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ПОСТКЕҢЕСТІК ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯДАҒЫ ИСЛАМ МӘСЕЛЕЛЕРІН ЗЕРТТЕУДЕГІ ФРАНЦУЗДЫҚ ЗЕРТТЕУЛЕР: ИСТОРИОГРАФИЯЛЫҚ ТАЛДАУ

Андатпа

Бұл мақалада посткеңестік Орталық Азиядағы исламның әлеуметтік-саяси және мәдени динамикасын зерттеумен айналысатын француздық зерттеу мектебіне жан-жақты және сыни историографиялық талдау жасалған. Зерттеу сапалық әдіснамаға негізделген, атап айтқанда, дереккөздерді жүйелі талдау барысында тақырыптық және диахрондық тәсілдер қолданылған.

Мақаланың негізгі мақсаты — 1991 жылдан бүгінгі күнге дейінгі кезеңде француз зерттеулерінің эпистемологиялық және әдістемелік эволюциясын қадағалау, негізгі парадигмалық өзгерістерді анықтау және бұл мектептің әлемдік орталықазиялық зерттеулер жүйесіндегі ерекше орнын айқындау.

Талдау нәтижесінде француз мектебінің үш негізгі интеллектуалдық кезеңнен өткені анықталды: **1990-жылдардағы іргелі кезең**, бұл уақытта зерттеушілердің назары «саяси ислам» парадигмасын деконструкциялауға және геосаяси дабыл қағушылықтан бас тартуға бағытталды (О. Руа); 2000-жылдардағы антропологиялық бетбұрыс, зерттеулердің «күнделікті исламға», жергілікті тәжірибелерге, тарихи дәстүрлерге (С. Дудуаньон) және гендерлік аспектілерге (Х. Фати) қайта бағытталуы; Қазіргі кезең, бұл трансұлттық діни қозғалыстарды (Б. Балджи) және мемлекеттің дінді саяси құрал ретінде пайдалануын (С. Пейруз) зерттеу секілді жаңа әрі күрделі тақырыптардың пайда болуымен сипатталады.

Мақалада француз мектебінің әдістемелік ерекшеліктеріне — terrain (далалық зерттеулер), longue durée (ұзақмерзімді тарихи перспектива) және исламды деэссенциализациялау тәсіліне — англоязық және ресейлік академиялық дәстүрлердің әдістемелерімен салыстырмалы талдау жүргізіледі. Сонымен қатар француз мектебінің белгілі бір әдістемелік шектеулері мен проблемалық қырлары да қарастырылады.

Қорытындысында, мақалада француздық зерттеулердің аймақтағы исламды зерттеуді қарапайым схемалардан арылтуға және оның күрделі әлеуметтік шындығын ашуға қосқан іргелі үлесі бағаланады.

Кілт сөздер: Орталық Азия, посткеңестік ислам, француз ориентализмі, историография, эпистемология, Оливье Руа, Стефан Дудуаньон, Байрам Балджи, күнделікті ислам, мемлекет және дін қатынастары, terrain.

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FRENCH RESEARCH ON ISLAMIC ISSUES IN POST-SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA: HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS

Abstract

This article presents a comprehensive and critical historiographical analysis of the French school of research on the socio-political and cultural dynamics of Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia. The study is based on a qualitative methodology, specifically a systematic analysis of sources, employing thematic and diachronic approaches. The primary objective is to trace the epistemological and methodological evolution of French scholarship from 1991 to the present, identify key paradigm shifts, and define the distinctive position of this school within global Central Asian studies. The analysis reveals that French research has evolved through three main intellectual phases: [1] the foundational works of the 1990s, which focused on deconstructing the "political Islam" paradigm and rejecting geopolitical alarmism (O. Roy); [2] a fundamental anthropological turn in the 2000s, shifting the research focus to "everyday Islam," local practices, historical traditions (S. Dudoignon), and gender dimensions (H. Fathi); and [3] a contemporary phase marked by the emergence of new and complex themes such as transnational religious movements (B. Balci) and the state's instrumentalization of religion (S. Peyrouse). The article compares the distinct methodological strengths of the French school—such as its emphasis on terrain (fieldwork), longue durée (long-term historical perspective), and the de-essentialization of Islam—with the approaches of Anglophone and Russian academic traditions. It also discusses certain methodological limitations and critical aspects of the French school. In conclusion, the article assesses the fundamental contribution of French scholarship in liberating the study of Islam in the region from simplistic frameworks and revealing its complex social reality.

Keywords: Central Asia, Post-Soviet Islam, French Orientalism, Historiography, Epistemology, Olivier Roy, Stéphane Dudoignon, Bayram Balci, Everyday Islam, State-Religion Relations, Terrain.

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ФРАНЦУЗСКИЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ ИСЛАМСКИХ ВОПРОСОВ В ПОСТСОВЕТСКОЙ ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ: ИСТОРИОГРАФИЧЕСКИЙ АНАЛИЗ

Аннотация

В данной статье представлен всесторонний и критический историографический анализ французской исследовательской школы, изучающей социально-политическую и культурную динамику ислама в постсоветской Центральной Азии. Исследование основано на качественной методологии, в частности на систематическом анализе источников с применением тематического и диахронного подходов. Основная цель работы — проследить эпистемологическую и методологическую эволюцию французских исследований с 1991 года по настоящее время, выявить ключевые парадигмальные изменения и определить особое место этой школы в мировой системе центральноазиатских исследований.

Анализ показывает, что французская школа прошла три основных интеллектуальных этапа: [1] Фундаментальный период 1990-х годов, когда внимание исследователей было сосредоточено на деконструкции парадигмы «политического ислама» и отказе от геополитического алармизма (О. Руа); [2] Антропологический поворот в 2000-е годы, связанный с переориентацией исследований на изучение «повседневного ислама», локальных практик, исторических традиций (С. Дудуаньон) и гендерных аспектов (Х. Фати); [3] Современный этап, характеризующийся появлением новых и более сложных тем, таких

как транснациональные религиозные движения (Б. Балджи) и инструментализация религии государством (С. Пейруз).

В статье проводится сравнительный анализ методологических особенностей французской школы — таких как акцент на terrain (полевые исследования), longue durée (долгосрочная историческая перспектива) и деэссенциализация ислама — с подходами англоязычной и российской академических традиций. Также рассматриваются определённые методологические ограничения и проблемные аспекты французской школы.

В заключение статья оценивает фундаментальный вклад французских исследований в освобождение изучения ислама в регионе от упрощённых схем и раскрытие его сложной социальной реальности.

Ключевые слова: Центральная Азия, постсоветский ислам, французский ориентализм, историография, эпистемология, Оливье Руа, Стефан Дудуаньон, Байрам Балджи, повседневный ислам, государственно-религиозные отношения, *terrain*.

Introduction

In the history of Central Asia, which adopted Islam from the 8th century onwards, Islam remained an important phenomenon until the 20th century. Almost all issues of state and society were resolved through Islam. Even during the period of colonization by the Russian Empire, social relations based on Sharia law were preserved for the local population. However, after the establishment of the communist regime, Islam, like other religions, was alienated from the life of society, and the state and society were secularized. The almost seventy-year isolation of Central Asia during the Soviet period gave rise to a very peculiar manifestation of the relationship between Islam, politics, and social life. Indeed, the persecuted religion of Islam, like other religions, survived either in secret or within the circle of official clergy who operated nominally under state control.

However, the "revival" of Islam, which began after 1991 and even in the 1990s, created complex processes in the relationship between society and the state. On the one hand, the reintegration of historical Transoxiana into the Islamic world was a positive phenomenon for the state's image in the international arena. On the other hand, the internal political tension caused by radical groups' aspiration to power revealed that the government faced serious problems.

This process sparked particular interest in local and international academic circles. The primary reason for this was the region's aspiration to integrate into the international community, while on the other hand, researchers were also intrigued by the impact of Afghanistan's political situation on the former Soviet republics. Indeed, in the early years of independence, leaders and members of religious groups who faced political persecution found refuge in Afghanistan. Consequently, Afghanistan was viewed as the main hub of Islamic radicalism in Central Asia. French researchers, like their Western counterparts, extensively analyzed these processes in their studies.

In recent years, against the backdrop of geopolitical changes in the Middle East and Afghanistan, studying the historiography of this issue remains relevant. Although the Middle East is a relatively distant region, the presence of hundreds of Central Asian republic citizens among radical groups there necessitates examining the problem from various perspectives. Such approaches by French academic schools underscore the need to analyze these studies.

The primary objective of this research is to conduct a comprehensive and critical historiographical analysis of the studies carried out by French scholars on Islamic issues in post-Soviet Central Asia from 1991 to the present. The article aims to address the following fundamental questions: What intellectual paradigms did French researchers employ to examine the Islamic revival in the region, and how did these paradigms evolve over time? Which aspects (political, social, cultural, gender) received the most attention in these studies? How did the scholarly perspectives of leading academics such as Olivier Roy, Stéphane Dudoignon, Bayram Balci, Habiba Fathi, and Sébastien Peyrouse contribute to this evolution? What are the essential differences

between the approaches of the French school and the Anglo-American and Russian academic traditions, and what are the strengths, as well as the weaknesses and limitations, of its distinctive methodology?

The relevance of this research lies in its offering of a significant intellectual alternative to dominant discourses that tend to view Islam solely through the lens of security or geopolitics. The French school's deep empirical foundation and its endeavor to understand phenomena in local contexts provide essential tools for accurately assessing the complexity of religious processes in Central Asia. This article serves to systematize and critically evaluate the achievements of French Oriental studies in this field and determine its place in global Islamic studies.

2. Methodology

This research employs an analytical methodology and encompasses several interconnected approaches:

Historiographical analysis: As the primary research method, it focuses on tracing the chronological development of French scholarly literature, shifts in paradigms, key debates, and intellectual turning points. This method demonstrates how the research topic has evolved over time and what intellectual and political factors have influenced this evolution.

Thematic analysis: The collected sources were categorized into main thematic groups ("political Islam", "everyday Islam", "transnational movements", "state-religion relations", "gender"), and the development dynamics of each direction, its principal researchers, and their arguments were thoroughly examined.

Analysis of scientific reviews: A distinctive feature of this research is that it analyzes not only primary scientific works but also scholarly reviews of them published in prestigious journals such as Cahiers d'Asie centrale and Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée (REMMM). This approach provides a "meta-perspective" to understand how key works were received by the scientific community, how their strengths and weaknesses were evaluated, and how they influenced broader scientific debates.

Comparative analysis: To highlight the uniqueness of the French school, its methodological and conceptual approaches are compared in detail with the dominant views of the Anglo-American and Russian scientific traditions.

Critical Analysis: The article analyzes not only the achievements of the French school but also its potential shortcomings, methodological limitations, and overlooked aspects in a separate section.

The source base consists of fundamental monographs, scientific articles, collections, and commentaries on them by scholars such as O. Roy [4, 5], S. Dudoignon [6], B. Balci [2, 3], H. Fathi [7, 8, 9, 10], S. Peyrouse [4, 5], and C. Poujol [11].

3. Results: The intellectual evolution of French research

The analysis revealed that French research has gone through three main, complementary stages of development.

3.1. First stage (1990s): Deconstructing geopolitical alarmism and reassessing "political Islam" $\,$

In the 1990s, the academic discourse surrounding Central Asia was dominated by perceptions of an "Islamic threat." The primary objective of the French school during this period was to deconstruct these alarmist views and provide a more nuanced explanation of Islam's role in the region. The central figure of this phase was Olivier Roy.

In his globally significant work "L'échec de l'islam politique" (1992), Roy emphasized that Islamic movements had failed in their attempts to seize power and establish stable Islamic regimes within the framework of modern nation-states. Applying this concept to Central Asia, he viewed the Islamic revival in the region more as a movement for cultural and national identity restoration rather than political radicalism [12]. In his analysis of the civil war in Tajikistan, he regarded this conflict not as an attempt at Islamic revolution, but as a manifestation of regional and inter-clan struggle masked by religious slogans. For Roy, "Islam" in this context was not an independent factor in

political struggle, but rather a language for expressing existing socio-political contradictions [13, 14, 5].

Roy's primary contribution was to soften the drama surrounding the Islamic issue and to question the very idea of political Islam. In other words, Roy intellectually disarmed the fear of the "Islamic threat" and shifted the analysis from political slogans back to social reality. Although the research of this period was mainly focused on macro-political analysis, it abandoned the view of Islam as a monolithic force and laid the foundation for the next stage of in-depth anthropological studies [14].

3.2. Second stage (2000s): Fundamental anthropological turn – "everyday Islam" history and society

By the 2000s, the focus of research had changed dramatically: it shifted from the political field to the social and cultural field, from "top" to "bottom." Scholars began to study not the role of Islam in state policy, but its place in the lives of ordinary people and its daily practices. This "anthropological turn" became the "calling card" of the French school.

One of the most prominent representatives of this approach was the historian Stéphane A. Dudoignon [6]. In his numerous works, he studied the historical layers of Islam in Central Asia - the debates between Jadidism and traditionalism, Sufi orders (especially Naqshbandiya), the cult of local saints, and the traditions of pilgrimage sites. His research has shown that many religious disputes and groupings in the post-Soviet era were actually a continuation of historical disagreements from the early 20th century or even earlier. He demonstrated that Islam was never unified and monolithic in the region, but rather always existed in various forms, in synthesis with local cultures.

During this period, gender issues also became an object of research. Anthropologist Habiba Fathi's studies on the religious life of women in Uzbekistan, particularly the institution of otin oyi, have been of fundamental importance. She analyzed otins not only as transmitters of religious knowledge but also as social actors who preserved religious traditions during the Soviet period and played a central role in their revival during the post-Soviet era [15, 10, 16]. Her work challenged patriarchal interpretations of the Islamic revival, demonstrating the active participation and agency of women in this process.

Catherine Poujol, in her research, studied the role of Islam in shaping post-Soviet national identities. She analyzed states' attempts to incorporate Islam into national ideology and the contradictions in this process, especially the relationship between Islamic values and the heritage of the nomadic way of life [11]. For all these scholars, long-term field research, knowledge of local languages, and direct communication with people became an integral part of their studies.

3.3. Third stage (2010-present): Transnational flows, state control and new fields

In the last decade, research has become more diversified under the influence of globalization and political changes in the region.

Transnational movements: The most prominent researcher in this field is Bayram Balci. In his works such as "Renouveau de l'islam en Asie centrale et dans le Caucase" [3], he conducted a comparative analysis of Turkish religious movements in the region (the Fethullah Gülen movement, the Nurju, the Sulaymonchilar) and Salafi currents entering from the Arab world. Balci's approach is based on viewing these movements not only as tools of geopolitical "soft power," but also as complex phenomena that create unique "grassroots social networks" through education, business, and social assistance. In Anne Ducloux's review of Balci's book, it is noted that "Bayram Balci... attempts to explain these religious currents not from a geopolitical perspective, but through their socio-religious logic and methods of integration into local societies" [17].

State-religion relations: In his research, Sébastien Peyrouse provides an in-depth analysis of post-Soviet states' policies in the religious sphere. He demonstrates that states not only seek to control and restrict Islam but also actively utilize it (instrumentalization) to reinforce their legitimacy and construct a national ideology [18, 4]. In his review of the collection edited by Peyrouse, Balci, B specifically emphasizes that the book reveals how "state policy in the religious

sphere encompasses not only repressive measures but also complex strategies aimed at managing and exploiting religious diversity" [1]. This implies abandoning the approach that views state and religion solely as opposing forces and recognizing the complex processes of negotiation and adaptation between them.

Another article by Aurélie Biard examines the intricate relationship between the state, religion, and society in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. It explores how religious identities and practices are being reshaped and utilized by various actors following the collapse of the USSR. The study focuses on the "usages of the religious," analyzing how Islam is instrumentalized for political legitimacy, social cohesion, and national identity construction. It investigates the tension between state-promoted "national" Islam and transnational movements like the Tablighi Jama'at. The central thesis argues that religion serves as a key indicator and management tool for the profound social transformations in contemporary Kyrgyzstan [19].

Today, French scholars are also actively investigating new and relevant topics such as digital Islam (Telegram channels, online imams), the impact of labor migration on religiosity, and the development of Islamic finance.

4. Discussion

4.1. The distinctiveness and intellectual contribution of the French school

The main achievements of the French school stem from its methodological and conceptual uniqueness:

Empiricism based on field research (Terrain): The French tradition prioritizes long-term, indepth ethnographic studies over theoretical speculation. This allows researchers to examine phenomena "from within," understanding people's motivations and worldviews.

Deep historicity: Contemporary phenomena are always analyzed in their historical context - from the perspective of Tsarist Russian colonialism, Jadidism, Soviet modernization, and the legacy of atheism. This approach helps to understand that post-Soviet processes are not simply a "return," but a complex transformation.

"De-essentialization" of Islam: French scholars consistently emphasize that there is no single, immutable essence called "Islam." For them, Islam is a collection of traditions, texts, and practices that are continuously reinterpreted and applied by various social groups.

4.2. Comparative analysis with other scholarly traditions: Three perspectives

To better comprehend the distinctiveness and intellectual contribution of the French school, it is appropriate to compare it with two other major scholarly traditions studying Central Asia - the Anglo-American and Russian schools. These three schools view Islam in the region through three different, sometimes contradictory, lenses.

The Anglo-American school primarily relies on paradigms from political science, international relations, and security studies. This approach is often characterized by post-Cold War geopolitical interests and the discourse of "counter-terrorism" that intensified after the events of September 11. Consequently, its conceptual framework is built around notions such as "radicalization," "terrorism," "democratization," and "failed states." As research subjects, it typically focuses on political parties (for example, the banned Hizb ut-Tahrir or the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan), armed groups, state policies, and power struggles among elites. Methodologically, this school is based on the analysis of political documents, quantitative analysis, political modeling, and often short-term field trips involving interviews with politicians or experts. As a result, the main objective of this school is frequently practical in nature: developing policy recommendations for Western governments, assessing potential risks, and forecasting political processes in the region. In other words, for the Anglo-American school, Islam is often viewed as a political variable that either poses a threat to stability or, conversely, may contribute to democratization.

The Russian scientific school also places great emphasis on security issues, but its perspective, unlike that of the West, is deeply state-centric and stems from its own geopolitical interests. For Russia, Central Asia is its "near abroad" and a buffer zone for national security.

Therefore, the central concepts in Russian research are "religious extremism," "separatism," "geopolitical competition," and particularly "external influence" behind various religious groups (for example, the influence of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, or Iran). The objects of study are primarily state security agencies, religious groups deemed "non-traditional," and the state's official policy in the religious sphere. The methodology often relies on the analysis of official documents, reports from government agencies, and surveys of experts close to the state, which frequently gives the research a character reflecting the official position. The main objective of this school is to ensure state security, protect Russia's geopolitical interests in the region, and identify potential destabilizing factors.

In stark contrast to these two major traditions, the French school distinguishes itself through its anthropological, sociological, and historical approaches. Its paradigm is founded on viewing Islam not as a political threat or a geopolitical tool, but as an integral part of society, a living sociocultural phenomenon. Consequently, its central concepts differ: "everyday Islam" (islam au quotidien), "social logic" (logique sociale), "re-Islamization," and "transnational social networks." French researchers focus more on local communities, religious practices, the lived experiences of ordinary people, family rituals, and networks of informal religious education, rather than on political elites or armed groups. The primary methodology to achieve this comprises long-term field research (ethnography), profound knowledge of local languages, archival work, and qualitative analysis methods. The main objective of the French school is not to provide political recommendations or ensure state security, but to gain a deep understanding of socio-cultural processes in all their complexity and contradictions.

Generally speaking, while the Anglo-American school mainly seeks to answer the question "What can Islam do?" (political threat or opportunity), and the Russian school focuses on "How to protect oneself from Islam?," the French school strives to answer fundamental questions such as "What is Islam for ordinary people?" and "How does it live in society?" This fundamental difference defines the unique and profound contribution of the French school to Central Asian Islamic studies.

4.3. Critical Analysis: Shortcomings and Limitations of the French School

Like any academic school, the French school is not free from certain limitations and criticisms. Its approaches leave a number of questions open:

"Anthropological bias" and neglecting political structures: Excessive emphasis on the anthropological approach can sometimes relegate the influence of broader political and economic structures to the background. For example, focusing on everyday religious practices may not fully reveal the impact of strict control over religious freedoms by authoritarian regimes in the region and the effects of repression on the lives of ordinary believers. Researchers sometimes become so engrossed in the "bottom-up" perspective that they inadequately assess the coercive power of the state directed "top-down."

Underestimating the role of ideology: Focusing on social practices and networks can sometimes lead to underestimating the inherent power of religious ideologies. Some transnational movements (for example, Salafism) not only address social needs but also offer a powerful ideological system that fundamentally transforms people's worldviews and motivates them to take specific actions. The French school sometimes attempts to explain this ideological appeal within the framework of "social logic," potentially overlooking its distinctive nature.

Limitations in the Francophone world: Many fundamental studies are published only in French and rarely translated into English. This situation restricts the reach of the French school's ideas and findings to the broader international scientific community, rendering it somewhat "insular." This hinders effective dialogue and debate with Anglo-American academic circles.

Insufficient attention to economic factors: Emphasis on cultural and social aspects can often overshadow the impact of economic factors - such as poverty, unemployment, and social inequality - on religious revival and sometimes radicalization. Some studies inadequately address how the search for religious identity can often stem from a sense of economic desperation and injustice.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, French academic research on Islamic issues in Central Asia during the post-Soviet era has created a rich, multifaceted, and unique intellectual landscape. This research has undergone a significant evolutionary journey, from deconstructing simplified notions of "political Islam" in the 1990s, through anthropological studies delving into the deep layers of society, to examining the complex dynamics of globalization and state control in the present day.

Olivier Roy "de-dramatized" the Islamic revival, opening new horizons for analysis. Stéphane Dudoignon and Habiba Fathi revealed the local, historical, and gender-related dimensions of Islam. A new generation of scholars, such as Bayram Balci and Sébastien Peyrouse, enriched the field of research with nuanced insights into transnational movements and the intricate mechanisms of state-religion relations.

The French school's greatest achievement lies in liberating Islam from abstract geopolitical or security-related categories, studying it instead as a living and dynamic socio-cultural phenomenon that exists in people's real lives. Simultaneously, it is crucial to acknowledge its potential limitations, such as "anthropological bias" and insufficient attention to political and economic factors. Despite these shortcomings, the methodological approaches and empirical findings of the French school remain an integral and invaluable resource for understanding contemporary societies in Central Asia.

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