

Johnson, Rob: *Oil, Islam, and Conflict. Central Asia since 1945*. London: Reaktion Books 2007. ISBN: 978-1-86189-339-0; 272 S.

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Rob Johnson, a freelance historian and head of Academic Development at the University of Bath, UK, looks in his new book at Central Asia, a region he expects to become the "new middle east" because of its „cocktail of abundant oil and gas, Islamic jihadist groups, dictatorial regimes, and rivalry between Russia, China, Pakistan, the US and Iran“. His understanding of Central Asia is thereby not entirely clear and inconsistent throughout the book: Initially, it refers to the five former Soviet republics Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as well as Afghanistan, the Caucasus and Xinjiang. In chapter two, providing an overview on the historical developments of the Central Asian republics, only the five former Soviet states are covered. Also in the following, the author speaks of „Central Asia and Afghanistan“, indicating that Afghanistan is not considered being a part of Central Asia. But then there are individual chapters on Afghanistan, the Caucasus, and Xinjiang as parts of Central Asia. On the other hand, Turkmenistan is hardly dealt with any more, as well as Kazakhstan. While the term „Central Asia“ is indeed used in different definitions, it would have been necessary for the author to once define clearly his understanding. Especially the rather unusual subordination of the Caucasus to Central Asia would have needed an explanation. After a general overview on history and current developments in the region, the third chapter introduces „Islam and Islamism“. However, it is more on Islamism than on Islam and basically on the Hizb ut-Tahrir movement. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan/Turkestan and the Islamic Renaissance Party in Tajikistan are analyzed separately in following chapters, which are devoted to the detailed account of the most important conflicts: the Tajik civil war, Afghanistan and the Taliban, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan/Turkestan, the Chechen and Caucasus

Wars, and the Xinjiang Province in China.

In these chapters, the problematic aspects of Central Asia are covered in detail: civil wars and unrest, ethnic tensions, jihadism, and different Islamic movements with their respective historic developments, ideologies, and leading figures. It shows that not only Islam, but also Islamism has to be differentiated, that there are considerable disagreements between the movements, and that these movements and their interests are interrelated with political, ethnic, clientelistic, and geostrategic factors as well as with the intervention of regional or extra-regional powers.

These chapters are followed by a chapter on „Hydrocarbons and the Great Powers“ that gathers sections on the Caspian, pipeline politics, pollution, and climate change. The section on pollution deals mainly with the Aral Sea disaster and industrial and radioactive pollution in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, telling nothing about the drying-up of lake Lop Nor in Xinjiang or any environmental problems in the Caucasus, hence, Central Asia seems to be again restricted to the five former Soviet republics. The „Great Powers“ are not systematically analyzed, but are only included in the sections on the Caspian and the pipeline politics.

The last chapter provides more systematic information on the influence of world and regional powers on Central Asia, analyzing the US, Russia, China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkey, and the Arab States. The European Union is obviously not considered to be a major player as it is hardly mentioned (and in fact the EU only recently gave more attention to Central Asia).

Some of the author's inferences are debatable: For example, that the Central Asian republics would have strong governments (other scholars, in contrast, regard the states as „under-governed“ by in fact weak rulers), that the Aral Sea will disappear in 2020 (the sea level of the Northern Aral raises since several years), that Afghanistan is a limited democracy (rather classified as a failed state), that Niyasov's personality cult is a communist legacy (in form, but not in content), or that Central Asian republics apart from Tajikistan enjoyed a national homogeneity (all had considerable minorities beside the titular na-

tionality at the time of independence). There are also some obvious mistakes. For example, „Turkmenbashi“ does not mean „Leader of the Turkmen“ but „Father of the Turkmen“. The Lake Balkhash is only salinized in its eastern arm, not as a whole, and the reduction of inflow from the Ili is rather a consequence of increased water usage for irrigation than of climate change.

While the title of the book, „Oil, Islam and Conflict“ already points to the orientation at conflicts, it is still misleading: Oil is explicitly only covered in two sections, comprising 13 pages. Islam as such is not the subject of the book, but Islamism. Moderate forms of Islam are neglected. Even in political respect, Islam in Central Asia is not restricted to jihadism, but also (as moderate Islam) used by all states for nation building. Hence, the political role of Islam is more complex than indicated. Also the subheading „Central Asia since 1945“ is misleading: The confusing usage of the term „Central Asia“ was already mentioned. In addition, the book mainly covers developments since 1991, but with very large historical accounts. These provide a good base and allow an understanding of the current developments. These historical descriptions usually go back to the beginning of the 20th century or the end of the 19th century. Definitely, Russian and Soviet interventions in these times provided deeper junctures in Central Asian history than the end of the Second World War in 1945, to which is not referred to in the book, so it is not understandable why this date is highlighted in the title.

The author provides a select bibliography that is thematically sorted and provides a good starting point for further reading. While timeliness is not the only criteria for historical literature, it is surprising that the section on „contemporary politics“ consists mainly of publications from the 1990s; the most recent titles are from 2001 (similar for the literature on Afghanistan). A final aspect to mention is that a careful editorial office would have been good to prevent the quite few slips of the pen.

Summing up, the interest of the author is clearly focused on the issues of jihadism, Islamic terrorism, and civil unrest in Central Asia. The book provides many detailed historical information on the development of

conflicts and Islamic movements and considers the many factors that add to the complexity of these phenomena. It lacks, however, a clearly structured analysis of these developments and the influencing factors. Finally, that the Central Asian ‘cocktail’ also consists of moderate or merely cultural Islam, a history of exchange and cooperation between different social and ethnic groups, traditions of civil society, nonviolent conflict resolution, and democratic attempts, is neglected.

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