



RADIO FREE EUROPE
RADIO LIBERTY

Radio Liberty Research Bulletin

31st Year, No. 39 (3452)

September 30, 1987

Iranian Religious
Propaganda in Turkmenistan

RL 375/87 ✓

Ukrainian Catholic
Activist Iosyp Terelya in
the West

RL 376/87

Literary Criticism in the
Glasnost' Era

RL 377/87

Transmission of AIDS Is
Made a Criminal Offense

RL 378/87

Moscow News Reports Strike
by Bus Drivers in Chekhov

RL 379/87

"Informal Groups" Hold
First Officially
Sanctioned Conference

RL 380/87

Religious Policy under
Gorbachev

RL 381/87

The USSR This Week

RL 382/87



RL 375/87

September 22, 1987

IRANIAN RELIGIOUS PROPAGANDA IN TURKMENISTAN ✓

Ann Sheehy

Summary: A recent article in Turkmenskaya iskra by the second secretary of the Krasnovodsk Oblast Party committee states that not only is Iran beaming religious radio and television broadcasts in Turkmen to Soviet Turkmenistan for several hours a day but inhabitants of Iran have been sending letters to their relatives in the Soviet Union offering to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca in their place and urging them to organize alms-giving, collective prayers, and "other deeds in conflict with Soviet legislation."

The Soviet authorities have long complained that foreign radio stations broadcasting to the Soviet Union attach great importance to encouraging religious and national sentiments among the Soviet population. One of the foreign countries that has put particular emphasis on religious broadcasts is, of course, Khomeini's Iran, which has been making considerable effort to exhort Soviet Muslims not to forget their Islamic roots.

Iran borders on two of the Muslim republics--namely, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan--and sizable groups of Azeris and Turkmen live in the areas of Iran adjacent to the Soviet Union. When the shah was still in power, Soviet Turkmen in the border areas were already listening regularly to Turkmen-language religious broadcasts from Radio Gorgan (Gorgan is a city in the Iranian province of Khorasan where the Iranian Turkmen live). In a brochure published in 1979 the then head of the Department of Propaganda and Agitation of the Turkmen Central Committee, Nursakhat Bairamsakhatov, stated that the Iranian religious programs had helped sustain Islamic "religious and customary survivals" in the border areas. He also reported that religious broadcasts from Radio Gorgan had been recorded on tape by local mullahs and played to Muslims in parts of Turkmenistan that could not receive the broadcasts directly.¹

1. See RL 142/80, "Spillover Effects of Religious Broadcasts in Iran on Soviet Muslims," April 14, 1980.

The religious content of Iranian broadcasts has increased under Khomeini, some of whose closest aides have made no secret of the fact that they regard the traditionally Muslim nationalities of the Soviet Union as a very legitimate target of religious propaganda. There have been several references in the Soviet Turkmen press to broadcasts from Radio Gorgan. In March, 1986, for instance, a teacher in the Murgab Raion of Turkmenistan wrote of the problems caused by Radio Gorgan in bringing children up as atheists. He cited the case of one child whose family he had visited: he found the father listening to a talk on the Islamic rite of sacrifice, tithing, and inheritance. In another case he heard a child singing a religious song that he had learned at home from a tape recording of a Radio Gorgan broadcast.² In an article in the republican Turkmen-language newspaper Sovet Turkmenistany in November, 1986, criticizing the widespread observance of the Islamic wedding rite, the authors blamed in part:

radio broadcasts of a reactionary religious and instigatory nature--for example, at the Gorgan and Bandar Turkmen [also a town in Iran, formerly known as Bander Shah] radio stations. Today it is no secret to anyone through what kinds of efforts and inventions the broadcasts are filled with Koranic guidelines and laws and shari'ah regulations and call for adherence to Islamic customs and traditions.³

Most recently, Allamyrat Myradov, second secretary of Krasnovodsk Oblast Party Committee, has referred to Iranian religious broadcasts in an article on atheistic work in the oblast and how the Party committee is combating foreign religious propaganda.⁴ Iranian radio, he says, broadcasts for several hours a day in Turkmen to inhabitants of the oblast, and recently Iranian television has joined in the propaganda campaign. He cites the case of a pensioner who took up religious work under the influence of such broadcasts and concedes that not a few people have been taken in by them. Appeals to people not to listen to religious sermons, and even more forbidding them to do so, would, Myradov maintains, most likely achieve the opposite of the desired effect. The answer is rather to "immunize" the population against alien ideology

2. Mugallymlar gazeti, March 23, 1986.

3. Sovet Turkmenistany, November 23, 1986.

4. Turkmenskaya iskra, September 3, 1987.

through atheistic and counterpropaganda work. According to Myradov, the holding of village assemblies has proved to be useful here.

We have found village assemblies to be an effective form of work in unmasking the antisocial activity of self-styled mullahs and the harmful content of foreign religious radio and television broadcasts.

Myradov then goes on to reveal that more than 170 such assemblies have been held in the Kizyl-Atrek, Kazandzhik, Gasan-Kuli, and Kara-Kala Raions in the past two years. Myradov also states that efforts are being made in preschool institutions to counteract the fact that the broadcasts of foreign radio and television centers are especially aimed at children, particularly those of preschool age.

More recently the Soviet authorities have found themselves faced with a new problem--viz., the dispatch of religious material from Iran to inhabitants of Turkmenistan. In Myradov's words:

In recent years we have come up against yet another factor that has to be taken into account in atheistic activity. The efforts of inhabitants of Iran to have a negative effect on believers and to kindle religious fanaticism by the dissemination of inflammatory religious material of an Islamic nature have increased. Letters, supposedly from relatives in the neighboring country, are being sent to many inhabitants of the oblast asking their permission for the haj, that is the pilgrimage to Mecca, to be performed in their name, after which they will be accorded the religious title of "haji".⁵

Myradov adds that the recipients of the letters have also been asked to urge their fellow-villagers to agree to pilgrimages being performed in their name and to organize alms-giving, the collective reading of prayers and "other acts in conflict with Soviet legislation."

5. Proxy pilgrimages are permitted if three conditions are met. First, the person performing the proxy pilgrimage must have performed the pilgrimage already on his own behalf. Second, the individual for whom the pilgrimage is being performed must be prevented from doing it himself for very compelling reasons, for example serious illness. And third, the proxy must be a

Evidently a sufficient number of these letters have been received from Iran for the authorities to feel the need to take widespread action against them. Myradov states that "broad-scale prophylactic measures involving the mass media" have been conducted to neutralize the harmful effect of the letters and that popular assemblies have been held in many of the rural settlements where such letters have been received. In this instance Myradov is confident that the steps taken have produced the desired results: "the attempts made on the part of inhabitants of Iran to create new religious authorities in the oblast have been thwarted."

It is difficult to tell from the material in the Soviet press exactly how much of a problem Iranian religious propaganda directed at Turkmenistan is for the authorities. At the very least, however, it is clearly an irritant, and possibly rather more (and this although the Iranians are Shi'a and the Turkmen Sunni). One thing seems certain. Iranian and other religious broadcasts would not have the same attraction if information on the beliefs and practice of Islam were freely available in the Soviet Union. There is some evidence that the Soviet authorities themselves are beginning to realize this and are more prepared to make such information available. Similarly, offers of proxy pilgrimages would not be necessary if Soviet Muslims were free to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. At present only about two dozen are able to do so annually, and they are hand-picked and include a sizable number of the official clergy.

very close relative. It is not known whether these conditions would be met in the case of the Soviet Turkmen and their Iranian relatives.