

Border lands: Unrest north of Afghanistan

by [Michael Bourdeaux](#) in the [March 27, 2002](#) issue

One of the objectives of Russian President Vladimir Putin's recent pro-Western diplomacy is to reduce instability along Russia's southern borders. In the troubled area to the north of Afghanistan are five predominantly Muslim countries—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. When they were part of the old Soviet Union, communist propaganda constantly proclaimed that Islam was dead. But communism misjudged Islam's staying power, just as it did Christianity's.

Not one of the five countries has the remotest tradition of democracy and at least four of them are chronically unstable. Igor Rotar, a Russian who speaks the local languages, recently made a foray into the region on behalf of Keston Institute of Oxford, England, which has long been studying the countries of the former U.S.S.R. Rotar's first trip was to the Fergana Valley, which is shared by Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

The Fergana Valley was once a kind of Shangri-La—a fertile, well-watered region in the middle of a desert. People flocked to it, overpopulated it and ruined it. So much productive farm land has been built over that many people are unemployed. The residents jostle for the valuable land remaining, and some people are starving.

Stalin carved up the Fergana Valley into three political slices in the 1920s, thus placing segments of the homogeneous local population under three different local administrations. In Soviet times that segmentation was not so important, as the politics of each area was identical—run by Moscow—and the borders existed only in name. You could easily cross back and forth without any special travel documents.

Now people of identical race and language are divided by real borders sealing off three new countries. Segmenting this area was an act of malevolent foresight by Stalin (a trick he also performed in parts of Eastern Europe), ensuring the region's instability.

Far from being rooted out under communism, Islam became an underground faith, nurtured by secret mullahs. In the privacy of their homes people widely observed Islamic customs, even though there were no mosques for a public profession of faith. Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 that faith has come out into the open, rapidly rebuilding its shattered institutions in a devastated religious landscape. Much of the money for reconstruction has come from oil-rich Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia.

What type of Islam is being built in these countries? How are the residents responding to the U.S. bombings in adjacent Afghanistan? In the early days after the U.S. intervention, Rotar found some disturbing reactions. A local mufti in Kyrgyzstan's section of the Fergana Valley said: "The United States has tormented the Muslim world. That country inflicts misfortunes on Muslims in different parts of the world: in Iraq, Palestine and Afghanistan."

In Tajikistan Rotar heard a local imam say: "Washington has preferred to unleash war in Muslim parts of the world, thousands of kilometers away from home. But if you play with matches all the time, sooner or later you'll set fire by chance to your own home as well. Today Americans are answering before God for their own sins."

Russia's 1979 invasion of Afghanistan—a ghastly mistake—was partly aimed at achieving stability throughout the region. The objective of quelling Islamic fundamentalism inevitably foundered, and the Kremlin reaped the opposite of what it had desired. But whether Russia, now an ally of the U.S. in its antiterrorist mission, has furthered stability in its border regions is still an open question. The collapse of the Taliban regime has lessened the threat of the incursion of Islamic fundamentalism on the Afghan model. But the signs of things going on beneath the surface give little cause for optimism.

Why was Putin so ready to allow U.S. military bases in Central Asia (remembering always, of course, that the "Soviet" mind-set still regards the countries of the former U.S.S.R. as home territory)? The answer lies in Tajikistan, a small country with a population only half of New York City's, but one which boxes well for its weight in the trouble-making arena. After 1991, Moscow backed the old-guard, neocommunist regime in this region against Islamic rebels who had the romantic idea of establishing an Islamic caliphate that would stretch, almost without interruption, from the Caucasus, north of the Caspian Sea, through Central Asia and right up to the Chinese border. Tajikistan, with its whole southern border abutting on

Afghanistan, is the geographical and possibly the ideological fulcrum of this geopolitical concept. That porous border has seen daily traffic both of heroin and Islamic fundamentalism from Afghanistan to the north. Tajikistan's consequent instability led to several years of intense civil and almost tribal war (which went virtually unreported abroad).

Only in 1997 did some signs of stability emerge with the signing of a fragile truce between the warring parties. The Tajik president, Emomali Rakhmonov, was prepared to invite the U.S. to set up bases in his country in the hope that they would deter the further incursion of Islamic fundamentalism. By extension, Putin, still smarting from the stings inflicted on his own forces by the Chechen Muslims, gave more than a cursory nod of approval to the Americans.

The al-Qaeda network may have been squashed in Afghanistan, but only the most naïve optimist would imagine that it has disappeared forever. It is precisely these territories to the north, perhaps even more than Pakistan, which may receive the ragtag remnants of a dangerous political regime, human beings smoldering with even more resentment against the West (the perceived "anti-Islamic" world) than before.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which has close ties with al-Qaeda, has long been established in northern Tajikistan, as well as in Uzbekistan itself, especially in the Fergana Valley. This could provide a nest for both Osama bin Laden and the remnants of his followers.

Rotar traced a former IMU fighter to a remote village in Kyrgyzstan. This young man, now 28, was born in Kyrgyzia to Uzbek parents and was recruited in bizarre circumstances. He left home because a local mullah led him to a devout belief in Islam, which resulted in a clash with his parents. The mullah sent him for study in a madrassa (Muslim theological seminary) in Uzbekistan's part of the Fergana Valley. He told Rotar:

My new teacher told me that he was sending me and another six pupils to study in Tashkent. The teacher told us that to save money, we were to travel to Tashkent on foot across the mountains. We were given a guide and set off on our way. On our third day of travel, the guide told us that in fact we were going to Tajikistan to fight for Islam. He told us that we were now being given new names, and that we should forget our old ones. We were astonished, but did not argue, as under Islam arguing

with one's teacher is a grave sin. We were taken to a disused seismological station in Tajikistan, which had been turned into a well-kept military encampment. Djuma Namangani [a senior military commander] met us there and congratulated us on having become "soldiers of Islam."

The camp regime was severe: physical training and weapons instruction all day, with propaganda films on Islam in the evenings. Diversions such as listening to music were forbidden. After two months the young men were transferred to another camp, which focused on instruction in sabotage. The propaganda became even more insistent and violent.

This man finally objected to his training and, surprisingly, was released. Perhaps the type of fanaticism in which he was being trained requires unquestioning obedience; he did not mention those who stayed the course, but one can imagine that the terrorists of September 11 received even tougher training and more intimidating indoctrination. How many people have started off, like this man, with a devotion to Islam and been subverted to undergo terrorist training and are even now secreted in cells around the world?

It is doubtful whether any one of the five countries of Central Asia can control such activity. Not one shares even the minimal democratic gains made during the past decade in Russia. Their laws do not uphold religious liberty. The Soviet suppression of Islam, from which the parents and grandparents of the younger generation suffered so grievously, has bred extremism. Minority rights are constantly infringed, so Christians suffer across the region. This affects the small Protestant minorities especially, not so much the Russian Orthodox Church, identified—however misleadingly—with the "friendly power" of the Kremlin.

President Putin's—and before him President Yeltsin's—conflict with Islam on home soil in Chechnya has been widely reported, but this is far from the whole story of the domestic situation. In Russia itself Islam goes back far beyond the acquisition of new Islamic areas in the Caucasus in the 19th century. Islam is a feature in almost every one of Russia's 87 regions. In most it is a minority religion, but in seven or eight it is a substantial presence or even a majority. There may be ten times as many Muslims in the Russian Federation as Protestants and Catholics combined; Islam is without rival as the second religion of Russia after the Orthodox Church. It presents two faces: one moderate, one extreme.

One may think of Tatarstan (its capital is Kazan), a region east of Moscow, as part of ancient Russia. In fact, it is the relic of the last great Muslim dominion on what is now Russian soil. Ivan the Terrible conquered it in 1552, but Islam lived on there and, after the collapse of communism, has flourished side by side with the Orthodox faith. The report on the region for the Keston Institute *Encyclopaedia* states that the local bishop “has excellent relations with the local Islamic clergy. Bishop Anastasi and Mufti Gabdulla Galiullin have constantly offered each other support in critical situations.” These there have been in abundance, as the communist-style local administration has refused to return religious buildings to their original use.

In 1995, frustrated by years of unfulfilled promises, the Islamic community occupied a building expropriated years before. The governor called in the troops to seize it back, whereupon Bishop Anastasi visited the mufti to express his unconditional support. The mufti promised in return to support the bishop’s attempts to recover church buildings.

Such isolated incidents offer some hope that Christians and Muslims can support each other. In other places, however, are new madrassas run by young Russians who went to Saudi Arabia and other Muslim countries to study. Some of them have returned deeply affected by various types of fundamentalism, nourished again by the memory of the deprivation their religion suffered in their parents’ and grandparents’ generation. Russia’s 1997 law on religion, ill-drafted and antidemocratic as it is, does not offer scope for containing the rise of militant Islam.

In Ukraine, Russia’s southern European neighbor with a population of over 50 million, Islam is sparsely represented, except in the Crimea. The local Muslim community, the Crimean Tatars, received especially brutal treatment at the hands of Stalin. During World War II, afraid that the disaffected Tatars might join up with the advancing Germans, Stalin deported them to Kazakhstan. On the way or soon after their arrival in an alien and barren land, huge numbers perished. In the 1970s and ’80s the community rallied and, in the face of continuing persecution, demanded to be allowed to return to the Crimea. Only after the collapse of communism did these demands succeed.

In 2000 I visited Yalta, where I met the leaders of the local Tatar community. In an annex to their mosque they spoke, with moderation and diplomacy, of their many continuing problems—for example, not receiving their land back. However, recent elections have given the communists more power in the Crimean government, which

has led to the removal of the moderate politicians who were most open to dialogue with the Tatars. The procommunist administration has also interfered with the formerly cordial relations between the Muslims and local Christian communities by backing the Orthodox Church—and by extension Moscow—in any dispute.

In Chechnya, by contrast, Islam has taken on an extremist character. Chechnya did not finally submit to the Russians until the 1860s. Stalin deported almost the whole population. They returned, only to face genocide in the 1990s at the hand of Yeltsin's and later Putin's army. Putin, at great cost, has won some battles, but the determination of the local Muslim population to achieve independence makes it likely that he will eventually lose the war. Russian soldiers are still being killed, but Putin has succeeded in diverting world attention away from this domestic shame. In the eyes of the world he seems to have achieved "legitimacy" in his suppression of the Chechens, but that is likely to make them even more fanatical.

As a result of Keston's survey of the area, it is evident that the conflict in Afghanistan has done nothing to bring stability to Russia's southern borders. If anything, it has made the unrest even worse.