

## International outlook

Edited by Sol W. Sanders

### The Islamic revolt's threat to the Soviets

Moscow's grip on its Moslem communities could be threatened by the interest the new leaders of Iran are showing in their Moslem brothers across their nation's northern border. There are 40 million Moslems in the two regions of the Soviet Union that flank Iran—the so-called six Moslem “republics” in Central Asia and the Caucasus. They not only share an Islamic religion with their Iranian neighbors but they also speak Iranian and Turkic languages.

Although the Russian Revolution in 1917 brought changes, it did not alter the relative subservience of these Asian peoples to the Russians who had colonized them in the 19th century when India and other parts of the region were falling under British or French rule.

**Still ruled by aliens.** The Soviets have gone to great lengths to make their colonial status less evident, and some of these efforts have benefited the local populations. Yet Moscow cannot escape the anomaly that, in the contemporary world of sovereign nation-states, Central Asia and the Caucasus remain among the few sizable areas and populations still ruled by aliens. Not much has been heard from these areas in the past century, but that may be about to change. The Moslems are no longer isolated. Because of a much higher birthrate than the ethnic Europeans, the Moslem population is rising at a phenomenal rate—and could be 100 million by the end of the century. Even in the heavily Russian Kazakh republic, Soviet statistics show a sharp shift in favor of the Moslems. Other scattered evidence indicates that an Islamic revival is taking place, despite the absence of mosques and the persistence of Soviet antireligious propaganda.

The Islamic revolutionaries in Iran, if they can consolidate their power, may accelerate this revival. It has already quickened in other Moslem countries, most notably Afghanistan and Pakistan. Afghanistan—where Kabul's pro-Soviet regime is facing increased resistance in the villages—could serve as a test case for the Soviet Union. These same Moslem elements kidnapped the U. S. ambassador last month before he was killed in a government rescue attempt.

**Khomeini's reach.** Iran's de facto ruler, the Ayatollah Khomeini, has been very circumspect lately in his remarks about the Soviet Union. But in the past he and his associates have expressed concern at the fate of Moslems in Central Asia. Khomeini is eager to extend his concept of Islam and its relation to the modern state into foreign policy. This was shown during the recent visit of Palestine Liberation Organization chief Yasser Arafat. Unlike Arabic-speaking Mideast and North African rulers, who feel a bond to the PLO as fellow Arabs, Khomeini supports Arafat as a fellow Moslem fighting non-Moslems, the Israelis. That is why he sees the struggle in Central Asia in historic terms as a continuing one, whether against (Christian) Czarist Russia or the (atheist) Communists.

Of course, Khomeini cannot repeat his Iranian success in the Soviet Union. For all his dictatorial ways, his ugly secret police, and his reliance on the army, the Shah did not establish a state apparatus nearly as pervasive and effective as is Soviet domination of Central Asia.

However, by raising the issue of Islam in the Soviet Union, Khomeini gives support to Moslems there, provides them with a spokesman, and brings attention to this little-known region. If a stable Islamic government evolves in Iran, it could cause the Soviets a lot of trouble.

—Daniel Pipes