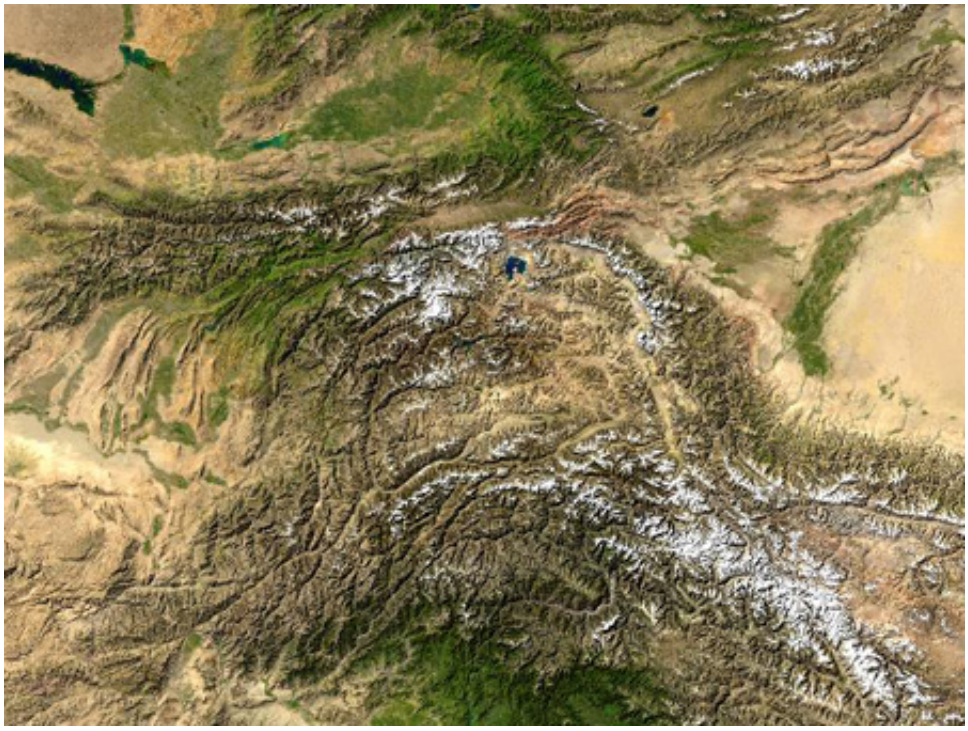
CHAOS IN KWAREZM

The center of Central Asia is the Pamir Knot, a tortured jumble of gigantic mountains formed when the sub-continent of India began bulldozing underneath Asia over 50 million years ago.



Two rivers flow west out of the Pamirs, the Amu Darya or Oxus and the Syr Darya or Jaxartes, both crossing a vast desert steppe and into an inland ocean called the Aral Sea. The land between the two rivers is sprinkled with oases and is known as the Kwarezm.

These oases have been peopled for many millennia. When Alexander the Great crossed the Oxus in 329 BC to conquer the Kingdom of Sogd, he came upon its walled, cosmopolitan capital, Marakanda, and found it “everything as I imagined except more beautiful.” Today the city is known as Samarkand, just as beautiful:

Older than fabled Samarkand is Bukhara. There have been Jews in Bukhara for 2,500 years (migrating there from Babylon instead of back to Judea when Cyrus the Great liberated them from captivity in 538 BC). Islam's greatest philosopher-scientist, Avicenna (Ibn Sina, 980-1037 AD), and venerated poets as Firdausi and Rudaki, made Bukhara a legendary holy city of learning and culture.

This came to an end in 1220, when the Mongol hordes of Genghis Khan swept the Kwarezm clean of life and rubblized its ancient cities. In 1963, I found a human skull fragment on the battlesite where Bukhara's defenders were slaughtered over seven centuries ago. Bukhara had to be rebuilt from level ground, the same for Samarkand, which became the capital of a Turkic conqueror even more ruthless than Genghis: Tamerlane (1336-1405).

Tamerlane was a savage butcher of countless thousands simultaneously devoted to art and architecture. After him came the Central Asian Renaissance, with the Kwarezm as the center of Islamic civilization flourishing astride the Silk Road to China. This didn't last, with oases devolving into independent Khanates lost to the world for three centuries. Then came Russia on the imperial march.

One by one, the oasis khanates fell.. The last to be subdued were Khiva in 1873, and the Turcoman fortress of Geok-Tepe in 1881 by Russian General Mikhail Skobelev, who observed:

> I hold it as a principle that in Central Asia the duration of peace is in direct proportion to the slaughter you inflict upon the enemy. The harder you hit them, the longer they will be quiet afterwards.

Just like the President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, believes today.

It is the former Soviet Republic and now independent Uzbekistan that encompasses the Kwarezm:

As the head of the Soviet Communist Party in Uzbekistan, Karimov seized power as the USSR dissolved into its constituent Republics in 1990. His primary goal since then has been to hold on to that power at all costs, turning Uzbekistan into a police state. As a Soviet apparatchik, he has no understanding of economics, no appreciation for the consequences of destroying the environment, and no capacity to prevent his paranoia from becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

We have Karimov, for example, to thank for the greatest ecological disaster in the world, the Aral Sea. The fourth largest inland sea is now a salt desert. Here is the Aral Sea in 1989:

And here it is today:

Karimov's trashing of the environment is equaled by his trashing of political, economic, and religious freedom. Scariest is the last. His standard rationale for power is holding up the boogeyman of terrorist Islam. "I am the only thing in the way, I am the only man capable of preventing a Taliban takeover of Uzbekistan," he claims. On the contrary, he may have made it inevitable.

Last August in To The Point, Ariel Cohen in Terror in Tashkent told you about two Islamist movements in Uzbekistan, the IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, a designated terrorist group) and Hizb-ut-Tahrir. What Karimov has done with the stupidity of only which a Soviet apparatchik is capable, is to drive moderate Moslems into their arms.

The Massacre of Andijan that took place last Friday, May 13, with Uzbek soldiers murdering hundreds of men, women, and children in cold blood, is only Karimov's latest effort to do so. When he took power, he promptly blew the most monumental opportunity in the Moslem world to create a modern Islam.

The first focused effort to transform Islam from a religion stuck in the Middle Ages into one that could flourish in the modern world and cooperate with Western Civilization was the *Jadid* or New Islam Movement that started in the early 1900s inï¿½the Kwarezm. Led by Islamic scholars such as Mahmud Khoja Behbudi from Samarkand, the Jadids advocated a new ("jadid"), flexible, and

dynamic Islam.

Instead of treating the words of Mohammed as sacred petrified fossils, the Jadids considered them as guides to the future, asking themselves not what Mohammed said centuries ago in the context of his day, but what he would say now if Allah brought him back to earth today. The Jadids wanted Islam to embrace and prosper in the modern world. Tragically, the Jadids were exterminated by the Soviets in the 1920s.

But they weren't forgotten. After independence in 1990, a revival of Jadidism was launched by Uzbek intellectuals based in the capital city of Tashkent. Instead of embracing them as the antidote to the poison of Islamist fundamentalism, Karimov had them arrested. All forms of Islamic advocacy were the same to him. Jadid modernists, IMU terrorists, Hizb-ut-Tahrir feudalists - for Karimov, they were all "Wahhabi" radicals and to be suppressed as a threat to his rule.

So the neo-Jadids were crushed along with democracy movements like Birlik (Unity) and Erk (Freedom). An association of Islamic businessmen, Akramiya, petitioning for more economic freedom, was blamed for the Andijan demonstrations. Now there's nobody left except the Islamist fundies. The Andijan Massacre has doomed the Karimov regime. But there is little hope that it will be removed by a technicolor democratic revolution as in rosy Georgia or orange Ukraine. Uzbekistan can look forward to the color of blood - violent terrorism, violent fascist repression in a vicious escalating spiral.

An entire region of the world, Central Asia, is on the brink of convulsion. A revival of Jadidism there could have de-radicalized Islam. That hope has been killed by Karimov. History does not always move in the direction of progress. It may be about to take a very bad turn in the Kwarezm.