



Khumoyun NABIYEV^a 

^aPhD Researcher, Fergana State University

E-mail: humoyunbsn@gmail.com

THE TRAJECTORY OF SOVIET RELIGIOUS POLICY IN THE FERGANA VALLEY: INSTITUTIONAL RESTRICTIONS, CLANDESTINE ISLAM, AND IDEOLOGICAL ADAPTATIONS (1946–1991)

Abstract. *This article examines the complex transformation and trajectory of Soviet religious policy in the Fergana Valley between 1946 and 1991. Following the tactical concessions made by the Soviet state during World War II, the post-war period was characterized by alternating waves of intense administrative restrictions and ideological containment. Utilizing a multidisciplinary approach that combines historical objectivity, chronological segmentation, and qualitative content analysis of declassified documents from the National Archive of Uzbekistan, this study analyzes the structural tension between the state-sanctioned “official” Islamic institutions (under SADUM) and the resilient network of “clandestine” or parallel Islam. The research reveals that despite aggressive antireligious campaigns, particularly during the Khrushchev era, the traditional socioeconomic fabric of the Fergana Valley facilitated the survival of underground religious schools (hujras), informal spiritual leaders, and Sufi networks. These covert structures successfully preserved the local cultural-religious identity and maintained the continuity of Islamic knowledge across generations. Ultimately, the article argues that the institutional suppression and artificial spiritual vacuum imposed by the totalitarian state inadvertently laid the groundwork for the rapid politicization of Islam and the religious revival that emerged in the region during Perestroika and immediately followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.*

Keywords: *Fergana Valley, Soviet Religious Policy, Clandestine Islam, Parallel Islam, SADUM, Hujra, Antireligious Propaganda, Totalitarianism, Islamic Revival, Central Asian History.*

INTRODUCTION

The post-World War II epoch witnessed a complex, often paradoxical transformation in the Soviet state's approach toward religious institutions, particularly within the geostrategic and densely populated landscape of the Fergana Valley. Following the pragmatic concessions made by the Kremlin during the war—most notably the establishment of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) in Tashkent in 1943—the period between 1946 and 1991 was characterized by cyclical shifts between strict administrative suppression and cautious institutional containment. The Fergana Valley, historically serving as the traditional, cultural, and Islamic heartland of Turkestan, became the primary battleground for Soviet anti-religious campaigns.

While the state systematically restricted the number of officially registered mosques and tightly regulated the state-approved clergy, an expansive network of non-official or clandestine (parallel) Islam flourished across the rural and urban centers of the valley. This underground ecosystem, sustained by local hujras (underground religious schools), informal Sufi networks, and unregistered self-proclaimed spiritual leaders (mullahs), effectively neutralized the secularizing ambitions of the Soviet apparatus. Under Khrushchev's aggressive antireligious offensive (1958–1964), through Brezhnev's era of stagnation, and up to Gorbachev's Perestroika, the Fergana Valley demonstrated a distinct socioeconomic and psychological resilience. Investigating this period is crucial not only for reconstructing the historical truth of Soviet totalitarian governance but also for understanding the structural roots of the Islamic revival and geopolitical dynamics that emerged in Central Asia immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comprehensive multidisciplinary approach, blending classic historical analysis with socio-religious and archive-driven historiographical methods to trace the evolution of Soviet religious policy in the Fergana Valley from 1946 to 1991.

- Principle of Objectivity and Historicity: The research processes primary source materials free from late-Soviet ideological biases or subsequent nationalist anachronisms. It evaluates the administrative decisions of the Council for religious affairs (*Soviet po delam religiy*) within the specific socio-political contexts of the decades examined.

- **Archival Content Analysis:** A significant empirical base of this study relies on declassified documents from the National Archive of Uzbekistan (NAU), specifically the records of the plenipotentiaries of the Council for Religious Affairs for the Andijan, Namangan, and Fergana regions. These include internal statistical reports, secret monitoring files on underground religious gatherings, and official decrees restricting Islamic rituals. (National Archive of Uzbekistan, Fund R-2454)

- **Comparative-Chronological Method:** The paper segments the forty-five-year timeframe into distinct phases: the late-Stalinist institutional stabilization, the Khrushchevite aggressive secularization, the Brezhnevite covert containment, and the Gorbachevian ideological deregulation. This division enables a systemic comparison of how changing Moscow-centric directives affected the daily lives and spiritual practices of the valley's population.

MAIN BODY

1. The Bifurcation of Islam: State-Sanctioned Bureaucracy vs. Clandestine Networks

The post-1946 religious landscape of the Fergana Valley cannot be understood without examining the institutional dualism between “official” and “parallel” (clandestine) Islam. The establishment of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) created a highly bureaucratized, state-compliant Islamic hierarchy. Moscow utilized SADUM as a mechanism of containment and foreign policy propaganda, presenting a facade of religious freedom to the Muslim world while simultaneously choking local religious expressions. (Ro‘znazarov, 2021:33)

In the Andijan, Namangan, and Fergana regions, the state implemented a strict quota system for registered mosques and officially recognized *khatibs* (preachers). Archival data from the National Archive of Uzbekistan indicates a severe disparity between the population's spiritual needs and the legally permitted infrastructure. For instance, across entire districts in the valley with hundreds of thousands of Muslim residents, the state frequently permitted only one or two registered Friday mosques to operate under the tight surveillance of the plenipotentiaries of the Council for Religious Affairs (*Soviet po delam religiy*). (National Archive of Uzbekistan, Fund R-2454).

This artificial deficit did not suppress religious devotion; rather, it pushed it completely underground. While SADUM officials delivered state-censored sermons praising Soviet internal policies, an expansive, decentralized network of unregistered mosques flourished in the rural *mahallas* and collective farms (*kolkhozes*) of the valley. (Ro‘i, 2002:11). These underground networks relied on self-proclaimed or traditionally educated *mullahs* who operated outside state control, collecting *zakat* (alms) and officiating life-cycle rituals such as weddings (*nikah*) and funerals (*janaza*). Thus, the Soviet attempt to bureaucratize Islam inadvertently bifurcated the faith, stripping the official elite of true grassroots legitimacy and empowering the clandestine scholars. (Babadjanov, 2001:23).

2. The Resilience of the Fergana Hujras: Preserving the Chain of Transmission

A central pillar of the Fergana Valley’s religious resilience was the survival of the underground Islamic schools, traditionally known as *hujras*. Following the total destruction of the formal madrasa system during the “Great Terror” of the 1930s, the transmission of classical Islamic knowledge faced an existential threat. However, during the post-war period, the valley re-emerged as the clandestine epicenter of traditional Islamic scholarship for the entire Central Asian region.

Operating in absolute secrecy—often disguised as private residences, agricultural storehouses, or nocturnal gatherings—the *hujras* maintained the classical curriculum. Students were meticulously instructed in Arabic grammar (*sarf* and *nahw*), Quranic exegesis (*tafsir*), prophetic traditions (*hadith*), and Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Prominent scholarly figures, most notably Muhammadjon Hindustoniyy (1892–1989), established highly influential, covert pedagogical lineages in the valley. (Ro‘ziyev, 2018:44)

The Soviet security apparatus (KGB) and local party cadres continuously launched aggressive anti-religious drives—most severely during Nikita Khrushchev’s anti-religious offensive (1958–1964)—raiding suspected homes and penalizing unauthorized teachers. Despite these systemic risks, the *hujra* system preserved the *isnad* (the chain of scholarly transmission). By producing a generation of highly educated, non-state-aligned theologians, the Fergana *hujras* effectively neutralized decades of aggressive state-backed atheistic propaganda and Marxist-Leninist schooling. (Babajanov, 2010:98)

3. Ideological Crises and the Road to Politicization (1980–1991)

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the systemic stagnation of the Soviet Union, coupled with tectonic geopolitical shifts in the Islamic world—specifically the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989) and the Iranian Revolution of 1979—profoundly transformed the religious dynamic of the Fergana Valley. The valley’s youth, experiencing a growing disillusionment with communist economic failures and hollow ideological promises, increasingly turned to Islam not just as a cultural identity, but as an alternative socio-political framework.

During this final decade, the generational and theological schisms within the underground Islamic community of the valley intensified. (Bennigsen & Wimbush, 1985) A younger cohort of *hujra* graduates, exposed to external reformist literature and deeply critical of SADUM’s passive compliance with the atheist state, began advocating for a societal return to “pure” or fundamental Islamic practices.

When Mikhail Gorbachev implemented *Perestroika* and *Glasnost* in the mid-1980s, the state’s ideological grip loosened dramatically. In the Fergana Valley, this relaxation led to an explosive, public re-Islamization:

- Unregistered mosques openly declared their existence.
- Tens of thousands of copies of religious texts were reproduced and distributed.
- Long-repressed grievances against the state’s historical destruction of heritage burst into the political arena.

However, because the Soviet regime had spent forty-five years systematically preventing the development of an open, legally integrated, and moderate civil Islamic discourse, the sudden ideological deregulation left a volatile vacuum. The historical trauma of Soviet suppression, combined with rapid economic degradation in the valley, caused the religious revival of the late 1980s to become rapidly politicized, laying the structural groundwork for the intense ideological confrontations that marked the immediate post-Soviet transition after 1991.

CONCLUSION

In retrospection, the period between 1946 and 1991 represents one of the most complex and paradoxical chapters in the history of Islamic resilience under Soviet totalitarianism. The empirical evidence analyzed in this study demonstrates that the Soviet state’s religious policy in the Fergana Valley was fundamentally flawed in its

sociological assumptions. Moscow's strategy—predicated on the belief that administrative prohibitions, aggressive atheistic propaganda, and the bureaucratization of faith through SADUM would gradually dissolve religious consciousness—inadvertently triggered the opposite sociological reaction. By restricting the “official” institutional space of Islam, the Soviet apparatus drove the deeply rooted spiritual traditions of the valley into a highly organized, decentralized, and clandestine underground.

The survival of the *hujra* system emerged as the critical mechanism of intergenerational cultural transmission. These clandestine schools did not merely preserve the technical ability to read Arabic or recite liturgical texts; they maintained the continuity of classical Islamic jurisprudence and theological thought, creating a counter-elite completely autonomous from state manipulation. When the ideological vacuum collapsed during the late *Perestroika* period, it became clear that decades of state-sponsored secularization had failed to penetrate the deep layers of the valley's social fabric. However, because the totalitarian regime spent forty-five years suppressing open, pluralistic religious discourse, the rapid religious revival of the late 1980s quickly took on a highly politicized and volatile character. Ultimately, the post-war Soviet religious policy in the Fergana Valley did not eliminate Islam; instead, it forged a highly resilient, structurally underground religious paradigm that profoundly shaped the geopolitical and ideological trajectory of independent Uzbekistan after 1991.

REFERENCES

1. Babadjanov, B. (2001). Muhammadjan Hindustani (1892–1989) and the shifting cleavages of Islamic scholarly authority in Central Asia. *Journal of the History of Sufism*, 3(1), 123–141.
2. Babajanov, B. (2010). Islam v Uzbekistane: Religiozniy faktor i gumanitarnaya bezopasnost' [Islam in Uzbekistan: The religious factor and humanitarian security]. Sharq.
3. Bennigsen, A., & Wimbush, S. E. (1985). *Mystics and commissars: Sufism in the Soviet Union*. C. Hurst & Co.
4. Khalid, A. (2007). *Islam after communism: Religion and politics in Central Asia*. University of California Press.
5. National Archive of Uzbekistan (NAU). Fund R-2454 (Records of the Council for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the Uzbek SSR), Inventory 1, File 142 (Reports of the Plenipotentiary for the Fergana Region, 1954–1958); File 289 (Statistical data on unregistered mosques and mullahs in Andijan and Namangan regions, 1962–1965).
6. Olcott, M. B. (1995). The Basmachi or Freeman's revolt in Turkestan 1918–24. *Soviet Studies*, 33(3), 352–369.

7. Rui, Y. (2002). *Islam in the Soviet Union: From the Second World War to perestroika*. Columbia University Press.
8. Ro‘ziyev, A. (2018). *Farg‘ona vodiysida diniy hayot: Tarix va hozirgi zamon [Religious life in the Fergana Valley: History and contemporary times]*. Akademnashr.
9. Ro‘znazarov, Sh. (2021). *Sovet hokimiyatining O‘zbekistondagi “Xrushcheyov davri” diniy ta’qiblari va ularning oqibatlari [The Khrushchev-era religious persecutions of the Soviet regime in Uzbekistan and their consequences]*. *O‘zbekiston Tarixi*, 4(2), 67–79.
10. Tasar, M. (2017). *Soviet and Muslim: The institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia*. Oxford University Press.