

Moscow feels heat from Islamic fires

Most people would be surprised to learn that the Soviet Union is the world's seventh largest Moslem nation. Its 50 million Moslems are spread across Central Asia from the Crimea to China.

Soviet Moslems are concentrated in Turkmenia, Uzbekistan, Khazakstan and Tadzhikistan. These nominally autonomous Soviet republics are all that remain of the once-independent Moslem emirates of Central Asia conquered by Russia during its southern expansion in the 19th century. This great sweep of steppe and mountain has rightly been termed "the 20th century's last great colonial empire."

A view that Russians, of course, deny. They say Central Asia is a happy and increasingly prosperous part of the Soviet Union. If it's a colonial empire, well then so is America's southwest. But residents of Phoenix are unquestionably Americans; Soviet Moslems feel little loyalty to their distant rulers in Moscow.

This attitude is increasingly important. Some demographers believe the high birth rate of Soviet Moslems could make them almost 38% of the nation's population in another 25 years and more than 30% of the Soviet army.

Moscow is uncomfortably aware of this trend and has reacted by settling Slavs in Central Asia. Moslem troops are routinely relegated to menial, non-combat roles. Under Mikhail Gorbachev, many Moslem ethnic leaders in Central Asia have been charged with egregious corruption and replaced by Slavs—an event that produced serious riots last year.

Less known to the outside world have been persistent Soviet efforts to eradicate Moslem religion and customs. Few mosques are allowed, Korans are impossible to obtain and religious instruction has been almost

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eliminated. Moslems have suffered even more repression in the USSR than Jews and Christians. At least 30 Moslem activists were tried and jailed last year alone for promoting Islam.

While Jews and Christians in North America have properly protested against the hard lot of their co-religionists in the USSR, most of the world's Moslem nations have shamefully remained mute to the plight of Soviet Moslems. Few dare anger Moscow, save for Iran and plucky Pakistan whose Islamic radio broadcasts into Central Asia are a major irritant to the Russians.

It's also noteworthy that on the few occasions that Afghan mujahedin have penetrated into Soviet Central Asia, they have distributed copies of the Koran to local Moslems. The KGB reacted by making massive efforts to seal the border to Islamic infection.

Moscow has been deeply worried by the rise of Islamic nationalism in Iran, Afghanistan and the Mideast—and its possible spread to Central Asia. There is little outward sign of Islamic unrest today in Soviet Asia, but a mujahedin victory in Afghanistan and a robust Islamic Iran both pose sharp dangers to Soviet hegemony in Central Asia. Just as the U.S. now feels the heat of Islamic nationalism on its Mideast Raj. And once again, in remote corners of Central Asia, the

name of Enver Pasha is being whispered. Of mixed Albanian-Turkish blood, Enver was one of the Young Turks who overthrew the degenerate Ottoman sultan on the eve of World War I. After fighting valiantly in the war, he secretly led a small band of Moslem fighters into Soviet Central Asia.

There, Enver organized and inspired local Moslem rebels who were battling to throw off Russian rule during the chaos following the Russian civil war. Jihad, or holy war, was proclaimed against the godless communist occupiers.

So worried was Moscow that it sent its best generals and most ruthless secret police agents to crush the mujahedin, whom the Soviets called *basmachi* or bandits. Just, in fact, what they call the Afghan resistance fighters today.

Briefly, it seemed that Enver might succeed in his dream of freeing Russia's Moslems and creating a vast Islamic empire—ruled, of course, by Sultan Enver. Then, overwhelming Soviet forces, making history's first use of air-delivered troops, finally ground down the Moslem rebels while the world turned its back.

Had Britain sent its Indian Army north across the Karakoram, Central Asia might today be independent. But Britain did not and the mujahedin were crushed.

Enver and his little band of fighters were finally hunted down and cornered by Soviet forces. Refusing to surrender, the last of the mujahedin drew their swords, gave the Moslem battle cry, "Allah Akbar," and charged the waiting Soviet machineguns. So died Enver and his men; their graves were hidden by the Soviets, lest they become a shrine. But now, from the mountains of Afghanistan, Moslems of Soviet Asia are once again hearing the distant cry, "Allah Akbar."