

suitable for use in college and university teaching, both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The book runs counter to many myths related to the Salafi activism, which were created in the highly charged climate during the past decade.

As such, it demands our attention, careful reading, deep engagement, and understanding.

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## Fergana Valley: The Heart of Central Asia

**Edited by S. Frederick Starr, Baktybek Beshimov, Inomjon I. Bobokulov and Pulat Shozimov**

Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2011, 442 pages, ISBN 978076562999.

*Fergana Valley: The Heart of Central Asia* is a remarkable volume that offers a very comprehensive and interesting study on the political and social life of the Fergana Valley and the three countries that include parts of it, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as Central Asia in general. The book is based on two general assumptions that can be easily picked from its title and the introductory words of the editor, S.F. Starr. As he maintains at the beginning, the Fergana is assumed to be the heart of Central Asia and so the contributors believe that what happens there might affect the fate of the whole region. The second assumption is summarized also by Starr in the following phrase: “nothing about the Fergana Valley is simple” (p.ix).

*Fergana Valley* is a comprehensive study since it aims to reflect the complex and multidimensional nature of the political and social construction of the Fergana both as a center and as a peripheral mirror of the whole region from pre-colonial times to the division of the valley among three independent republics. Although two basic dimensions of geopolitics, time and

space, and the relation between geography and politics, seem to be the subject of this edited book, *Fergana Valley* intends to go beyond the simple geopolitical calculations that are generally used to explain the strategic and political intentions of external powers in the region. Instead of focusing of such narrations as the (New) Great Game, this book on the one hand tries to analyze the economic, social, political, demographic, ecologic and cultural forces in the region throughout the periods of political unity (as during the times of Kokand Khanate, Tsarist Russia, and the Soviet rule), periods of disintegration (as during the times of independent republics) and transitionary periods (as during the time of Revolution, the perestroika period and the nation and/or state building periods of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan). And on the other hand, the chapters collectively intend to illuminate two contradictory trends in the valley: 1) “unity in diversity” as the reference to Sasha Kuprin who is one of the Fergana poets illustrates: “words like kishlak (village), aryk (irrigation canal), chinar (oriental plane tree), bazaar, chaikhane (teahouse) and

plov (pilaf) are not mere fragments of exotic vocabulary but worlds through which we experience a common time and destiny” (p.293); and 2) “diversity in unity” that reveals in the overlapping dual lives, languages, identities and loyalties existing in Fergana along with different fault lines in the Fergana states (especially chapters 5, 7, 8, 9, 12, and 13).

*Fergana Valley* is an interesting book not only because of the complexity it reflects but also because of the nature of each chapter’s structure in which the editor(s) try to offer insights of scholars from all three Fergana states. Therefore each contribution is based on the collective work of one principle author and other contributing authors from different Fergana countries, with two exceptions (chapters 4 and 11 where the leading authors are respectively from Russia and Switzerland). This structure is significant especially when one thinks that the Fergana’s social, economic and political realities, such as the role of religion—primarily Islam—and state in the construction of the region, the meaning of nationality (Uzbek, Tajik and Kyrgyz), the instruments of economic (in) equality (trade-water-energy bargaining), the culture of resistance (from the time of Basmachi Revolt to the Tulip Revolution), the future of democracy and inter-state challenges, the continuous interplay between conservatism and modernism since the Jadid movement, and the shifting regional tendency from being isolated to being a contact zone where external influences reach to the main cities and enclaves of Fergana, have different and contentious meanings in each republic, in Russia and in the West. Moreover, this book as a collective study may be taken as example of the prolific face of contact zones that are

usually supposed to generate economic, ethnic and religious tensions such as that observed in the Fergana Valley particularly during the last three decades.

All in all the editorial team tries to reflect different visions of 27 regional experts from various disciplines in 14 chapters to reach a coherent reading of the Fergana’s reality. To accomplish this difficult task, the editorial team bring forth nine key questions (pp.xvi-xix) used by the authors in writing their chapters. Among these, three questions are especially important and are used in each chapter to explain the nature and direction of change in the Fergana. These questions are related to 1) the role of localism in reflecting continuity and change in the valley; 2) the driving motives for change, whether they are external or internal; and 3) the direction of change and whether it creates centripetal or centrifugal forces in the valley. Although, the book provides a very elaborate but coherent picture of the Fergana’s reality, distinguishing the sources and directions of change is not easy because there is a continuous interchange between top-down and bottom-up reflections of change as well as between its inside-out and outside-in drivers. The interplay between causes and consequences of change in Fergana actually resembles the visual impact of a möbius ribbon on which external influences and top-down policies of change can be vernacularized and localized over time as one can see in the revival of Islam in valley either in conservative or radical form since 1980s (chapters 9 and 13).

The international community has mixed feeling of indifference and concern for the Fergana Valley and Central Asia as it is seen as relatively stable compared to

the contemporary Middle East. The Fergana Valley, now located at the periphery of three Central Asian republics but once the center of Central Asia, illustrates both the risks and opportunities for social and political changes in the whole region, and the book *Fergana Valley: the Heart*

*of Central Asia* proves that understanding the Fergana's complexities and its fluctuation between unity and diversity is crucial to understanding regional change.

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## Islam Without Extremes - A Muslim Case for Liberty

**By Mustafa Akyol**

New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011, 352 pages, ISBN 9780393070866, \$25.95.

In Mustafa Akyol's book *Islam Without Extremes*, the author takes up the challenge to confront the many misconceptions and false portrayals of Islam as inherently conservative or violent by tracing back Islam's history, the development of political Islam, and offering his own vision for a modern and more liberal political Islam. Throughout his writings, he is implicitly and explicitly guided by the question why a dominantly conservative brand of Islam is nowadays present in many governments or societies. Yet in the course of the book, he contrasts (formerly) authoritarian and secularist Turkey with other Islamic countries, concluding that Islam may not be the reason for authoritarianism but that other factors are at play. Drawing also on his own experiences, religious beliefs, and Turkish heritage, Akyol analyzes the emergence of political Islam by deconstructing the past, meaning he sheds light on both conservative (Traditionalists) and more progressive (Rationalists) movements within Islam and supplements his evaluation of the movements with a discussion on other factors, such as the environment (desert vs. arid regions),

cultural context (tribalism) or economics (commerce). To support his arguments and interpretations, he employs quotes from the Qur'an, Hadiths, and explains the socio-cultural setting that shaped and influenced the development of (political) Islam. Akyol focuses on the origins of Islam in the first part of the book and asserts that they provided a foundation for a more liberal future, citing women's rights (p.53) or the role of the individual (p.49). He then goes on to follow the blossoming of Islamic culture, trade and political life which all come to an end or faced stagnation from the 12th century (to a degree even earlier) on due to, among other reasons, the economic decline, and a lack of trade (pp.125-127).

However, aside the lack of economic development, Akyol also discusses the role the desert environment played on shaping the nature of Islam, the function of the middle class, and the role of the respective rulers of the land. This critical review will assess the latter point, the role and power of rulers in the Muslim world and how their interests influenced the development and interpretation of Islam.