

# Muslims In The U.S.S.R.

## Seeking A New Dawn

by  
**A. Kalaam**

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[There are about 80 million Muslims in what was Soviet Union. In spite of their number, the outside world seems to know little about them. Of the 16 states that comprised the Soviet Union, Muslims were in majority in eight of them when the Communists took over in 1917. The Muslim majority areas in what was the Soviet Union were: 1. Uzbekistan, 2. Tajikistan, 3. Azerbaijan, 4. Georgia and Armenia, 5. Kazakhstan, 6. Kirghizia, 7. Tatar and Bashkar, 8. Caucasia and 9. Cremia.

Islam was introduced in Uzbekistan in the 8th century during the time of the Umayyad Caliph Abdul Malik bin Marwan. For twelve hundred years, the entire area remained under Muslim rule. Uzbekistan has produced several renowned scholars of Hadith and Fiqh, besides leading Muslim philosophers, physicians and mathematicians. It was also in the early 8th century, the entire population of Tajikistan embraced Islam, even before the message of Islam reached Afghanistan. The message of Islam reached Azerbaijan in 14 AH (636 CE), and it became a part of the Islamic world in the year 113 AH during the period of Umayyad Caliph Hisham bin Abdul Malik.

Muslim merchants introduced Islam to the European Russia in the beginning of 10th century. There are about 10 million Muslims in the Tatar, Bashkar, Kazan, the Ural and in the Volga river valley.

The December 4, 1917 declaration jointly signed by Lenin and Stalin said: "To the Muslims in Russia, be they Tartars of Volga, the inhabitants of Cremia, the Kaukaz of Siberia or Turkistan, the Turks of Kaukaz, the Charks, the dwellers of Kaukaz mountains, to all those whose mosques and worship places and whose faith and traditions were trampled upon by the Tsars of Russia or the other tyrants; Be assured that your traditions and faith and your national and cultural institutions shall be free from this day and nobody will object to these in future. You are free to organize your national life without any interference and obstacles from outside." The Russians, however, knew that the only power which could pose a threat to their revolution were the Muslim states. Within a year they changed their tune and occupied the Muslim states.

Over 74 years of colonization and exploitation has devastated their lands, siphoned off their resources, and dilapidated their spirit of freedom. The demon of Socialism had swallowed around fifty thousand ulema and religious leaders by 1940 and, according to Russian estimates, the Communists closed down 14,000 mosques in Turkistan by 1941. In the Republic of Turkmenia, during 1954 alone, 700 anti-religion speeches were arranged. The Muslims were labeled as 'Balmeek' which implied fundamentalists and regionalists. Any Muslim could be killed after being declared a Balmeek.]

The Soviet Union is in a state of convulsion. It has lost at least six of its states. The question remains as to the future of the Muslims living in that unstable country. There are about 80 million Muslims in what was Soviet Union. In spite of their number, the outside world seems to know little about them. The former Communist Party and KGB had such terrible noose around them that most Muslims did little to even think about liberation. Over 74 years of colonization and exploitation has dilapidated their spirit of freedom, devastated their lands, and siphoned off their resources.

Of the 16 states that comprised the Soviet Union, Muslims were in majority in eight of them when the Communists took over in 1917. They posed themselves as sympathizers of Muslims. Even the December 4, 1917 declaration jointly signed by Lenin and Stalin said: "To the Muslims in Russia, be they Tartars of Volga, the inhabitants of Crimea, the Kaukaz of Siberia or Turkistan, the Turks of Kaukaz, the Charks, the dwellers of Kaukaz mountains, to all those whose mosques and worship places and whose faith and traditions were trampled upon by the Tsars of Russia or the other tyrants; Be assured that your traditions and faith and your national and cultural institutions shall be free from this day and nobody will object to these in future. You are free to organize your national life without any interference and obstacles from outside."

An earlier declaration of Nov. 15, 1917, jointly signed by Lenin and Stalin said: "Nations in Soviet Russia are entitled to decide about their future any time. They have the right to secede from the Union and pronounce complete freedom, and also have the right to forsake all national and religious bindings and discrimination." (Communist government Gazette of Nov. 3, 24, 1917).

The Russians, however, knew that the only power which could pose a threat to their revolution were the Muslim states. Within a year they changed their tune and occupied the Muslim states. The Muslim majority areas in what was the Soviet Union were: 1. Uzbekistan, 2. Tajikistan, 3. Azerbaijan, 4. Georgia and Armenia, 5. Kazakhstan, 6. Kirghizia, 7. Tatar and Bashkar, 8. Caucasia and 9. Crimea.

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## **The Republic of Uzbekistan**

Uzbekistan (173,600 sq. miles) has a population of 20 million of which 80 percent are Uzbek Muslims. Tashkent is the state capital while Samarkand is the second largest city. Bukhara, Farghana, Kashkadarya and Sorekhan, are some of its provinces. It has produced several renowned scholars of Hadith and Fiqh, besides leading Muslim philosophers, physicians, mathematicians and astrologers. [[Cities of Muslim Scientists](#)]. About 60 percent of Russia's cotton is produced in Uzbekistan.

Bukhara is the center of quality carpets, while Khiva is known for sheep/goat breeding and wool.

Islam was introduced in Uzbekistan in the 8th century during the time of the Umayyad Caliph Abdul Malik bin Marwan. The renowned Muslim mujahid Quataiba bin Muslim Bahli made this region part of the Muslim world in 706 after a jihad of nine years. Soon after Arabic was adopted as the official language. For twelve hundred years, the entire area remained under Muslim rule, and the Islamic states of Bukhara, Khewa, Oazaq and Khoqand were established in this area. The Russian Tsar annexed Uzbekistan in the 19th century.

In 1917 when the Tsar's rule came to an end, the Muslims set up their independent states in Samarkand, Khoqand and Bukhara. These states fought against the Communists for five years.

In April 1922, an all Turkistan Islamic Conference held in Samarkand unanimously declared Turkistan as an independent republic. The communists sent in the Red Army, under M. Feroze who

started the mass killing of the Muslims. After the failure of this attempt, an anti-Islam propaganda campaign was started. The ulema became the foremost target of this campaign and efforts were made to win over unscrupulous people by bribery. Religious institutions were closed and congregational prayers were prohibited. Any one found praying were fined heavily. The madrasas were closed and the ulema were handed out severe punishment. Different methods were devised for their liquidation. For instance, they were pushed into work camps from where there was no escape. At the start of this campaign there were nearly 7,000 madrasas in Turkistan of which hardly any can be found now. A breed of Socialist 'Ulema' was produced. There were organized attempts to steer the younger generation toward permissiveness and liquor was supplied in abundance in the Muslim areas.

In order to distance Muslims from the Qur'an and Hadith, Arabic script was first replaced by the Latin script which was subsequently switched over to Cyrillic.

During the Second World War, when the Germans invaded Russia, the Communists softened their policy toward religion because they needed Muslims for their military. The Moscow National Museum collection includes Muslim banners inscribed with the Kalima. After the World War, the policy was reversed and a new period of hardships began for the Muslims.

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## **The Republic of Tajikistan**

Tajikistan (area: 55250 sq. mi.) borders Afghanistan and some of its area is in Afghanistan as well. Out of a total population of five million, 98 percent are Muslims of Tajik and Uzbek origin. The Soviets renamed its historic capital Dushanbe to Stalinabad. Leninabad and Khoruj are major cities. Shaikh Yaqub Charkhi, a talented disciple of Shaikh Khwaja Bahauddin Naqshband, is buried in Dushanbe and the entire area is under the strong influence of Muslim saints.

With the advent of Islam in this part of the world in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century, the entire population of Tajikistan embraced Islam, even before the message of Islam reached Afghanistan. The Russians occupied the republic in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The Tsars' rule ended in 1917 and Muslims assumed control of these areas. The Communists did not show any hostility towards the Muslims but as soon as they got entrenched in power, they invaded Tajikistan like other parts of Turkistan. By the time the republic was formally annexed into the Soviet Union, most mosques and ulema had been wiped out. The River Amu (Darya) cuts through the Tajek-speaking people living in Russia and Afghanistan. During the Afghan Jihad, the Tajek-speaking Russian soldiers came into contact with the Afghan Muslims which created a stir among them. When the Russians came to know of this development, they recalled the Tajek soldiers and replaced them with Europeans who did not even know the local language.

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## **The Republic of Turkmenia**

Turkmenia (186,400 sq. mi.) has a Population of 3.5 million of which 90 percent are Muslims. Ashgabat is the capital of the republic while Chirchik, Poltek and Maru whose present name is Mari, has been the center of Muslim civilization. Some of the world famous Muhadditheen (compilers of Hadith) also lived here. The Hamadani mosque in Mari is a historic monument which was named after Shaikh Yusuf Hamdani who took a leading part in defending Turkistan from outside invasions.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Turkmenia became a part of the Muslim world and remained under Muslim rule till the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Tsar's armies invaded it.

After the Communist revolution, an independent Turkistan came into being but the Red Army soon occupied it and made it a part of the Soviet Union. Later, it was declared as the Republic of Turkmenia and a Communist government was set up there. Its ulema were sent to labor camps and people were employed to preach atheism. During 1954 alone, 700 anti-religion speeches were arranged. The Muslims were labeled as 'Balmeek' which implied fundamentalists and regionalists. Any Muslim could be killed after being declared a Balmeek.

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## The Republic of Kirghizia

This is the fourth republic set up by the Soviets in the former Turkistan. It has an area of 76,460 sq. miles and a population of over four million of which 92 percent are Muslims. Farmand is the republic's capital. Islam reached here in the 18th century and soon the majority of the population came into the fold of Islam, and Muslim governments were set up here. Ultimately, the Tsar's army ransacked the area in the 19th century.

After the fall of the Tsar, the Muslims were overrun by the Communists. According to the Christian writers, the demon of Socialism had swallowed around fifty thousand ulema and religious leaders by 1940 and, according to Russian estimates, the Communists closed down 14,000 mosques in Turkistan by 1941.

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## The Republic of Kazakhstan

The republic of Kazakhstan, fifth republic carved out in Russian Turkistan, is spread over 1,048,310 sq. miles and has a population of 16.5 million. Seventy percent of them are Muslims.

Islam was introduced here in early eighth century. Today the Kazakh Turks are known for their religiosity. The Kazakh tribes also embraced Islam in the early 17th century. They were the last idol-worshipping people in Turkistan to come into the fold of Islam. But in the 19th century, a period of Islam's decline, the Tsar's armies started attacks on Kazakhstan.

The Kazakh Turks founded their independent republic in 1920 at the end of the Tsar's dominance but the Soviets annexed the republic by force in 1936. The Kazakh language which had been the official language of the republic till 1921, was later replaced by Russian and Kazakh national songs and Islamic songs were banned. A large number of ulema were exiled and mosques converted into clubs and schools. Some of the mosques were even converted into prostitution houses. The Muslims were barred from going to [Hajj](#). A Russian General Tober writes in one of his books that 200 Turkistani Muslims applied for permission to perform Hajj, but only 17 applications were forwarded to Moscow for approval.

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## The Republic of Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan (area 33,450 sq. mi.), situated west of the Caspian Sea and north of Iran, has a population of about 7 million of which 80 percent are Muslims: 77 percent are Turks and 10 percent Arabs and Iranians. To its west are Armenia, Turkey and Iraq. So, it is directly linked with the Muslim world through Iran and Turkey. This oil-rich republic is the main source of oil for the Soviet Union.

The message of Islam reached Azerbaijan in 14 A.H. when the Islamic army arrived under the command of Bakr bin Abdullah. However, it became a part of the Islamic world in the year 113 Hijra

during the period of Umayyad Caliph Hisham bin Abdul Malik. By this time, thousands of Arab Muslims had settled down in Azerbaijan and spread Islamic teachings all around.

The first Russian invasion of Azerbaijan was in the 13th century which led to the Russia-Iran war for the control of this republic. At the end of the war, the Tsar's army captured the north Azerbaijan and perpetrated all kinds of atrocities on the Muslims of the area which forced a large scale exodus to Iran and Turkey.

After the Bolshevik revolution, Azerbaijan's Muslims proclaimed independence on May 28, 1918, and the Russia's Communist government too extended its recognition. The first Azerbaijan parliament included 84 Muslims, 2 Armenians and 11 Russians.

But after only two years, the Red Army invaded Azerbaijan from one side and the Armenian armies swarmed into Azerbaijan from opposite directions and finally it fell into the Soviets' hold on August 17, 1939. The Russian dream of capturing the Azerbaijan's oil reserves was realized. Soon after, mosques, religious schools and ulema were eliminated and the Russians were successful in thrusting an atheistic system with the support of some ulema, who became their stooges.

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## Caucasia (Kaukaz)

The southern Kaukaz comprises Azerbaijan, while its northern area is traditionally a Muslim majority area comprising Daghestan and Charkas. The north Kaukaz (area: 166,177 sq. mi.) has a population of 10.25 million. Daghestan, which came under the Caliphate as early as 24 Hijri (AH), was among the first areas to be introduced to Islam. Later, the Shashanis and Ankosh tribes embraced Islam. The Charkas and Qarabadin tribes also came into the fold of Islam under the influence of the Turks. This land gave birth to several great warriors. The Russians launched a series of attacks on this land in the 16th century and captured the entire area in the 19th century.

The tribes living in the hills of Kaukaz declared open war against Russia under the command of Shaikh Mansoor. He was succeeded by Qazi Mullah, Hamza Bak, Mohammasud-Din and Imam Shamil. Imam Shamil continued the jihad for 30 years and won many battles against the Russians. At last, the Russians were able to capture him in 1859. His detention spread a wave of unrest all over Kaukaz and the next year, the Russian government was constrained to announce that the Kaukazis would be given full freedom.

After the 1917 Revolution, the Kaukaz Muslims also established an independent government called Turk Daghestan. Turkey and Germany recognized the state. Later the Communists also recognized it.

In 1921, a conference in the Kaukaz capital attended by Stalin himself, adopted a resolution that the Republic to be set up in the Kaukaz hills will be formed in accordance with the Islamic Shariah and the traditions of the Kaukaz people. Imam Shamil's photographs were installed in government offices. However, after only a few years, the Communists showed their true colors and under a phased program, the mosques, religious schools, ulema and the Muslim traders were gradually wiped out. In 1937, the remaining traces of Islam were wiped out in the name of "the 'peoples' movement." According to a Kaukaz author, about one million Muslims were martyred in Kaukaz.

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## Georgia and Armenia

The Muslim majority in these republics was converted into a minority after the Communist revolution and the Christians got an upper hand in the area. The Islamic Movement has started here and in March

this year, there has been a major revolt in Georgia in which 18 persons lost their lives. Clashes with the armed forces were also reported. This was the first large scale and organized revolt after Gorbachev's announcement of perestroika.

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## Cremia

This fertile and lush green island is situated in the Black Sea towards the north of Turkey and has an area of 27,000 sq miles. In the 13th century, Cremian ruler Barkah Khan embraced Islam and urged the Abbaside Caliphs to send Muslim da'wah missions to his state. On his invitation, Ulema, Muslim traders, scholars of Fiqh and preachers reached Cremia from different Islamic countries and busied themselves in the work of dawah. In 1482, an independent, sovereign government was established in this area which was headed by Alhaj Manglee Karai. Sixty nine members of his dynasty became rulers of Cremia one after the other. Towards the end of their period, the Tsar's forces started skirmishes with the Cremian army. In 1475, Cremia came under the influence of the Ottoman empire. This state lasted for 300 years when in 1774, it was declared independent following negotiations between the Russian and Ottoman governments. But in 1783, the Russians captured the island after a large scale massacre of the Muslims.

After the Russian revolution, the Cremian Muslims proclaimed their independence and the Grand Mufti of Cremia was elected its president. Some countries recognized its independence. However, the Communists invaded Cremia in 1918 and set up their government there after two years. A Communist leader, Wali Ibrahim was appointed its Governor. In this process the Russians massacred thousands of Muslims.

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## Muslims in European Russia

There are about 10.25 million Muslims in the Tatar, Bashkar, Kazan, the Ural and in the Volga river valley. The Muslims are in majority in Tatar and Bashkar but instead of establishing a separate republic, these areas were merged with the Soviet Union.

Muslim merchants introduced Islam to this area in the 10th century. In 921, Muslim ruler Ajmas Khan bin Silki sent his emissary to the Abbaside Caliph Muqtadir Billah requesting the teams of Ulema and Fiqh scholars for paving the way for the dissemination of the Islamic Shariah in this area. He also invited Muslim engineers to set the direction of Qiblah (Kaaba) and for the construction of mosques. Several eminent ulema and reformers were born in these areas, including the renowned writer and historian Qazi Yaqub Nauman.

The Russians invaded these areas in 962, and Kazan became a part of the Russian empire in 1552, and Muslims here were subjected to untold hardships. At a later stage, hundreds of thousands of Muslims were forced to declare themselves Christian.

After the Communist Revolution, these areas became free and the Muslims started constructing new mosques. But in 1918 the Red Army invaded and occupied Kazan. Subsequently thousands of ulema took refuge in Manchuria and Japan. In 1919, a socialist republic of the Tatar and Bashkar nation were established. Thereafter, the Arabic script was discarded, mosques were converted into clubs and brothels. Those who tried to resist, were deprived of their land. In 1931, there was an uprising in Tatar and Bashkar which was ruthlessly crushed by the Red Army.

Over 70 years of Russian domination did not stifle the Muslim passion for independence. This passion

was aroused anew in the 1990's with the failure of Communism.

The Soviets' humiliating withdrawal from Afghanistan had ended their facade of invincibility and superiority and the people became bold enough to stand against the tanks. The Afghan war also provided an opportunity to Russian soldiers to smuggle in Islamic literature, including the Qur'an.

Several Afghan mujahideen groups even attacked Russian territory across River Amu which raised the morale of the local Muslims.

The Iranian revolution also inspired freedom movements in Azerbaijan. The late Pakistani President Zia ul-Haq was the first to raise the voice for the liberation of Russian Muslims. After the failed coup by so called hardliners of the Communist Party, new hopes and prospects are emerging for Muslims of the Soviet Union.

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**Allah:** Allah is the proper name in Arabic for The One and Only God, The Creator and Sustainer of the universe. It is used by the Arab Christians and Jews for the God (Eloh-im in Hebrew; 'Allaha' in Aramaic, the mother tongue of Jesus, pbuh). The word [Allah](#) does not have a plural or gender. Allah does not have any associate or partner, and He does not beget nor was He begotten. SWT is an abbreviation of Arabic words that mean 'Glory Be To Him.'

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