Book Reviews

Review Article

M. NAZIF SHAHRANI

The implosion of former Soviet Russian empire resulted in the long awaited, if unexpected, birth of the last batch of independent states in Eurasia at the closing decade of the twentieth century. This remarkable event also resulted in an avalanche of conferences and subsequent publications of their proceedings in many parts of the world — especially in western Europe, the United States and some Muslim countries. The collapse of what President Reagan had dubbed as the “Evil Empire”, also brought considerable new academic attention to the region: the establishment of many new research and analysis groups and units (or giving the old dormant ones a new lease on life) to study the states of Former Soviet Union (FSU) as they made their “transition” into the triumphant Capitalist Market system.

In the Muslim world, and particularly in the “soft underbelly” of the FSU (i.e., Turkey, Iran and Pakistan), the emergence of six new independent republics in former Soviet Central Asia — Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan — was a cause for celebration and of much heightened expectations. The raised expectations were the result of a serious poverty of knowledge about this region and underrating the transformative effects of the seven decades of Soviet Russian colonial rule upon the fabric of Central Asian Muslim societies and cultures. The abrupt end to the forced isolation of Muslim peoples of Turkistan from the rest of the ummah had apparently raised the expectations that the six newly independent Central Asian republics, with a total population of more than fifty million and considerable natural and human resources, including large oil and gas reserves, would enthusiastically embrace the larger Muslim
ummah and provide a sizable new markets for their goods and services. Some of these countries (e.g., Turkey, Iran and Pakistan) began to see themselves in the role of a new “Big Brother” to the newly independent states and presented themselves as the “model” for the future successful transition of post-Soviet Central Asian societies into the twenty first century. A phenomenon that has led to some regional competitive — albeit for the most part wasteful and alienating — jockeying for influence and market shares in the region. The outcome so far, ten years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, at least for the regional peddlers of influence, has been far from what was anticipated during the heyday of the euphoria or hysteria of the early 1990s.

The volume under review records the proceedings of an International Conference on Central Asia, sponsored by the Institute of Central and West Asian Studies, Karachi, Pakistan, and held at that Institute on November 27–30, 1993. As such it is a time capsule of sorts recording both the state of poorly developed research and analysis about Central Asia as well as the documentation of a period of wishful optimism in South Asia for the revival and re-strengthening of historic ties between Central and South Asian Muslim societies.

Central Asia: History, Politics and Culture, co-edited by three Pakistani academics, is organized into three topical parts: Section I on History, consists of nine articles (pp. 1–74); Section II on Politics has eleven articles (pp. 75–194); and Section III on Culture contains twelve articles (pp. 195–338). The book also includes fourteen abstracts of various lengths (pp. 339–364), presumably of the conference presentations which were not published in their full form, followed by “A Profile” of Central Asian Republics (pp. 365–383), reflecting a compilation of data from the Europa World Year Book of 1998, by a Javed Husain.

According to the brief “Preface” to the volume by the co-editors, the aims of the Conference celebrating the Silver Anniversary of the host Institute was: to “provide an opportunity to the scholars of Pakistan [amply represented by more than twenty authors in the volume], the scholars of Central Asia [three each from Azerbaijan and Tajikistan, one from Turkmenistan, none from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan], and other states who are interested in Central Asia, such as Turkey [one], Iran [none], Afghanistan [none], China [none], Russia [one], India [two], Europe [one], and America [none], to pool their intellectual resources in order to examine the history, culture, and contemporary politics and foreign relations of Central Asia, and to see how the region can find stable moorings and secure a worthy place in the community of nations, and [to] chalk out a programme of material, cultural and spiritual rehabilitation in the context of changed political realities of the world” (p. i). It is also assumed that because Central Asia and Pakistan have a
long standing “cultural, institutional and spiritual relations, [therefore] the scholars from these two regions are deeply interested” in finding ways and means of collaborative research and analysis” (ibid). Hence, the expected outcome of the forum was “a better perception of Central Asian republics’ problems” in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, presumably by the Pakistani scholars, and their collaborative efforts with their Central Asian counterparts to articulate “a clearer vision of the paths... to a better future for the people of the area” (p. ii).

As a reflection of the cumulative endeavours of the conference participants, the volume editors and the sponsoring Institute, during that expansive time of wishful optimism in the early1990s, the volume falls far short of its declared aims and objectives both as a work of serious scholarship and as a document aiming to offer specific programmatic vision(s) for the future of post-Soviet Central Asian republics, or policy guidelines for the future relationship between Pakistan and the newly independent Central Asian states. Constructing a coherent volume that addresses significant themes from any international conference presents enormous challenges. But pulling together conference papers on Central Asia written not only by scholars from South Asian and former Soviet backgrounds, but also a retired army officer, a former ambassador and even a former minister of foreign affairs has added greater complexity to the task. One important means, generally employed by volume editors, to provide some semblance of intellectual integrity to such collections of disparate essays is by constructing a broad analytical chapter(s)—a general introduction, introduction to various parts and/or conclusion — by the editors synthesizing the major arguments of the contributors. Unfortunately, this volume is blissfully innocent of any such efforts on the part of the co-editors. Further, the editors have failed to include even the most rudimentary map (either historical or contemporary) of the regions covered. Combined with the absence of any care to bring about some standardization of the spellings of names (geographic, tribal, ethnic and personal), makes the use of this book a hazardous task for the uninitiated and very cumbersome and frustrating for the area specialists. The examples of spelling inconsistencies (e.g., Uzbeks, Uzbekstan, p.190, for Uzbeks and Uzbekistan; Buchara, p. 301, for Bukhara; Pekhlavi, p. 11, for Pahlavi) are simply too many to mention them all.

The organization of articles into thematic Sections lack any meaningful order. Section I, on History begins with a review of Central Asian Studies in Pakistan (by Akhtar Rahi) and ends with a complaint by M. Anwar Khan regarding the poverty of data about the region. Yet, Dr Khan does not shy away from offering an extremely outdated impressionistic and superficial information about Central Asian republics. Sandwiched in between are a
sundry of barely connected pieces: a strangely worded title about “Tajik Indian Pakistan Literary Links in XIII – XVII Centuries” [Pakistan in the 13th – 17th century?] by Alimardanov of Tajikistan; the utterly unconvincing case made by Professor Dani about the historical and future role of Balochistan as “The Gateway to Central Asia”; trade relations between Azrbaijan and Central Asia in the 18th century (Mamadova); and commercial ties between Muslim Spain and Khurasan during 9–11th centuries (Imamuddin).

Despite the lack of harmony and cohesion, some of the articles are not without merit. For example, Akhtar Rahi’s piece is a fine inventory of the written or translated histories of Central Asian men of sword and men of religion in the subcontinent. Unfortunately, the utility of this article as well as that by Professor Alimardanov is marred by total absence of proper references and bibliographic information about the sources and the titles discussed.

Professor Ahamad Hasan Dani, the doyen of Central Asian studies in Pakistan, while offering an arguably alternative explanation for the dissolution of the former USSR, his rosy predictions about the people of Central Asia that they will “certainly aspire to mould their life according to Islamic values” (p. 20), and that Balochistan “could go forward [with some miracle power of agency!] in bringing together Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan and all states of Central Asia and evolve a policy of cooperation and strategic link for the common use of the Arabian sea” (p. 22) seem widely off the mark. The only role extended to Balochistan, so far by Pakistan Government, seems to be its support to the Taliban movement from Quetta into the war torn Afghanistan which has brought little else than politicization of ethnicity in that long suffering nation, further bloodshed and the threat of total chaos in Central Asia, an unfortunate development which has culminated in the re-strengthening of Russian influence in the region. Dr Tirmizi’s renditions of the differing conceptions of Central Asia (European, Russian, Chinese, Persian and Indiana) and his brief history of Central Asian and Mughal official edicts and documentation practices is the rare gem in this section of the book. Also valuable is Professor Razvi’s account of the astronomical research and constructions of observatories in Central Asia in general and that of the Timurid ruler of Samarkand, Ulughbeg, in particular.

Section II on Politics consists of a medley of articles discussing in no coherent order a variety of issues — small and large, obscure and well-known — events and characters that are, to a large measure, outdated due to the fast pace of political changes in the region. The section begins with an examination of the numerically small non-Azeri ethnic groups (Lezghins, Udins, Inghiloyes, etc.) in Azerbaijan in which Professor Abbasov tries his hand on applying the long-dated Soviet theories of ethnogenesis. Then Afzal Mahmood in his chapter states the obvious: that the Russians want to ensure
the continued dependency of Central Asia on Russia. He offers words of caution to ECO member countries in dealing with Russia, but makes no constructive suggestion as to how they should relate to that important powerhouse to the north. The disappointing piece in the volume, at least to this reviewer, is the article entitled “Geo-Politics of Central Asia” by Agha Shahi, the former Foreign Minister of Pakistan. Shahi calls the President of Uzbekistan Ismail (instead of Islam) Karimov (p. 95), and refers to Nursultan Nazarbayev, the President of Kazakstan as “Sultan Nazerbeyof” “the president of Tajikistan” (p. 95). Then in showing his skills and familiarity with a piece of popular (in the early 1990s) analytical literature states the following: “One might have heard of Fukohoma’s [sic] essay that the West has conquered”, by which I suspect, Mr Shahi means Francis Fukuyama’s 1989 essay “The End of History” published in The National Interest, no. 16 (summer) pp. 3–18 or his 1992 book, The End of History and the Last Man (published by Free Press). Apart from these minor diplomatic and scholarly aberrations, Shahi in his article advocates a curious regional policy for Pakistan. In the beginning of his article he suggests that, although there is a desire on the part of Pakistan and the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) group countries — “basically an economic grouping” — that they “should try to assume a political role and in due course of time also aspire to the possibility of geopolitical role” (p. 93). Quickly, however, he assesses that in view of global politics — i.e., the opposition of the West, Israel, Russia and India to Islamic fundamentalism — that “we [Pakistan] should concentrate on the geoeconomic perspective” (ibid). But after discussing the many international and regional obstacle to Islamist oriented political stance in Central Asia, and noting Pakistan’s very limited economic potentials for making an inroad in the region, Agha Shahi concludes his paper by stating that “Pakistan’s policy makers should ... for the time being opt for more geo-political approach” (p. 98). He, however, does not define what he means by a “geopolitical approach”.

Professor Durrani offers a fanciful fable, based primarily on a mid-nineteenth century account by H.W. Bellow, a British colonial agent and author, for the history of the establishment of a Durrani Pushtun tribal empire which preceded the creation of a buffer state under the name of Afghanistan in the late 19th century. He makes some remarkable ethnographically disputable statements such as: “Pashto Language is spoken in almost all parts of the country [Afghanistan]” and “Afghans [Pushtun/Pashton/Pakhtun] are in majority in Afghanistan and they are also a ruling race in the country. The greatest portion of the soil is possessed by them” (p. 99–100; emphasis is mine). Although such claims have been made by the Pushtun dominated regimes in Afghanistan without any firm data to back them up, these are widely disputed issues among scholars of Afghanistan
studies, especially since the onset of *jihād* struggle against the former USSR. Professor Durrani’s Afghanistan just as well may have been named Pushtunistan, a brave land of tribal warriors, in which the more well mannered and educated Abdali (Durrani) tribe was victimized by their ill-mannered and illiterate cousins, the Ghilzai, who constantly feuded with them over power. In this extremely rosy picture of Durrani history, Dr Durrani claims at the conclusion of the paper, without any real discussion, that all major Central Asian Turkic-speaking groups — Uzbeks, Kazakks [sic.], Turkmen, Tajiks and Kirghazis [sic.], “responded to the Afghan influence [!]... In short Afghanistan played a vital role in Central Asia” (p. 112).

The article by Yuri V. Gankovsky, a well known Russian/Soviet scholar of Afghanistan studies, is a fascinating account of the life, struggle and demise of Mullah Muhammad Ibrahim Beg (1889–1932), one of the more colourful leaders of Central Asian Muslim resistance, the so called Basmachi movement, but more accurately known by Central Asians as the Beglarden Qozghalishi or the Revolt of the begs (Headman). Popularly remembered as Ibrahim Beg Lakai, after the name of an Uzbek tribe in southern Turkistan, he had taken refuge for a time (during 1920s) in northern Afghanistan with his fighters to wage a war of attrition against the Russian Bolsheviks in the territory of the Amir of Bukhara. But Ibrahim Beg Lakai was treacherously driven out of his refuge in northern Afghanistan by Nadir Khan’s (Shah’s) Pushtun *lashkar*, mobilized from the southern tribal belt, into the hands of Russians (April 1931), who promptly martyred him and many of his men. Gankovsky’s account, based on primary Russian KGB sources is very useful, but it is short on any attempt at analysis or commentary on how Ibrahim Beg’s resistance related to the larger, failed struggles of the Muslims of Central Asia. He also does not indulge in exploring the consequent atrocities committed by the Pushtun *lashkar* and Nadir Shah’s government officials against the Turkic and Tajik-speaking peoples of northern Afghanistan as they drove Ibrahim Beg Lakai into his death and caused the virtual termination of Muslim Central Asian’s anti-Bolshevik struggles.

The articles by Makhamov on Islam and political development in Tajikistan, by Moonis Ahmar on India’s relations with Central Asian states (ranging from Kushan to Mughal times, and then to the old and worn out colonial concept of “Great Game” and its evolution into the “Green Peril”), and by Parvez Iqbal Tareen on constitution making in Uzbekistan, are unremarkable for their lack of anything new or insightful to add to our knowledge of the area or the topics discussed. The chapter by Qutbuddin Aziz is nothing but a wish list of hopes for Pakistan to offer Afghanistan as a “model transit” nation for land-locked countries of Central Asia to emulate in redirecting their trade through Pakistani ports. While Aziz is silent about
Pakistan’s disastrous Afghan policy and its implications for the future, the two final authors in this Section are not.

Dr Syed Salahuddin Ahmad in his attempt at the application of a “functionalist theory” — i.e., examining institutional linkages between Pakistan and Central Asian republics — suggests that the achievement of any institutional integration among the countries of this region is contingent on the establishment of “peace in Afghanistan” (p. 181). After some utterly fanciful speculations about the inclinations of the non-Pushtun Turkic and Tajik-speaking populations’ wishes to join one or the other of the newly independent states in former Soviet Central Asia (a pre-occupation of some Afghan Pushtun politicians and their Pakistani mentors), Ahmad raises the following mortal question: “In any ensuing civil war [in Afghanistan] the question would be who rules Kabul? Tajiks, Uzbeks or Pashtuns” (p. 186). The implications of raising such a question is that, from the perspective of Pakistani foreign policy makers, the answer seems to matter. Indeed, as it has been recently confirmed by General Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan’s policy in Afghanistan is defined by how Pakistani foreign policy establishment has responded to this question — i.e., favouring the rule of the Pushtuns to the exclusion of other ethno-linguistic communities in Afghanistan, because “it is to the national interest of Pakistan”. Indeed, the clear warning by Talat Wizarat, who examines the possibilities for confidence building and conflict resolution among ECO member countries, has been ignored by Pakistani policy makers, much to their own policy detriment. Wizarat correctly points out: “A disintegration of Afghanistan on ethnic lines will only give rise to an unending process of degeneration and disintegration of other states”, I might add, especially of Pakistan. She then sagaciously adds that “Afghanistan constitutes a test case; how the regional states face this challenge will have a tremendous consequences for the future” (p. 190). But this remarkably wise warning has remained unheeded so far in Pakistan.

Section III, on Culture is perhaps remarkable for its omissions rather than commissions as to what constitutes the meanings of this overused concept. “Culture”, in this instance, has been limited to a discussion of poets and poetry (three articles), calligraphy and painting (three presentations), funerary architecture, primarily in Pakistan (four articles), and a biography of a well known Central Asian muhaddith. The section begins with a promising title of an article by a former Ambassador of Pakistan, Dr Afzal Iqbal, on “Rumi as a Cultural Link in Central Asia”, but turns out to be nothing but a stream of consciousness pieces filled with unrealistic hopes and expectations. For example, Dr Afzal Iqbal says, “It is our considered view that Rumi will help reflect the common cultural legacy of Central Asia and his thought will weld them into a powerful unity in which premium will be placed on peace, unity
and the spiritual strength of an individual” (p. 199). He also adds that the message of Rumi — love, tolerance, harmony, peace, justice, equality and constant activity to eliminate superficial differences and unite mankind — “will kindle a new faith and a new resolve in the people of Central Asia who are his kinsmen and share with him their ideals, hopes, ambitions and aspirations” (p. 200). One is forced to ask, does this exemplify the current tragic realities of Rumi’s presumed land of birth, Afghanistan? Why the flights of fancy? And what about the Qur’ânic statement decrying the donkey who carries huge tomes of sacred texts, but understands them not. (Qur’ân 62: 5) Why not focus on the power of the agency of humans, why give misplaced agency to thoughts and ideas that are not internalized by real actors? Ideas of Rumi or others may have their relevance and may have stood the test of time, but only for those few who have heeded them!

By contrast, the chapter on Amir Ali Sher Navai (by Dr Inamul Haq Kausar), offers a short informative biographical data, but unfortunately the cited Persian texts (about Navai as well as his own) are rendered, for the most part, unintelligible because of typographical errors. The third piece on the literary culture is by Professor Annmarie Schimmel, giving a fascinating but cryptic (at least to this reader) account of linguistic and literary links between Ottoman Turkish, Central Asian and the Indian subcontinent communities from about the tenth century onwards— including the Turkish origin of the name of one of the dominant literary languages of Indian subcontinent, Urdu. Similarly, the biographical information on Abū ʿIsā al-Tirmidhī and his distinctive methodology for the collection of one of the six compilations of authoritative, sahib Traditions, by Dr A.R. Bedar, Director of Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library at Patna, India, is a useful contribution.

On an account of the difference between Iranian and Turkish style of Nastaʿlīq calligraphy, Dr Ali Alparsalan reports that the Turks came up with a method of employing a standardized number of nuqtah (dot) for rendering hurūf (letters) in their Nastaʿlīq system, but the Iranians did not. Khalid Anis Ahmad recounts how the eldest son and successor of Emperor Bābur, Humāyūn, during his fifteen years out of power (1540–1555), became exposed to the Behzād school of miniature painting (developed earlier in the Timurids court of Herat), while spending a year in the Persian Saʿ¯īd court of Shāh Tahmasp. We are told that after returning to power in Delhi, Emperor Humāyūn introduced the art in India. Then, his descendants — Emperor Jalāl al-Dīn Akbar (1556–1605), “though illiterate was very fond of books... [and] he had books read [aloud] to him” (p. 241), Jahāngīr (1605–1628), and Shāh Jīhān (1628–1658)— patronized and developed the art of miniature painting into a superb tradition that has come to be known as the “Mughal miniatures” (p. 237). This fine description of the development of Mughal paintings also
includes photographs of four paintings (p. 248), unfortunately without any captions introducing them to the readers.

Dr Sulhinisso Rahmatulaeva of Tajikistan attempts to explore the art of Central Asian fortifications through a study of miniature painting from the 15th century Herat and 16th and 17th century Buchara (sic.). Although methodologically a sound approach, lack of proper identification of actual places with fortifications studied (castles of Filmandar, Gardani Hisor, Chihilk hujra, etc. on p. 302, or Chilburja and Janbasqal’a on p. 303), and comparisons suggested by reference to poorly described miniature paintings makes the author’s claims sound enigmatic and unconvincing. With proper scholarly investigations, there is no doubt that miniature paintings could yield much useful data on our understanding of the architectural practices of Central and South Asian history.

The coverage of archeological remains makes up the remainder of the contributions in this Section of the book. E. Atagorvev, a conference participant from Turkmenistan, in a poorly written and edited brief article which tries to introduce the ruined and much neglected, but apparently once a significant city of Dekhistan (Dehistan?), without revealing its actual location within Turkmenistan. The “9–14th centuries” this city occupied about 200 hectares and contained important Islamic monumental architecture, including a mosque-madrasa complex, which since 1991 has been “declared as State and historical-cultural reservation” by the President of Turkmenistan (p. 216). The articles by Shaikh Khurshid Hasan and Brigadier (retired) M. Usman Khan attempt to explore the link between funerary architecture in Central Asia and in Pakistan, especially. Also offered on this theme is an interesting technical study of the uses of “naked brick” architecture in the early Islamic period in what are now the territories of Pakistan. All three articles, well illustrated with photographs, may be of interest to those specializing in the history of architecture in this region.

On the whole, the 1993 conference and this volume of its proceedings presented a great potential opportunity for addressing some of the very crucial research issues about important historical, cultural, economic and socio-political ties that have characterized the regions of Central and Southwestern Asia for many centuries. The collapse of the former Soviet empire and the radically altered global politics and economics demanded a more thorough and critical analysis and understanding of the potential new opportunities and problems for the countries of this region. As a volume, *Central Asia: History, Politics and Culture*, is reflective of the current status of scholarship about Central Asia, especially in the Indian subcontinent. This volume is noteworthy not only for what it covers and reveals, but also for the many important topics it leaves out or fails to highlight on the history, culture and
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politics of this increasingly volatile part of the Muslim world. Given the poor state of our knowledge and dismal quality of analysis of crucial issues on Central and South Asian Muslim states’ relations, it is hoped that these and other important topics will be revisited with a fresh and intellectually more rigorous look, in a new forum, soon.

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Before dipping into the contents of this book, the reviewer is immediately swamped with favourable comments on the beautifully designed cover by a number of prominent scholars. These praiseworthy comments place one in a somewhat awkward position because the question which arises: “What more is there to say if respected scholars such as Karen Armstrong and Issa Boullata have fully endorsed the publication?” Well, the only option was to carefully peruse its contents and see whether their remarks are valid or have to be rejected or modified.

Michael Sells is well known among Arabists for his numerous literary studies with respect to the classical Arabic odes. The close relationship between the style of Arabic poetry and that found in the Qur’ān seemed to have prompted him to embark on this project. Sells divides his Approaching the Quran: The Early Revelation into five chapters. This includes a lengthy introduction (pp. 1–31), wherein he states that he “tried to bring across the same sense of that particular majesty and intimacy that makes the Quranic voice distinctive”; and he wanted “the reader who is unfamiliar with the details of Islamic history to approach the Quran in a way that allows an appreciation of its distinctive literary character”.

When one considers the first objective, it may be argued that it is no different from what the translators of the Qur’ān such as Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Arthur Arberry, Muhammad Asad, Aisha Bewley, Thomas Irving and many others had in mind. Most of the translators, with the exception of George Sale and N.J. Dawood, conveyed the Qur’ānic message as best as they could. This contribution of Sells is very much the same. However, he confined his selection to certain Makkah chapters only; each of these is accompanied by a description of each chapter’s unique literary features. As far as one can recall, none of the earlier mentioned translators have specifically focused their effort