

# Muslim Soldiers in Non-Muslim Militaries at War in Muslim Lands: The Soviet, American and Indian Experience

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## *Abstract*

*This article examines the performance of Muslim soldiers serving at home and abroad in the militaries of majority non-Muslim countries deployed to Muslim lands—including disputed and internal territories. The three case studies examined are of the Soviet Red Army in Afghanistan, the ongoing American military involvement in various conflicts dating to 1991 and the Indian military at home and in disputed areas such as Kashmir. While these three cases are very different in numerous aspects, they do illustrate a similar phenomenon—Muslim soldiers overwhelmingly choosing to fight for the country of their citizenship over and above any potential complicating ties of Muslim solidarity.*

## Introduction

This article will take the question of how well integrated Muslims are into non-Muslim (or majority non-Muslim) institutions to a comparatively extreme level and analyze how Muslims reconcile their multiple identities and perform as members of militaries that will be killing Muslims—whether armed combatants or civilians. Within the academic literature, the permissibility of Muslims serving in non-Muslim militaries has been addressed in terms of the Islamic jurisprudence debate.<sup>1</sup> And while the performance of Muslim soldiers serving in predominantly non-Muslim militaries deployed to Muslim lands has also been analyzed in the literature, it is overwhelmingly in case studies limited to one country's military.

Examples include studies of Dutch Muslim soldiers deployed to Bosnia and Afghanistan,<sup>2</sup> as well as of Bedouin and Palestinian Muslims in the Israeli military.<sup>3</sup> Many other examples outside of academic and research institute analysis can be found. For example, Thailand's overwhelmingly Buddhist military deployed units that included Thai Muslim soldiers to one area of the country's Muslim-populated south to combat the local insurgency.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the Thai General tasked to command troops in the Muslim south, Sonthi Boonyaratglin, is himself a Muslim.<sup>5</sup> The post-Soviet Russian military has also been able to send high-ranking Muslim officers to predominantly Muslim areas. Prominent examples include two recipients of the "Hero of the Russian Federation" award. One, the late Lieutenant-General Muhridin Ashurov, an ethnic Tajik, served in Afghanistan as part of the Soviet Red Army, in Tajikistan as commander of the Commonwealth of Independent States military division that transitioned to Russian command, and in both of the Chechen Wars.<sup>6</sup> The other, Guards Colonel (ret.) Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, is an ethnic Ingush who served not just near home in both the Chechen Wars, but also in Kosovo where he was the overall commander of Russian forces.<sup>7</sup> And with regards to

immigrant communities, the Muslims of the British military have been profiled several times in the media,<sup>8</sup> as well as by advocacy groups.<sup>9</sup>

In order to analyze how Muslims perform their duties when asked to fight against fellow Muslims (directly or in a supporting role), this study will focus on three prominent cases: The Soviet Red Army, the American armed forces and the Indian military. The reliability and performance of Muslim soldiers at home and deployed outside the country during times of war against Muslim opponents will be analyzed.

### **The Soviet 40th Army in Afghanistan**

During the Soviet–Afghan War, many Western sources pointed to the Soviet soldiers from the Central Asian republics, including groups with co-ethnics in Afghanistan, as performing poorly and being unreliable—even mutinous. Throughout the 1980s, numerous Western authors wrote that Soviet Muslim soldiers, particularly those from the Central Asian republics, were unreliable or prone to desertion in the fight against the *mujahideen*, leading to Central Asian troops being withdrawn from Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup> The most prominent example offered of the Soviet Central Asians’ unreliability is the supposed Soviet government decision at the beginning of the war to withdraw the Central Asian troops after only three months in Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup> With regards to the origin of this information and who relayed it most enthusiastically, a survey of the early publications that claimed Central Asian soldiers in the Soviet military were unreliable or mutinous encompasses sources such as anti-Soviet publications,<sup>12</sup> Soviet defectors and émigrés,<sup>13</sup> scholars who had a long history of arguing that the Soviet Union faced an impending clash with its Muslim population,<sup>14</sup> anti-Soviet academics,<sup>15</sup> a Pakistani army officer who led the Afghan Desk of the Inter-Service Intelligence,<sup>16</sup> a Ukrainian émigré working for Radio Liberty,<sup>17</sup> RAND<sup>18</sup> and an employee at the US Department of Defense.<sup>19</sup> One writer, a Radio Liberty director, stated with no skepticism whatsoever that reports of the Central Asians’ unreliability and subsequent withdrawal from Afghanistan came from “Various media, émigré, and, increasingly, Afghan *mujahideen* reports...”<sup>20</sup> This view has remained mostly unchallenged and has continually appeared even in the academic literature on the conflict.<sup>21</sup>

With regards to exact details, some authors, such as RAND’s Thomas Szayna, are extremely harsh in their appraisal. He argues that “The Afghanistan experience demonstrated that while not excelling in military skills, Soviet Muslim soldiers were adept at black-marketeering, smuggling, drug-dealing and currency manipulation. The war appears to have intensified Muslim soldiers’ disaffection and negative self-assertion”.<sup>22</sup> Some authors take an even stronger view on this unreliability and report that Soviet Muslim soldiers provided materiel and intelligence to the *mujahideen*.<sup>23</sup> Others even write that some Soviet Central Asian soldiers had defected to the *mujahideen* and were actively fighting their former comrades.<sup>24</sup> The most extreme claims of the unreliability of Soviet Central Asians are with regards to an alleged mutiny in September 1985 at the Dasht-i Abdan Soviet garrison in northern Afghanistan. Numerous sources report a similar story: that Soviet Tajik and Uzbek troops mutinied after the execution of an ethnic Tajik Soviet soldier, resulting in 80–450 deaths and the destruction of around 500 military vehicles.<sup>25</sup> After following citations, a search for the source of information on this incident in the above sources in almost every case (some are un-cited) led eventually to the anti-Soviet “Afghan Information Centre” in Peshawar, Pakistan.<sup>26</sup> This massive incident was not noticed by any other sources, and no information has

emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union—leading to the obvious conclusion that an anti-Soviet information outlet reported on an incident that did not happen.

### *A Reassessment of Soviet Muslim Soldiers' Performance*

Some analysts, such as Robert F. Baumann, are more cautious in their analysis, and refer to reports of Muslim soldiers' unreliability as allegations.<sup>27</sup> Other authors went further and debunked the idea that Central Asians were withdrawn due to desertion or collaboration. First of all, the large presence of Central Asians in the first Soviet deployment force to Afghanistan is due to the vicinity of the military forces of the Turkestan Military District, which is located in Central Asia. This allowed for speed, surprise and logistical capabilities that a full deployment from western areas of the Soviet Union would not be capable of.<sup>28</sup> As for the withdrawal of Central Asian troops from Afghanistan during February to March 1980, reservists were obligated to serve for 90 days once they were activated. Since the Turkestan Military District—which called up reservists locally in Central Asia—was a large part of the initial force, many of the forces returning after 90 days were Central Asian.<sup>29</sup> Beyond this, there is the simple fact that Soviet Tajiks served in Afghanistan from the beginning until the end of the war despite stories of Central Asian troops being withdrawn.<sup>30</sup> By the end of the war, approximately 10% of the over half a million Soviet soldiers who served in Afghanistan were Central Asians.<sup>31</sup> Now with the hindsight of newly released archival materials, it is clear that the Soviet authorities did not view Soviet Muslim attitudes toward the war in Afghanistan with any serious concern.<sup>32</sup>

It is true that Central Asians were under-represented in the Soviet officer corps.<sup>33</sup> RAND's Alexander Alexiev argued—based on émigrés' testimonies—that “After their initial experience with Central Asian troops during the invasion, the military recruitment authorities appear to have taken measures to limit the numbers of Soviet Muslims serving in combat units in Afghanistan”.<sup>34</sup> However, others reached a different conclusion. The lower education levels of Central Asians resulted in them being less suitable on average to qualify for the officer corps or for a combat role where Russian language fluency would obviously be an overwhelmingly important factor.<sup>35</sup>

The belief that Muslim soldiers were not contributing their share was also a commonly held prejudice amongst Russians back home. The Soviet military responded by directing its official publication *Red Star* to include a Muslim in every photograph and article.<sup>36</sup> In terms of being engaged in the fighting, the contribution of Muslim ethnic groups was just as mixed as the contribution of non-Muslim ethnic groups in the Soviet Union. Once official—and reliable<sup>37</sup>—casualty figures were made available, the idea of Muslims shirking their duties as Soviet citizens became untenable. Mark Galeotti produced an “Index of Involvement” (controlled for population and youth population) and found that indeed, Muslim ethnic groups such as Azeris, Kyrgyzs and Kazakhs were under-represented in the casualty figures at -35.3%, -24.6% and -19.4%, respectively (the Soviet average being zero). Yet, the non-Muslim Armenians, Georgians and Latvians were also under-represented at -39.1%, -35.4% and -36.7%, respectively. And while the smaller Slavic groups (Ukrainians and Belorussians) were overrepresented at +16.7% and +21.3%, the Russians were close to average at +2.6%. The Muslim Uzbeks and Tajiks were also close to average at -3.8% and -5.5%, while the Turkmens were over-represented at +34.5%, the highest contribution of the major ethnicities in the Soviet Union.<sup>38</sup> Worth noting is that Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turkmens also contribute a sizeable percentage of the population of Afghanistan; they were facing not just fellow Muslims, but their fellow co-ethnics.

Furthermore, recent research on Central Asian veterans of the Soviet military by Erica Marat found that Central Asian soldiers who served in “elite regiments”, but who were not deployed to Afghanistan, “still regret not serving”.<sup>39</sup> She also concluded, with regards to members of the Afghan Veteran Union (AVU), that in Central Asia “in particular, AVU members proudly recall their service in Afghanistan as the most manly, most patriotic, even most romantic period of their lives”.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, she does mention that an undetermined number of rural Central Asian soldiers with poor Russian skills resented the Russian dominance in the military. She states that “The sense of inferiority felt by Central Asian soldiers inevitably led to resentment, apathy, and weak commitment to their military service”.<sup>41</sup> However, this unhappiness is related to lack of prestige within the military rather than to sympathy for fellow Muslim Afghans.

The casualty figures above demonstrate how problematic earlier analyses were. For example, Alexander Alexiev commented in his 1988 RAND study that “staffing policies have resulted in the virtual absence of Muslims from the counterinsurgency forces, underrepresentation in the regular motorized rifle units, and overrepresentation in the noncombat and support formations”.<sup>42</sup> However, making assessments based on testimonies of former soldiers who had left the Soviet Union, as Alexiev did, was problematic. But RAND studies were far faultier than just relying heavily on the testimony of people who chose to leave the Soviet Union. Three years earlier Ellen Jones found, also based on émigré servicemen’s testimonies,<sup>43</sup> that Muslims were “assigned to virtually every sort of post, including technical units, the Strategic Rocket forces, elite airborne units, and specialist training programs. They are not restricted to menial tasks or non-sensitive posts”.<sup>44</sup> Not only did Central Asians serve in combat units, but they were also prominent in psychological operations units as their language skills were an asset.<sup>45</sup> The most prominent example of Muslims in combat roles are the two Muslim Battalions, the first of which (officially the 154th Special Operations Detachment) was composed of Uzbeks, Tajiks and Turkmens, and was tasked to perform covert operations disguised as locals. Initially, its job was to provide protection for President Taraki, but soon it was re-tasked and was directly involved in the attack on President Amin’s palace at the very beginning of the war. The second battalion, despite claims that Central Asian and Muslim soldiers had been withdrawn, saw service in the very dangerous Panjshir Valley through 1982.<sup>46</sup>

#### *Reasons for Desertion from the Soviet Army*

Concerning desertion, bullying and hazing were the main considerations for deserters.<sup>47</sup> And, in terms of the planned destination of deserters, some were actually trying to return to their homes in the Soviet Union.<sup>48</sup> Others, of course, made it to America and Europe. As for deserters in general, religion was not a factor in desertion, as evidenced by just a few of many examples: the two Ukrainian soldiers who still live in Afghanistan;<sup>49</sup> the anecdotes given by Rodric Braithwaite of non-Muslims who joined the *mujahideen*;<sup>50</sup> and by the non-Muslim Soviet deserters who made their way to the West.<sup>51</sup> The claims that Central Asians enthusiastically joined the *mujahideen* are even less supportable. They did exist; Muslim deserters who joined the insurgency were in some cases even interviewed.<sup>52</sup> Marat also mentions the desertion of Central Asian soldiers, but describes the process as “not a collective behaviour”.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Artemy Kalinovskiy observes that “Among the soldiers who went to fight in Afghanistan, there was never any large-scale defection of Muslims to the *mujahideen*. True, some did go over to the other side,

usually after being held in POW camps—but so did a number of Russians”.<sup>54</sup> Olivier Roy also writes that few Soviet Muslims actually fought alongside the *mujahideen*. He observes that one well-known defector—known by the *nom de guerre* Taj Mohammed—who fought with the *mujahideen* in Takhar was likely not even Central Asian, but rather a soldier from the Caucasus.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, the only well-known named deserter who fought against the Soviets was Kazbek Khudalov, an Ossetian from the Caucasus. A version given to journalist Artyom Borovik of Khudalov’s activities was that he fought with a group of about a dozen Tajik deserters.<sup>56</sup> While Khudalov is certainly real (he is listed as missing by an missing in action (MIA) advocacy group<sup>57</sup> and by the Russian General Staff<sup>58</sup>), the likelihood that there were a dozen Soviet Tajiks along with him is doubtful. For example, the Russian Union of Afghanistan Veterans maintains a list of Soviet soldiers who joined the *mujahideen* and fought against the Afghan Communist government and the Soviet military. The list, which includes Khudalov and covers the full decade of the war, names 64 men of which only 17 or 18 are Muslims.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, the MIA advocacy group footnoted above has compiled, after 15 years of investigating and a dozen trips to Afghanistan, a list of the missing. Of the 270 missing soldiers, only 4 are Tajik.<sup>60</sup> Clearly, it is unlikely that this many Tajik deserters could be in one group, at one time, fighting the Soviet military.

In general, neither Muslim nor non-Muslim soldiers in the Red Army held much affinity for the Afghans. Galeotti, the author of an in-depth study on the Soviet military, commented that “One can [...] safely discount tales of Central Asians galvanized, as a whole, into resistance by the thought of fighting their co-religionists, ...”<sup>61</sup> He later states that “To an extent, even to Soviet Central Asians, but especially Slav soldiers, the Afghan remained alien, unknowable and suspicious. As a result, neither those supporting nor repudiating the war had much fellow feeling for the rebels...”<sup>62</sup> However, Erica Marat does note that Central Asian soldiers did have some sympathy for the local Afghan civilians. She mentions that “instances of Central Asian conscripts siding with the local population while realizing that they could not obey orders involving the killing of civilians with similar ethnic roots were fairly frequent”.<sup>63</sup>

What should be mentioned here is that there are similar anecdotes of non-Muslim Soviet soldiers who also had sympathies toward the locals under the same circumstances.<sup>64</sup> Marat does stress that “Most Central Asian veterans, however, say that they drew a clear line between their Soviet identity, calling themselves internationalists, and the local Afghan population, despite often similar physical appearances and languages” and that Central Asian veterans “in particular remained loyal to the Soviet ideology” regarding the Soviet–Afghan War.<sup>65</sup> Clearly, the process whereby Soviet Muslims—Central Asians in particular—reconciled their Muslim identity and their duties as Soviet soldiers was mostly successful.

### *Muslims in the American Armed Forces*

In terms of the representation of Muslims in the US military, in 2008 the Department of Defense stated that there were 3409 active duty Muslims across all branches of the armed forces. However, it is optional for members of the military to provide their religious affiliation, so the number is likely higher,<sup>66</sup> with 20,000 being the most optimistic figure provided by some sources—though with no methodology given.<sup>67</sup> The estimated number of Muslims in the USA also fluctuates wildly,<sup>68</sup> so weighting the percentage of Muslims in the US military versus the US Muslim population as a whole is problematic. Using the different figures, one can conclude that Muslims are either slightly or heavily under-rep-

resented. The reasons given for this are almost always regarding Muslims feeling unwelcome in the military due to American society's suspicion of Islam and the alleged unwillingness of Muslims to serve in a military force that has been at war in Muslim countries regularly since 1991.<sup>69</sup> However, there is no indication that Muslims served in higher proportions before 1991, and in fact the military claims modest gains in the number of Muslims serving in the armed forces since 2001.<sup>70</sup>

Moving away from conjecture over numbers, the performance of Muslims in the US military is the most relevant issue for this study. The reliability—or rather “loyalty”—in the American discourse—of Muslim members of the US military is a visible issue, but overwhelmingly limited to the news media and the Internet.<sup>71</sup> Post-9/11 many Muslim Americans, including those in the military, felt compelled or motivated to state their loyalty as American citizens. However, one Muslim military chaplain, anticipating a mobilization and further deployment of the US forces to Muslim countries, had concerns that went beyond public relations. The chaplain, the US Army Captain Muhammad Abdur-Rashid, sought advice from a prominent American Muslim scholar who in turn brought the issue to a Qatar-based Islamic scholar, Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi. The reply came in the form of a *fatwa* (edict) that approved of Muslim Americans participating in the impending campaign.<sup>72</sup> The *fatwa*, signed by al-Qaradawi and four others, ended emphatically:

To sum up, it is acceptable—God willing—for Muslim American military personnel to participate in the fighting in the upcoming battles, against whomever their country decides has perpetrated terrorism against them, keeping in mind to have the proper intention, as explained earlier, so that no doubts will be raised about their loyalty to their country, or to prevent harm from befalling them, as might be expected.<sup>73</sup>

As Basheer Nafi noted, the issue of Muslim Americans' perceived allegiances was at issue, as demonstrated by “the fatwa's implicit goal [...] to normalize the presence of Muslims as a minority living under non-Islamic rule”.<sup>74</sup> Of course, there were dissenting opinions elsewhere, notably by one Saudi Islamic scholar who stated that all Muslims must support the Taliban.<sup>75</sup> Later, in 2003 and with regards to Iraq, the European Council for Fatwa and Research, of which al-Qaradawi is president, issued a *fatwa* prohibiting Muslim soldiers in the British, American and Australian militaries from participating in the Iraq War.<sup>76</sup> However, this negative *fatwa* was ignored by Muslim soldiers already serving in these militaries.

### *The Performance of Muslim Americans during War*

Beyond Islamic jurisprudence, which is not the usual or final determinant of Muslims' decisions in their daily lives, what can be said about the actual reliability of Muslim soldiers? A few prominent incidents illustrate extremes on the part of military authorities and Muslim servicemen. Good examples of the alleged hyper-vigilance of the US military and government are the Desert Storm-era charges of treason against two Muslim converts aboard the United States Ship *Ranger* in 1991 that the government eventually dropped,<sup>77</sup> and the more recent 2003 arrest of the US Army Muslim chaplain Captain James Yee, another convert to Islam, relating to his service and suspected espionage activities at the Guantanamo Bay prison. Prosecutors eventually dropped the main charges against Yee due to lack of evidence amidst accusations that the US government and military were profiling Muslim Americans.<sup>78</sup> At the other extreme are the cases of

Sergeant Hasan Akbar, a convert who murdered two fellow servicemen at the beginning of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and Major Nidal Malik Hasan, a Palestinian-American who murdered 13 at Ft. Hood. Both men had previously exhibited discontent regarding Muslims serving in the US military in a war against Muslims.<sup>79</sup>

Concerning the rhetoric of Muslim-American members of the military, there can be found both statements declaring their complete dedication to their duty and statements that qualify what they will do. For example, during interviews in 2002 with a group of six Muslims (three Air Force and three Army, and five of whom were converts), five strongly declared their dedication to their sworn duty. But the sixth made this comment: “Would I go and shoot another Muslim, if I knew they were another Muslim [?], no. Because we’re not supposed to! If a Muslim kills another Muslim—in the Qu’ran it says that even more so, even if it’s in self-defense—we’re not supposed to kill another Muslim. That’s like dictating a path to the hellfire”.<sup>80</sup> Years earlier, in 1992, a French journalist visited Ft. Hood in Texas and found several converts who were particularly enthusiastic about their new identities. One convert stated that “Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the United States. Tomorrow, it will be the religion of America, and then, Inshallah [God willing], the religion of the whole world”.<sup>81</sup> Another convert, identifying himself as an *imam*, remarked on his service in Desert Storm, stating that “It is true, some soldiers refused to bear arms against Iraqis. So, one day the authorities called me and asked which side we were on—Muslim or American. The result was that those troops were left in the rear”.<sup>82</sup> The idea of Muslim in the military being unreliable could also be supported by the statements of Muslim Americans online, notably on Muslim Military Members Net, an email listserv that was closed to non-members (a researcher was given access in 1998). But only a small number of the 50 members who participated made statements that indicated they had a problem with being Muslim in the US military. For example, one debate on the inability to grow a beard in the US military resulted in this email:

If they have beards [and] they are still willing to deploy to areas where they may have to fight and kill Muslims then obviously the beard isn’t the issue. [...] If there are Muslims who will be dropping bombs loaded with Gas I suggest to the brother not to shave his beard but to insure that he is not placed in a situation where he will possibly be killed by a Muslim or where he will kill a Muslim. [...] What are a few mere dollars that the US government gives as a salary compared with the price of your soul? [...] If you are a new Muslim get out [of the military] at the first opportunity.<sup>83</sup>

Another member had a different strategy: “In fact, what we need to be working on is making our presence in the military so strong—that when the administration wants to go fight some Muslim, 40% of the entire military says ‘we’re not going’, because most of them have become Muslim, and the rest have become Muslim sympathizers”.<sup>84</sup> However, many others were of a completely different view. The list moderator, in reply to a member who said Muslims should get out of the military, stated that “This e-mail list is here to SUPPORT Muslims in the military. If you do not want to be in the military, then leave”.<sup>85</sup> And one member, in reply to another who said Muslims should get out, repeated the oath of enlistment and then said “look at the future and see what your role could be. Will you be in armed conflict against Muslims? I’m sure that there are Muslims in the military who will take exception to this line of thinking and present a more patriotic position”.<sup>86</sup> Overall, the calls to leave the military were

drowned out by a “large majority” who stated that they were able to reconcile the difficulties of being Muslim American and serving in the military.<sup>87</sup>

Further counter-balance to expressions of discontent can easily be found in the positive portrayals in the media of Muslim-American servicemen and women. A good example is Sgt. George Curtis, a Gulf War I veteran, who framed his service as having defended the holy cities of Mecca and Medina from Iraqi forces. He remarked that “Whether it’s Iraq or anywhere else in the world, my first duty is to defend my country”.<sup>88</sup> As an example of an opposite view, at the beginning of the Iraq War in 2003, a Muslim-American former Marine detailed the difficulty of serving with Marines who made bigoted comments about Muslims and stated that “It’s getting harder and harder for Muslims in the service to morally justify being in a military that seems constantly engaged against fellow Muslims”.<sup>89</sup> However, his statements in the article were, like those above, balanced by other Muslims who argued that they had no issue whatsoever with their military service.<sup>90</sup>

Overall, the more recent post-2001 process whereby Muslims reconcile their identity as Muslims and their duty as members of the US military appears to be mostly successful. This is despite rare incidents of fratricide (Hasan and Akbar), desertion (e.g. Marine Corporal Wasseff Ali Hassoun<sup>91</sup>), refusal to deploy (e.g. US Army Private Naser Abdo<sup>92</sup>) and charges of plotting to attack fellow soldiers (Abdo again). Thousands of service men and women have been deployed to Muslim countries and performed their duties, while many others have supported the operations there from bases in the USA and throughout the world.

### **Muslims in the Indian Military**

While the Indian military has appointed Indian Muslims to high-ranking posts (see below), the proportion of Muslims in the military is far smaller than the proportion of Muslims in the Indian population. Muslims represent about 13% of the Indian population, but they compose only 2% of the military, a percentage that has been maintained since the 1950s.<sup>93</sup> This percentage is of course mainly a legacy of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent, when “virtually all” Muslim officers and enlisted men of the British Indian armed forces joined the newly formed Pakistani Army.<sup>94</sup> The under-representation of Muslims in the military troubled the first Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, and almost six decades later it is still a subject of some controversy, most notably when the Indian government formed a committee in 2005 to study the issue of the Muslim community in India, including in the military. Some commentators saw the activities of this committee as an attack on the institution of the Indian Army and as a dangerous line of inquiry that would create further sectarianism in the country.<sup>95</sup>

Analysts have given various reasons for the continual under-representation of Muslims in the Indian military that go beyond the obvious history of brutal Muslim–Hindu sectarian violence during Partition and the subsequent wars against Muslim Pakistan. In the years after Partition and the emergence of India and Pakistan as independent states, the recruitment process failed to bring in a significant number of Muslim recruits due to attitudes on both sides; there was a tendency by the military to eliminate potential Muslim recruits as a security risk, while potential Muslim recruits themselves were disinclined to join a military that would possibly be in regular conflict with the military of a Muslim country.<sup>96</sup> The average lower level of education of Muslim in India has also hindered the entrance of Muslims into the enlisted and officer ranks,<sup>97</sup> but nowhere near as prominently as the pervasive Indian distrust of Muslims in the military.

Starting in the 1970s, the situation for Muslims in the Indian army improved.<sup>98</sup> However, in 1985 the Indian politician George Fernandes (who happens to be a Christian) noted that “the Muslim is not wanted in the armed forces because he is always suspect—whether we want to admit it or not, most Indians consider Muslims a fifth column for Pakistan”.<sup>99</sup> The debate over this issue is continuing, with some arguing that the Muslim issue is not relevant as the Indian military is above sectarian issues,<sup>100</sup> while others state that the active discrimination and suspicion keep Muslims from joining the military.<sup>101</sup> And, of course, the possibility that Indian Muslims are still reluctant to join a Hindu-dominated military force to fight against fellow Muslims, many of whom had emigrated to Pakistan from their areas in India, must still be considered as a factor.

In the discussion on the issue of Muslims serving in the Indian military, exemplary individuals are usually mentioned prominently. The story of Brigadier Mohammad Usman comes to the fore as an example of Muslims excelling in the Hindu-dominated armed forces. The Sandhurst-trained Usman served in Burma during World War II and, most relevant to this article, died in 1948 while fighting against his fellow Muslims of the Pakistani army in the disputed region of Kashmir, itself demographically dominated by Muslims. The Indo-Pakistani War of 1947 had an obvious communal component as Muslims fought against Hindus. At Partition, the military authorities gave officers the choice of joining the Pakistani or Indian armies. Usman, to the surprise of many, chose India along with over 500 other Muslim officers.<sup>102</sup> Against the backdrop of communal violence and anger, Usman had to win the confidence of his Brigade, some of whom were questioning his loyalty. He quickly dispelled any doubts about his loyalty and gained fame after Battle of Naushera. Usman, who was described by General V.K. Singh, the retired Chief of Army Staff of the Indian Army, as having a “secular outlook”, proved his willingness to fight Muslims whatever the cost, as demonstrated by his orders to his reluctant gunners to destroy a mosque that Pakistani forces were using as a firing position.<sup>103</sup> The Indian government accorded Usman, who died in Kashmir in July 1948 during Pakistani shelling, the rare honor of a state funeral. Many in India still remember Usman today as one of the nation’s heroes.<sup>104</sup> More recently, commentators often mention Muslims such as the top army commander in Jammu and Kashmir, Lt. Gen. Syed Ata Hasnain.<sup>105</sup> And, with regards to the all-important Kashmir factor, the first Kashmiri Muslim to rise to the rank of general, Major General Mohammad Amin Naik, reached that rank just recently in 2008.<sup>106</sup>

Beyond prominent personalities and high-ranking officers,<sup>107</sup> the performance and loyalty of Muslims in the Indian army have been tested numerous times during battles with Pakistani forces, as well as during operations to quell Hindu–Muslim communal violence within the country. Of course, during partition many serving in the British Indian army had to make a decision whether to join the Pakistani or Indian military. Many Muslim officers, mostly Pashtuns and Punjabis, did join the Pakistani armed forces during Partition,<sup>108</sup> an event that cannot be used as a measure of unreliability in the framework of this article, as the choice was presented as an honorable option as India was split into two, and Pashtuns and most Punjabi soldiers hailed from the region now in newly created Pakistan. Of course, there were some desertions of Muslims from the Indian army, notably after the Indian army entered the Muslim principality of Hyderabad Deccan in September 1948.<sup>109</sup> But as Colonel Anil Athale (ret.) argues, “During the Hyderabad action, the Indian Army was in process of division between India and Pakistan on grounds of religion. To call these acts as desertion would label the entire Pakistani army as ‘deserters’”.<sup>110</sup> Years later, Muslims performed quite well in the Indian army

while conducting operations in predominantly Muslim areas. For example, in the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965, a Muslim majority battalion of the Indian Army was stationed in a strategic location in Jammu and Kashmir. As noted by Thomas and Karnard, “According to several high-ranking Indian army officers, the fact that the battalion did not flinch and carried out its assigned role with considerable credit, sufficiently dispelled worry—at least within the military—about the loyalty of Indian Muslim soldiers”.<sup>111</sup> Indian Muslims have proven themselves to be loyal members of the Indian military in the post-Partition era, yet their relatively low numbers is obviously a cause for continued concern.

## Conclusion

Comparing the cases of Muslim soldiers in the Soviet, American and Indian militaries can be problematic. The difficulties in making a comparison go beyond the very different availability of literature on the three cases. For example, Soviet Muslims lived in an authoritarian, Russian-dominated state that was the legacy of Russian imperial expansion—and the Soviet military relied heavily on conscription for the enlisted ranks. In contrast, American Muslims are mostly immigrants from diverse backgrounds that chose to immigrate to the USA—and those that chose to join the US military also did so voluntarily. Comparing the Soviet and American cases to India is just as problematic, as the Indian-Pakistani conflict started in the context of a disintegrating British colonial empire and massive communal Hindu–Muslim violence that occurred at the time of Partition. Besides, the American and Soviet Wars analyzed here are not nearly so desperate a struggle in terms of national existence and territorial integrity, as in the case of India and Pakistan. Additional problems in making comparisons between the cases, and within a case study on a single country, are the varying levels of religiosity and strength in Islam as an identity. There are no clear indications of whether or not religiosity affects a Muslim’s inclination to join the military in any of these three cases or, once in the military, to be unreliable.<sup>112</sup>

Based on all the available information, in none of the three cases was there systematic treason, desertion or poor performance on the part of Muslim soldiers while their countries were at war with fellow Muslims. Of course, this is a strong trend in one direction, not an absolute behavior; isolated incidents of treason, desertion or fratricide were present in all three cases. These three prominent cases, as well as smaller case studies mentioned in the Introduction, demonstrate that the loyalties of Muslim soldiers are not as simple as a reductionist religious or ethnic category of identity. The overwhelming majority of Muslim soldiers in non-Muslim militaries have clearly been able to reconcile multiple identities (e.g. Soviet soldier and Muslim) while supporting and even directly participating in the fight against fellow Muslims as reliable nationals of their country of citizenship.

## NOTES

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11. Alexander Alexiev, *Inside the Soviet Army in Afghanistan*, Santa Monica: RAND, 1988, p. 42; Gregory Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan*, New York: HarperCollins, 2009, p. 105; Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban*, Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002, pp. 244–245; Joseph J. Collins, “The Soviet-Afghan War: The First Four Years”, *Parameters*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1984, p. 53.
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