abudi wrote down everything in his diary that he witnessed during his trips. Thanks to a good literary style, extensive knowledge of the history and geography of the visited countries, as well as information received from local Muslims, he managed to prepare a vivid description of the ongoing processes.³

Traveling around Soviet Muslim republics

While working in the OIC Secretariat, Al-Abudi received a task to familiarize himself with the lives of Muslims of East and West Turkestan (China and the Soviet Union). In April 1989, Al-Abudi, at the head of a six-member delegation, went to the USSR to visit Muslim republics.

The trip began in Moscow and then the delegation visited the republics where Muslims were represented by the majority of the population: Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, as well as the cities of Dagestan, Chechnya, Astrakhan and Samara regions. Subsequently, the impressions of the trip were published in several book versions. The most valuable of them are the books "Country of Dagestan," "Journey to Russia," "Azerbaijan Republic," "Diary of Central Asia." Moreover, the impressions of the trip to the Soviet Union provided the basis for books: "The Situation in Kazakhstan," "Kyrgyzstan," "Lazistan," "Country of Circassian," "Forgotten Muslim Population," "Journey to the Caucasus," "Astrakhan and Samara Region," "Belarus" and many others. Using the style close to the genre of classical travelogue, which today is rare in world literature, the author

was eager to provide information about the lifestyle and social status of Muslims. These works can be considered more like anthropological and field studies.

Sheikh Al-Abudi's first trip to the USSR took place at a time when the Muslim world was experiencing hard times, and the Soviet Union itself was in a crisis situation, on the brink of collapse. Moreover, this was a period of civil war in Afghanistan and the aggravation of the situation on the borders of Central Asia. His later visits took place at a time when the countries of the region gained independence, were going through a difficult transition period and had a stormy debate about Islamic and secular education in the state, and Islamic missionaries and radical groups, using the situation, began to be active. The contradictions of that period are not fully contained in the author's diaries, but the process of emancipation of public consciousness and re-Islamization of the population of Soviet republics with a Muslim population are described in detail.

“Lands of forgotten Muslims in Bukhara and Mawarannahr”

The first trip took place in 1989. Sheikh Al-Abudi describes the impressions of this trip in the book “Lands of Forgotten Muslims in Bukhara and Mawarannahr” (1991).⁴ He notes that religion in the USSR did not matter in political life, and was mainly preserved as a specific feature of culture of the local population. However, at the turn of the 1970s – 1980s the religious situation in the Union began to change, and by the end of the 1980s it had acquired a completely new format. In the Central Asian region, the process of re-Islamization became a serious political problem.

Babikar Darwish, author of the preface to the book, points to the difficulties faced by Sheikh Al-Abudi. Firstly, the USSR during this period was a “closed” country. Secondly, Muslims spoke different languages – more than 15 Turkic, 13 Caucasian,

Farsi, and in some regions Mongolian. Arabic, widespread in the Muslim world, was poorly used, and Russian was used as a language of interethnic communication. Another difficulty was the socio-cultural diversity of Muslims of the USSR. For example, Tajiks were mainly settled people, and Kazakhs largely preserved the traditions of vagrancy. On the other hand, Muslims in the Caucasus have a special identity and are represented by 43 tribes. Fourth, all publications in the Soviet Union, including on Islam in Muslim countries, were censored and distributed exclusively with the knowledge of Moscow.

Statistics obtained by Sheikh Al-Abudi in Moscow indicated that in the described period Muslims made up a fifth part of the total population of the USSR. Sheikh Al-Abudi emphasized the uniqueness of the role of Central Asia in the history of Islam. The inhabitants of this region made a significant contribution to the creation of Islamic civilization and its fundamental principals. Among them, Muhammad Musa al-Khorezmi (783–857) is the founder of algebra. Ahmad al-Ferghani. (died in 861) – astronomer, mathematician, geographer, author of the works “Book of celestial movements” and “Code of Stars Science.” Abu Nasser al-Farabi (872–950) is a great encyclopedist of the Middle Ages. Abu Ali ibn Sina (980–1037) is a scientist who wrote more than 450 works. 40 of them are on medicine, 30 on natural science, 185 on philosophy, logic, psychology, geology, ethics, etc. Abu Reyhan Beruni (973–1048) is an outstanding encyclopedic scientist, author of more than 150 works on history, astronomy, mineralogy. Rudaki Abdullah Jafar (858–941) – the author of poems: “Kamila and Dimna,” “Sinbad-name,” and others. Abdulkasim Firdousi (940–1030) – author of the poem “Shahnameh” (Book of Kings) – a poetic set of history of the peoples of Iran and Central Asia. Imam Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari (810–870) collected 600 thousand hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad life. Ahmad Yassavi (died in 1166/67) – founder of the Order of Yassavia and Turkic poet. Ulugbek (Mhammad Taragai) (1394–1449) created an

astronomical academy in Samarkand, which brought him world fame. His main work, *Gurgan Astronomical Tables* (1437), which describes the position of 1018 stars, distinguished by a high scale of accuracy. Alisher Navoi (1441–1501) - the founder of Uzbek poetry. Nuriddin Abdurrahman Jami (1414–1492) – representative of Persian-Tajik literature. Kamaliddin Behzad (1455–1536) is an artist who is called Raphael of the East.

Before the establishment of Soviet power, state and public life in the region was regulated by sharia law. During the years of Soviet power, religion was displaced not only from the political life of the state, but also from the daily life of the population, and the Muslims of the region were isolated from the worldwide Muslim community – the Ummah. This circumstance forced Sheikh Al-Abudi to call the Muslims of the Central Asian republics, the heirs of Islamic civilization, “forgotten Muslims.”

Al-Abudi took part in a meeting of the Department of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan. In 1989, more than 300 mosques functioned in the USSR, 82 of which were in Uzbekistan, which was one of the leaders of the region.⁵ The author also describes the system of governance of Muslim communities in the Soviet Union. The delegation also visited 15 major mosques in Tashkent. When visiting mosques, Al-Abudi was always interested in the number of parishioners, the level of their education, the general condition and history of mosques. He saw that many mosques were in dilapidated state and those visiting the mosque were mostly elderly and had very little religion knowledge. So, Al-Abudi, notes that weddings and funerals were not held according to Sunna, and that almost all ceremonies had long since gained a secular character.

After a trip to Tashkent, the delegation also visited Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva, Urgench, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, as well as a number of cities of the Ferghana Valley. Tellingly that, as a result of this visit, Al-Abudi, despite of found downsides, noted that in the Muslim republics of the USSR there were no obstacles to perform Islamic rituals and that work to

build mosques and religious educational institutions was underway.

“Travel diary around Central Asia”

Another book, based on the impressions of Al-Abudi's second trip to Central Asia, which took place in 1990, “Travel diary to Central Asia” was published in 1995 in Riyadh. This book was also presented in the genre of travel, where the author describes life of Muslims of the Union republics – Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. The author focused on the activities of mosques, madrassa and religious media.

Interest in life of Muslims of the USSR during this period increased significantly. In the early 1990s foreign scientists published a number of works on the religious situation in Central Asia. In particular, the works of S. Akiner,⁶ Adib Khalid⁷ and Johan Rasanayagam⁸ appeared. They refer to Islam and secularism in the region, relations between the state and society on religious issues, as well as specifics, contradictions and potential future threats. In particular, Johan Rasanayagam, basing on anthropological methods, studied life of Muslims in Central Asia, especially in Uzbekistan, was interested in the degree of reflection of Islam in the minds of local population. The work of Al-Abudi should certainly be considered an anthropological study, since the author focuses more on the material heritage of Muslims. However, the works of other authors also provide interesting information. Thus, J. Rasanayagam since 1998 lived in the Andijan region and for several years he was able to study deeply the level of religiosity of the population. On the example of the Andijans, he describes the changes that occurred in the minds of the inhabitants of Central Asia in Soviet and post-Soviet times.

Al-Abudi monitored worshippers in mosques, madrassa and mausoleum in cities, as well as places related to religious cults and education.

In his book *Diary of Central Asia*, estimating the region's place in the Islamic world, he noted the following: "first of all, this region is a place where the fundamental principles of Islam were laid for Muslims...," thereby recognizing it as one of the leading components in the Islamic world. Al-Abudi commended the work of the Muslim Department. He mentions a publication of the newspaper *Islom Nuri*, books used for religious education, in particular, the manuals *Muallimi Soni*, *Religion Islam*, *Myftah Al-Nahv* and *Islamic Prayer*. Al-Abudi noted the great merit of the head of spiritual administration, Sheikh Muhammad Sadiq Muhammad Yusuf, in translating the meanings of the Koran and publishing many other religious books.

In order to promote religious education in Central Asia, the delegation visited some Muslim higher schools, in particular the Imam Termezi Islamic Institute in Dushanbe (Tajikistan). The delegation was informed about the construction of a new Islamic institute in Ferghana, in Khorezm, about the project of the Islamic center in Tashkent, with the Tashkent Islamic Institute named after Imam Bukhari, the Miri Arab madrassa in Bukhara.⁹ The delegation got to know the activities of the Imam Buhari Islamic Institute. About the visit to the Tashkent Islamic Institute named after Imam Buhari Al-Abudi wrote the following: "About 100 students who are fluent in Arabic study at the institute. They come here to study from different republics. They are taught by more than fifteen teachers, most of whom are graduates of Miri Arab Madrassa."¹⁰ After spiritual administration, he visited the mosques of Tashkent and regretted that the mosques were in a weakened state and there were very few of them, and the existing mosques were very old. But at the same time, Al-Abudi admits that in recent years work has begun on the construction of new and renovation of old mosques. Thus, as a result of familiarization with the diary, it is possible to learn about the religious landscape of Tashkent in the early 1990s, about the relationship between society, religion and the state. Al-Abudi noted that many imams did not know the Arabic language, as

well as the small number of Muslims with a religious education and the lack of religious literature.

After completing the visit to Tashkent, the Al-Abudi delegation continued its visit to Khorezm, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and the Ferghana Valley. Al-Abudi noted that even in the early 1990s Bukhara could potentially become the center of Islam in Central Asia, since the city had many mosques and madrassa. A visit to the Ferghana Valley convinced him that the religious image of this region was high.

“Back to Mawarannahr”

So called the book of Sheikh Al-Abudi, written after his third trip, held in 1991 Mawarannahr – this is the ancient name of the historical region in Central Asia. The name comes from the Arabic expression: “What is behind the river.”

The name appeared during the Arab conquest in the 7th–8th centuries and originally meant the region on the right bank of the Amu Darya. It was in Mawarannahr that there were the most important cities of the Islamic world of that period with high culture and civilization, such as Samarkand, Bukhara, Khujand, etc. By the time of the trip, the republics of Central Asia had already gained independence, and began to carry out reforms in all spheres of the life of the state and society. The transformation of the social and political spheres, primarily affected the processes related to Islam. We can say that both the political fate and the social and ethnic stability of the countries of the region depended on the solution of this issue. All Muslim countries abroad attentively watched the historical processes in the region and tried to exert as much influence as possible on the events. Especially Saudi Arabia, which considers itself the center of the Muslim community. Therefore, the Kingdom actively sent Islamic missionaries to the republics of Central Asia. Among these missionaries was the Al-Abudi group, which practically repeated the route of the Sheikh's first trip. This time, he notes a

change in the political situation in the region and changes in the social life of the republics.

In particular, he mentions the presence of parties in Uzbekistan, one of which, the "Islamic Revival Party," was a "religious party."¹¹ However, he does not write that the party's activities were suspended at that moment due to its propaganda of fundamentalism. Analyzing political and ideological processes in the republics of the region, the author writes: "The ideas of Marxism and Leninism, which dominated for many years, are replaced by Islamic ideas in the region. It can be seen that every day Islam is dynamically developing in the republics of the region, but returning of the region to the Muslim family under the influence of the West is a subject of discussion."¹² Many Muslim countries, such as Saudi Arabia, the Gulf countries, Pakistan, Egypt, as well as Turkey and Iran, supported the process of re-Islamization in the region. The author argues that Iran's capabilities in this regard are small, because Iranians are adherents of the Shia direction, and Turkey's ethnic proximity gives it more opportunities in the Central Asian region.

After a trip to large cities of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, the delegation of Al-Abudi was received in the spiritual administration of Muslims in Tashkent. Its head, Sheikh Muhammad Sodik Muhammad Yusuf, provided guests with information about changes in the religious sphere in Uzbekistan. In particular, he noted that as a result of the expansion of religious freedom, the number of mosques in Tashkent in a short period of time exceeded 300, while during the first visit of the delegation in 1989, only 15 mosques were recorded in the reports of the trip.

Al-Abudi's diary reports that there are many young people, religious sciences and Arabic are taught freely to everyone, all mosques are equipped with Quran and that women wear religious clothing – hijab.¹³ The difference between these travel notes of 1995 and of the previous ones, in that, visits of 1989 and 1990 were familiarization with the Muslim republics of the USSR

and observation of the lives of Muslims, and the purpose of the last trip was to influence the process of revival of Islam in the region. Besides, the visit gave the delegation an opportunity to conduct research, opened up access to sources on the history of the religions of the region and the opportunity to receive first-hand information. In addition, members of the delegation talked with the local population, got acquainted with everyday life and attitude towards Islam. All these observations are reflected in the third book. In short, the work of Al-Abudi can be considered excellent sources on the history of the complex and ambiguous transition period of the republics of Central Asia.

Afterword

It is possible to regret that Sheikh Al-Abudi did not continue his acquaintance with Central Asia nowadays, where 2042 mosques operate in Uzbekistan, in which imams with a good education work (in 2018, 1 imam per 8 thousand inhabitants). By decree of President S. Mirziyoyev (dated 16.04.2018) No. 466 "On measures of fundamental improvement of the activities of religious and educational sphere," the previously existing Tashkent Islamic University and the Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan were merged into the International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan. This educational institution, funded by the budget, holds classes in the following subjects: Koranistics, Hadith studies, Islamic jurisprudence (Abu Hanifa Law School), Tasawwuf, Islamic economics and financial system, history, original religion, Islamic philosophy, religious studies, international relations, pilgrimage tourism, sociopsychology of religion, classical literature of the countries of the Middle East. The Academy also teaches foreign languages (English, German, Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Uzbek, Urdu). In addition, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Uzbekistan has prepared online programs for those wishing to study Islamic sciences on their own.

References

The Islamic Awakening Party of Uzbekistan was not registered. It existed from 1990 to 1996. She advocated the transformation of the Republic of Uzbekistan into an Islamic republic, for the adoption of state laws based on

Sharia. The party was popular among the conservative and marginalized population. The Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Uzbekistan had a negative attitude towards the party. The Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan dated June 14, 1991 No. 289-XII "On freedom of conscience and religious organizations" does not allow the creation of political parties on a religious basis. This law establishes: equality of citizens regardless of their attitude to religion and separation of religion from the state. (Editorial comment)

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