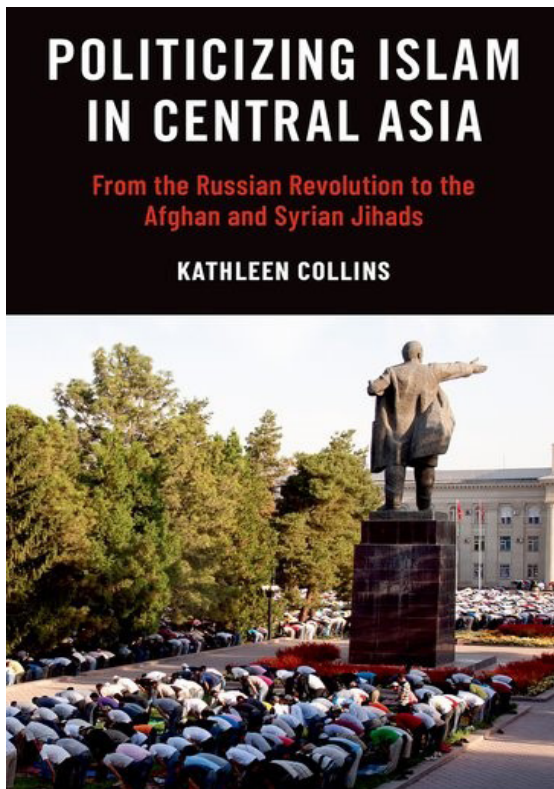




POLITICIZING ISLAM IN CENTRAL ASIA, FROM THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION TO THE AFGHAN AND SYRIAN JIHADS

by Kathleen Collins



We continue our security culture tradition by sharing with our readers a few ideas from a new editorial release that, as it is our strong belief, will hold your interest. The book, signed by Mrs. Kathleen Collins, a well-known associated professor and expert in the Islamic culture, is titled *Politicizing Islam in Central Asia: From the Russian Revolution to the Afghan and Syrian Jihads*, and next we present its review.

Professor Collins visited “Carol I” National defence University in June this year and had the opportunity to introduce to academic professors and students as well, her new research topic, which was published by Oxford University Press, and which represents the author’s second book on existing challenges in Central Asia.

Her first book, *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2008, won the Central Eurasian Studies Society Award for the Best Book in the Social Sciences on Central Asia. This makes Mrs. Collins an excellent expert on Central Asia matters.¹

As the author mentions, this highly interdisciplinary study consists of 15 chapters divided into six parts that offer a “ground-breaking study of Islam’s evolution in

¹ As per the official page of Amazon.com – About the author, site <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B0BY5LXKGV/about>



Central Asia”, as well as a significant “new interpretation of Islamism’s causes using original primary source evidence, which includes hundreds of Soviet-era archival documents, oral histories, and a trove of interviews and focus groups with Muslim leaders, Islamist activists, and ordinary Central Asians²”

In order to achieve her intended research objectives, Professor Collins spent a long time researching and writing on this project, almost during the same years that marked the growth and spread of Islamism across the region in former Soviet so-called ‘Stan’ states (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan or Kyrgyzstan), offering important insights for policy makers and human rights activists about a sweeping history of Islamism in Central Asia from the Russian Revolution to the present.

Few observers anticipated a surge of Islamism in Central Asia, after seventy years of forced communist atheism. Muslims do not inevitably support Islamism, a modern political ideology of Islam. Yet, Islamism became the dominant form of political opposition in post-Soviet Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In her new book, Kathleen Collins explores the causes, dynamics, and variation of Islamist movements – first within the former USSR, and then in the post-Soviet states in Central Asia. Drawing upon extensive ethnographic and historical research on Islamist mobilisation, she explains the strategies and relative success of each Central Asian Islamist movement, arguing that in each case, state repression of Islam, by Soviet and post-Soviet regimes, together with the diffusion of religious ideologies, motivated Islamist mobilisation. Sweeping in scope, this book traces the dynamics of Central Asian Islamist movements from the Soviet era through the Tajik civil war, the Afghan jihad against the US, and the foreign fighter movement joining the Syrian jihad³.

During her research methods used to finalise this reader-friendly manuscript in a balanced manner of historical accuracy and cultural respect for local particularities, Mrs. Collins considers that she encountered many complications – ranging from multiple times changes in the spelling and alphabets’ writing and reading (from Cyrillic to Latin) to serious movements of geographical borders of Central Asian countries, as well as political and religious changes in many of them. Even so, her main goal was to respect the Central Asian languages and cultures, maximise consistency, and ease the nonspecialist’s burden.

Therefore, the narrative of her book is oriented in providing adequate answers to two interrelated sets of questions. The first set is strictly linked to the understanding of Islamist emergence or non-emergence over time and space, including language and the defining character of political opposing movements, the different spread of Islamism in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and the three waves of Islamist movements from 1980s to 2010s. The second set is centred on whether and how Islamists attract popular support, including their media campaign, strategies

² The quotation source is Mr. Mike Croissant, a retired US government counterterrorism official.

³ Kathleen Collins: *Politicizing Islam in Central Asia: From the Russian Revolution to the Afghan and Syrian Jihads*, Oxford University Press, New York, the USA, 2023, on the cover.



employed to win social bases, ordinary people attractiveness to all/any Islamist movements and why are some of them sympathetic to Islamist ideas.

The first part of the book starts with an excellent and comprehensive description of the history of political Islam in Central Asia, followed by outstanding definitions of the core concepts of political Islam versus Islamism, and Muslim politics versus civil Islam. Without a clear understanding of the differences of some ideological terminology such as Islam, Muslim and Islamism, someone who is not a specialist could consider every Islamism a radicalistic, an extremist or, even worse, a terrorist. This part of the book develops the author's arguments and analytical framework.

The second part examines Central Asia during the Soviet communist rules, highlighting the idea of the foundation of Islamist opposition in the twenty century, as a result of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's antireligious policies. At the end, the main focus of this part is on the existing conditions of state repression and politicization of Islamic identity, alongside growing association space to disseminate Islamist ideas, which fostered the emergence of Islamist entrepreneurs. The next three parts (III to V) represent real case studies of the three waves of Islamist mobilisation in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan over nearly 50 years of Soviet and post-Soviet history, starting with the Gorbachiev's "perestroika" and finishing with the Muslim religious freedom, justice, and national Islamic revival through nonviolent means in 2000s.

The last part examines the surprising rise of foreign fighter movements in Syria and Iraq with the diffusion of Salafi jihadist ideology by radical entrepreneurs through online associated space. The main conclusion of this part is the fact that the idea of ISIS and Al-Qaida movements did not resonate with most Central Asians. Even so, by using efficient social media, enhance their sacred authority, and develop networks to mobilise thousands of fighters, Talibans obtained victory in Afghanistan.

The research project uses 23 well-designed images, seven detailed tables and seven descriptive maps of all Central Asia countries and neighbours meant to strongly argue the author's statements and ideas. These figures highlight the fact that Islamism is varied and complex, and the process of Islamist mobilisation is embedded in Central Area's historical and political context. In this respect, the most Central Asians want to believe and practice their faith under a just state and not through militant jihadists or a caliphate.

In conclusion, the author considers that studying Central Asia might provide novel insights into why Islamists sometimes emerge and mobilise and why the majority of Muslims reject radical and violent forms of Islamism. As Professor Collins mentions, a better understanding of Islamism's roots causes and dynamics over time is crucial for politicians, scholars, and the non-professionals who, many times, associate the instability and conflict with some Islamic movements in Central Asia and surrounding countries, especially targeting the West⁴.

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 21-22.



After lecturing this very interesting book, we consider the theoretical and empiric accent of this research project as being in line with the one of the Strategic Impact Journal. Therefore, we invite you to discover a well-argued and logical constructed research book, which presents a little addressed topic in the Romanian Armed Forces – the history of Islam and Islamic movements in Central Asia. Katleen Collinns’ remarkable feat of scholarship should be required reading for all students, academic professors, serious analysts and observers of Central Asia and Islam.

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