
Radical Islamists in Central Asia

ZEYNO BARAN

RADICAL ISLAMISTS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN INTERESTED in Central Asia, a historic center of classical Islam located today in a region of strategic importance.¹ Yet, only in recent times have radical Islamists entered the region, as it had been closed off to the rest of the Islamic world by decades of harsh Soviet rule. By the 1970s, many clergy members had begun to move away from the traditional Hanafi school of Islam to Wahhabism—thanks in part to the initial work of the *Ikhwan al-Muslimun* (Muslim Brotherhood).² The first *Ikhwan* group to arrive in Central Asia consisted of an ethnically diverse collection of Muslim students from countries such as Jordan, Iraq and Afghanistan. These students created the “Tashkent Group,” which sought to establish clandestine cells in Central Asian universities with the goal of recruiting local students into their movement and ultimately establishing the Caliphate. While at first they operated secretly, the *Ikhwan* and other Islamists began to act more openly as the reforms of *perestroika* were implemented. They were further emboldened in their openness by the Taliban takeover of neighboring Afghanistan in the 1990s.

For most radical Islamists, the main point of entry to the region was the Ferghana Valley, an area densely populated with deeply religious people, and which is shared among Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. At first, four radical Islamist groups were active there: Adolat (Justice), Baraka (Blessings), Tauba (Repentance), and Islam Lashkarlari (Warriors of Islam).³ These groups existed underground during the Soviet period, but emerged in the era of Gorbachev’s reforms. Over time, other groups also became active in the region, including Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) and its splinter groups Akramiylar and Hizb un-Nusrat, as well as Uzun Soqol (Long Beards), Nurcular, Tabligh Jamaat, Lashkar-i-Taiba, Hizballah, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, the Islamic Movement of Central Asia (IMCA), and the Islamic Jihad Group (IJG).

While their methods and strategies may differ, almost all of the groups listed above have as a shared goal the overthrow of the secular government

and society and the establishment of an Islamic state. Hizb ut-Tahrir, however, is the only group with a coherent ideology. Neither Osama bin Laden, nor former Taliban leader Mullah Omar, nor IMU leader Tahir Yuldashev has come up with an ideological and theological framework that justifies their actions. Instead, these and other leaders have relied on the comprehensive teachings of Hizb ut-Tahrir—which is currently the most popular radical movement in Central Asia. This article will first introduce HT and its splinter groups, and then discuss several other groups most active in Central Asia today.

Hizb ut-Tahrir al Islamiyya (The Islamic Party of Liberation)

Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) was founded in 1952/1953 by Sheikh Taqiuddin al-Nabhani in Jordanian-ruled East Jerusalem. Al-Nabhani died in 1977 and was succeeded by Abu Yusuf Abdul Qadim Zallum, another Palestinian cleric.⁴ Zallum left HT's leadership in March 2003, due to his deteriorating health, and died in April 2003. He was succeeded by Ata Ibnu Khaleel Abu Rashta, who previously served as the party's official spokesman in Jordan.⁵ Abu Rashta, alias Abu Yasin, is a Palestinian who is believed to have lived most recently in the West Bank. Under his leadership, HT activities have become more aggressive. During fall 2003, the governing body (*kiedat*) is believed to have instructed members to engage in acts of aggression towards the diplomatic representations and other buildings of those countries that supported the Iraq War. Today it is active in over 40 countries, with its ideological "nerve center" in London, and official headquarters in Jordan.

The main goal of the HT movement is to recreate the Caliphate, the Islamic state formally brought to an end in 1924 following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Although it claims to be nonviolent, HT acknowledges that violence may eventually be necessary in order to overthrow the regimes standing in the way of the Caliphate. It is viciously anti-Semitic and anti-American, and disseminates a radical Islamist ideology fundamentally opposed to democratic capitalism and to Western concepts of freedom. While HT as an organization does not engage in terrorist activities, it does operate as an ideological vanguard that supports and encourages terrorist acts.

HT may be the only self-described political party that calls for the unity of the *umma*—a unity which it seeks to bring about by emulating the steps that the Prophet Muhammad took to establish the original Caliphate. According to al-Nabhani, the Prophet's work was performed in "clearly defined stages, each of which he used to perform specific clear actions" that led, in the end, to the creation of a Sharia-based Islamic government.⁶

HT effectively combines Marxist-Leninist methodology and Western slogans with reactionary Islamist ideology to shape the internal debate within Islam. As an organization, HT also bears striking similarities to the early Bolshevik movement. Both have an ultimate, utopian political goal (whether “true communism” or the Caliphate), and both show an intense dislike for liberal democracy, while seeking to establish a mythical “just society.” Both also function with a secretive cell system. And while it insists on non-violence until the third stage, HT does justify the use of force, just as Lenin and the Bolsheviks did in 1917.

Its partly leaflets, accessible over the Internet in various languages, provide the *umma* with timely and coherent explanations of current events that fit HT’s ideological framework. The language of these leaflets is simple and direct; for instance, many repeat the call to Muslims to “kill Jews wherever you find them.”⁷

The tight compartmentalization of HT ensures that little information is known about its financial structure. Its members take oaths of secrecy on the Quran—oaths that are generally not broken even under interrogation. The “need-to-know” basis on which information is transmitted in the party ensures that data obtained from all but the most senior members is of little importance. This is why, until today, neither Central Asian nor Western authorities have been able to deny the group access to its funding sources.

Moreover, HT does not require a great deal of money to sustain its activities. Its ability to create a virtual Islamic community on the Internet has allowed the movement to reach the hearts and minds of many without investing in an elaborate communications network or in party offices. Interviews with arrested HT members indicate that local entrepreneurs, party members and other sympathizers tend to make individual donations to HT’s local organs. Meanwhile, more detached businessmen and Islamic charities are most likely to direct their money to HT’s leadership committee, which in turn sends money to the movement’s various regional branches. Funding is essentially drawn from a combination of private donations and the dues of party members. The latter is particularly significant, since in Central Asia each member is obliged to donate between 5 percent and 20 percent of monthly income to the party.

Unlike many Islamist movements that shun female participation in politics, women are thought to make up 10 percent of HT’s membership.

The Radicalization of Hizb ut-Tahrir

There has been a clear and consistent trend towards the radicalization of HT, especially since 2001. In June of that year, in its publication *Al-Waie* (Consciousness), Hizb ut-Tahrir stated clearly that it is acceptable to carry

out suicide attacks with explosive belts. In March 2002, HT argued that suicide bombs in Israel are a legitimate tactic of war, given that the enemy has sophisticated weapons and hence can only be defeated through attacks on so-called “soft targets,” such as women and children. Over the next two years, HT leaflets and writings continuously emphasized that in the context of a clash of civilizations, offensive jihad against the Americans and the Jewish people is acceptable. It went as far as declaring, in a May 2003 leaflet, that jihad against unbelievers is the only type of jihad. At the time, an HT website displayed an image of American soldiers superimposed over the burning of the twin towers, carrying the legend “U.S. Troops: Die Hard.”

It is yet to be established whether HT has already formed a militant wing or whether it is simply “inspiring” members independently to engage in terrorist acts. Regardless, many observers believe that in the long run, HT will move away from its policy of nonviolence in order to accomplish its ultimate goal. After all, as HT itself admits, Central Asian governments would most likely use force to protect themselves against any such coup attempt. It seems clear that HT would like to respond to any such measures with force, as well. Indeed, as suggested by the capture of armed HT members en route to a planned attack on the US military base in Kyrgyzstan, HT may well be forming a military wing—or worse, the organization as a whole may have turned to radicalism.

What is even more troubling is that, since 2003, HT has paid increased attention to weapons of mass destruction. The fact that no WMD were found in Iraq only strengthened the group’s interest in such weapons. With its emphasis on the inevitability of the clash of civilizations, HT may further “inspire” some Muslims to take this next step.

HT has the best chance for success in Central Asia, which is its main battleground. Many Central Asian governments are illegitimate and cannot provide their people with opportunities for socio-economic improvements, which would evaporate support for possible coup attempts. HT has already succeeded in diverting the world community’s attention away from its activities in Uzbekistan thanks to its brilliant public relations campaign. As a result of this propaganda effort, more observers are concerned with HT supporters’ prison conditions than are alarmed by the possibility of a successful HT coup d’état. Also assisting HT’s campaign in Central Asia is the proximity of Afghanistan and Pakistan, two primary bases for terrorists and radical sympathizers. And, since Pakistan, Russia and India also have nuclear weapons, the possible availability of loose WMD material makes Central Asia a very attractive place for HT.

Hizb ut-Tahrir's Splinter Groups

To date, known HT splinter groups include (with dates of founding in parentheses):

- *Palestinian Islamic Jihad* (1958)—Shaykh Assad Bayyoud Tamimi, a former HT member, founded both PIJ and a second splinter group, the Islamic Jihad Organization (also known as the al-Aqsa Battalions), which was created in 1982. PIJ has no known presence in Central Asia.
- *Al-Muhajiroun* (1996)—Omar Bakri Muhammad, a former HT member, founded this extremely radical organization. Bakri has claimed to be “the eyes of Osama bin Laden” and reports indicate that communication between the two men dates back at least as far as 1998. Al-Muhajiroun was headquartered in London; when Bakri realized that the British authorities were going to take action against the organization, the group announced its “dissolution” in an October 2004 press release. This announcement merely signifies that the group has gone underground, and like al-Qaeda, al-Muhajiroun will now have its recruits globally dispersed, working for the same goal. Bakri recently fled London after the bombings there, and was arrested recently in Beirut. Al-Muhajiroun has no known presence in Central Asia.
- *Akramiylar* (1996)—Formed in the Uzbekistani section of the Ferghana Valley, as a group with a primarily local focus (mentioned below)
- *Hizb un-Nusrat* (1999)—The Party of Assistance (mentioned below)

HT material was first brought to Uzbekistan in the late 1970s, by Jordanians and Palestinians who were studying at the region's higher-education institutions. The second wave of HT expansion began in 1992 but took off in earnest in 1995, when a Jordanian named Salahuddin brought HT's literature to the Ferghana Valley and disseminated it among the ethnic Uzbek population. While HT is still most active in the Ferghana Valley, over the last decade it has successfully spread to the rest of Uzbekistan and to all other Central Asian countries.

The movement found many recruits following the February 1999 attacks in Tashkent, especially after the authorities in Uzbekistan wrongly accused HT of participating in the explosions. (This charge was later retracted.) In order to respond to the government's accusations, Hizb ut-Tahrir published its first leaflet about Uzbekistan in April 1999. The group then began to regularly issue leaflets, at times releasing over 100,000 copies of each leaflet twice monthly.

As a result of the repressive methods used by the authorities, many HT members have left Uzbekistan since early 2000, and have moved to more open Central Asian states, thus becoming excellent missionaries for the movement. At first, many settled in the ethnic Uzbek regions of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, and through person-to-person contact were able to win people over to HT's cause. Over time, non-ethnic Uzbeks have also joined the movement; today, even ethnic Russians and Koreans are found among arrested HT members. Geographically, the group also broadened its scope: While it initially confined its operations to northern Tajikistan, the Osh area of Kyrgyzstan, and the southern areas of Kazakhstan (all areas with large Uzbek populations), it has since expanded. Within the last year, Hizb ut-Tahrir members have been arrested in northern Kazakhstan, the Bishkek area of Kyrgyzstan, and in the Tajikistani capital of Dushanbe—areas that are neither near the Uzbekistani border, nor known for significant Uzbek minority populations.

The precise number of Hizb ut-Tahrir members in Central Asia today is difficult to estimate. In general, like other Islamist movements, HT has been less successful in recruiting the traditionally less-religious, nomadic peoples (for instance, the Turkmen and the Kazakhs), and more successful among the more settled Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Tajik peoples. It is therefore not surprising that as of early 2005, HT is numerically strongest in Uzbekistan, with estimates ranging from 7,000 up to 60,000 members. There are 3,000–5,000 members in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The number is much smaller in Kazakhstan, where there are estimated to be no more than 300 HT members. HT has also yet to establish a noticeable presence in Turkmenistan. As recent arrests indicate, support for HT is growing throughout the region, including among teachers, military officers, politicians (especially those whose relatives have been arrested), and other members of the elite. Given that HT aims to penetrate political power centers as a method of obtaining power, even several hundred recruits in the right places can make a significant difference.

The pattern of HT's activity—whether in terms distribution of materials or in approaches to recruitment—does not vary significantly from country to country within Central Asia. HT first begins its recruitment drive by approaching individuals most likely to embrace radical Islam, communicating and establishing links with them, and disseminating propaganda literature translated into local languages. HT distributes party literature, including its publication, *Al-Waie*, all across the region. For Central Asian target audiences, leaflets are convenient propaganda tools as they can be printed locally and distributed easily. This is especially true in regions where Internet access is limited or nonexistent. Local HT branches download materials from the

group's principal website and disseminate them after translation into local languages.

The implementation of HT's three-stage method can easily be seen in Central Asia. During the first stage (early 1993–February 1999), the group mainly engaged in religious and socio-economic propaganda activities to recruit new members. These new members were organized into self-reliant groups of three to seven people, called *halkas*. These and other members were ordered to bring all their family members, including females, into the organization. The second stage (February 1999–April 2003) followed the terrorist attacks in Tashkent. HT began to fill its ranks with new members, using open agitation and propaganda methods such as the distribution of leaflets in public places (all over Central Asia), and the organization of mass picketing at buildings of government agencies (mainly in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan). Under the leadership of Abu Rashta, HT has now entered the third stage, during which it will attempt to overthrow governments.

There is little confirmed information about the HT leadership in Central Asia. According to Central Asian government sources, after 9/11 HT leadership decided that members in the CIS countries should carry out a propaganda campaign in support of the Taliban and Osama bin Laden, due to the shared ultimate goal of recreating the Caliphate.

In light of the recent events in Andijan, which will be described in more detail below, it is interesting to note that Abdurashid Kasymov, whom the Uzbek government had long claimed was the HT leader in Uzbekistan from 1990 to 1996, as well as the alleged current HT leader, Abdurakhim Tukhtasinov, are both said to be natives of the city.

Akramiylar

The movement's name comes from its leader, Akram Yuldashev. However, this name is not used by members themselves, who call each other "brothers." Yuldashev is believed to have been a member of HT from 1986–88, before leaving due to a disagreement.⁸ He is also believed to be profoundly influenced by al-Nabhani, and in 1996 founded Akramiylar in his native Andijan region, preaching widely among the youth of the area. He was first arrested in 1998, and charged with possession of narcotics. He received amnesty later that year, but after the bomb attacks in February 1999, was re-arrested and sentenced to 17 years in prison.

In 1992, Yuldashev wrote a theological pamphlet in Uzbek titled "Yimonga Yul" (The Path to Faith), which aims to call people to Islam.⁹ According to Uzbek scholar Bakhtior Babajanov, there is a supplement to this more philo-

sophical piece, in which Yuldashev outlines a five-stage process to establish an Islamic leadership. Those few analysts who have read the supplement believe that Akramiylar shares HT's conspiratorial methodology and its multi-stage process for achieving the ultimate objective of the Caliphate. The aim of Akramiylar is to gather enough strength to greatly influence the regional authorities, if not to control them directly. With this aim in mind, Akramiylar promotes a simplified version of Islam, in order to maximize its potential support base. For this reason, the group tolerates cigarette smoking, alcohol consumption and temporary marriages. However, its structure is communal and cult-like, and members have limited exposure to outsiders.

Akramiylar seems to have been rather successful in developing a following by delivering on socio-economic promises that the Uzbek government has been unable to deliver: jobs and money. Wealthier followers set up small businesses such as bakeries, cafeterias, or shoe factories, in which they employ young males who are then required to attend study groups after work. The owners of these businesses contribute about a fifth of their profits to a fund, which then assists poorer members of the group. This is one of the most successful examples of the bottom-up approach of pro-Islamic social engineering.

Hizb un-Nusrat

Hizb un-Nusrat (the Party of Assistance) was founded by a group of HT members in Tashkent, in 1999. Its current leader and founder is believed to be Mirzazhanov Sharipzhon Atoyevich. Like HT, this group is fundamentally clandestine in nature, and prospective members must undergo six months of training in *The System of Islam*, HT's guidebook. Members are also required to donate money to the party's communal fund. Unlike HT, however, this group does not spread propaganda among the general public. Instead, it only recruits those whose backgrounds are first investigated. The group is thus mainly comprised of former members of other Islamic fringe groups, and those accused by the Uzbekistani government of engagement in radical Islamic activities. Its supporters also include HT sympathizers who fear public exposure.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)

The IMU was formed in 1992 by Tahir Yuldashev, an underground Islamic cleric who operated out of the Otavaliyon mosque, in the Namangan region of Uzbekistan. Yuldashev's views were shaped by extensive travel to Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, where he was influenced by Wah-

habism and Deobandism. His radical message spread throughout the network of mosques and *madrassas* in the Ferghana Valley. With the help of al-Qaeda, the Taliban, Harakat ul Ansar and al-Jihad, Yuldashev unified the four radical Islamist groups mentioned above (Adolat and Islam Laskarlari, both of which he led, as well as Barak and Tauba), under the framework of the IMU. At first, all four groups consisted of only a few hundred members, but in the absence of decisive action by the Uzbekistani government, they were able to disseminate their propaganda in the Ferghana Valley and recruit many more followers.

Yuldashev's ally, Juma Khodjiev Namangani became the military commander of the IMU. Along with the Saudi-trained militant, Abdul Ahad, Namangani was Yuldashev's main supporter.¹⁰ By 1998, there were reports of hundreds of Uzbek *mujaheddin* training in and operating between, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan—taking advantage of Tajikistan's civil war and Uzbekistan's battle with the Islamists.

The first instance of IMU violence occurred in August 1999, when Namangani and his associates abducted Japanese geologists, along with Kyrgyzstani government officials and military personnel, near Osh, Kyrgyzstan, thus expanding its activity to a third country. The IMU was also believed to be launching carefully orchestrated attacks against Uzbekistan from neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, most notably the 1999 Tashkent bombings. Soon thereafter, when Namangani declared his aim to seize the region by force, thousands of refugees fled the Ferghana Valley. Namangani then headed for Afghanistan where, with the permission of the Taliban, he established an IMU training camp. Militants from all over the Ferghana Valley began to flock to the camp to receive instruction in terrorist tactics, under the guidance of the Taliban. In the only interview he has ever given, Yuldashev declared, "The goal of IMU activities is the creation of an Islamic State. We declared a jihad in order to create a religious system and government. We want the model of Islam which is nothing like in Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan or Saudi Arabia."¹¹

In late 2001, the IMU joined forces with the Taliban and al-Qaeda against U.S.-led forces during the Afghanistan campaign. After suffering grave losses (including the death of Namangani in Afghanistan), some IMU fighters fled to South Waziristan (a region divided by the Pakistan-Afghanistan border), along with other jihadists who also escaped U.S. entrapment at Tora Bora. On orders from Bin Laden, IMU militants have taken control of South Waziristan, with Yuldashev in command of military activities. Since the conclusion of Operation Enduring Freedom, the IMU's infrastructure and man-

power has been significantly weakened, but today there are approximately 150 IMU militants who still have the capacity to fight.

Yuldashev, his son-in-law and chief lieutenant Dilshod Hodzhiev (who is believed to be in charge of IMU finances), and Ulugbek Kholikov, alias Muhammad Ajub (who is believed to head the IMU's military section) are reportedly hiding in Wana, Pakistan. Yuldashev is thought to be in negotiations with other international terrorist organizations and illegal arms traffickers in order to purchase Russian-manufactured "Igla" portable anti-aircraft missile launchers to use against American targets in Afghanistan. According to the most recent intelligence reports, he may already have acquired them.

HT and the IMU do not have a formal alliance—after all, it runs contrary to HT's interests to be directly associated with a terrorist group—but the two organizations share a similar ideological foundation. Some also assert that HT "delivers" staff for the IMU. The main difference between the two groups is one of focus: The IMU openly advocates and carries out militant operations, while HT concentrates on the ideological battle. The two nonetheless admit to the closeness of their goals, and both are propelled closer to the achievement of their ends by state failure.

The United States State Department originally designated the IMU as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in September 2000. It was designated a second time as a terrorist organization in September 2002, and once again in September 2004. The statement in 2004 noted "Islamic Jihad" to be an alias for the IMU. (See below for more on Islamic Jihad.)

Tabligh Jamaat (TJ)

TJ was established in India in the 1920s by Maulana Mohammad Ilyas as a direct response to Hindu proselytizing. The group claims to follow the Prophet's *sunna* (way of life), which to Tabligh members means wearing long beards, robes, and leather shoes to replicate the Prophet's dress; the group firmly believes in outwardly showing that one is Muslim. Members are also required to conduct "Tabligh," that is, to try and convert others to Islam, on a regular basis. They each devote a certain amount of time to this *dawa* ("cause"), which, depending on the individual, could be one hour per day, one day per week, one week per month, or one month per year. Members can spend this time camping in small groups in order to preach "the Prophet's way" in mosques. In Central Asia, they also preach in bazaars.

Often, local young men in search of an identity join the group for a few days or even for a few weeks. While the group does not involve itself in politics (and has been criticized by radical Islamists for being apolitical), over

time Tabligh has become an international movement, active mostly in South and Central Asia.

TJ has also succeeded in introducing Islamic networks to Europe and the U.S., and often functions in parallel to the Wahhabi Muslim World League. In recent years, like many other Islamic movements, TJ has also become radicalized. Consequently, those who learn about Islam via the TJ are today at risk of supporting or joining terrorist groups. The group has been accused of having indoctrinated its followers to fight for the Taliban and Al Qaeda. TJ came to the attention of US terrorism experts after it became known that American Muslim terrorist John Walker Lindh was inspired to go to Afghanistan after first traveling to Pakistan with Tabligh.

TJ can also be easily infiltrated by terrorists. Al Qaeda or other terrorist groups are believed to have used TJ as their cover to travel and smuggle operatives across borders; because the group is apolitical, TJ's members can fairly easily travel between countries. Other terrorist groups may have used the movement as a recruitment pool; its failure to discuss politics leaves room for others to provide a political message.

Today, TJ has offices and schools in Canada and the UK—though its main centers are on the Indian subcontinent. Its principal mosque and spiritual center is at Basti Nizamuddin, in New Delhi, while another major facility is located in the village of Raiwind, outside Lahore, Pakistan. Its annual gatherings in India and Pakistan attract hundreds of thousands. TJ annually holds a summit in Raiwind with over a million people; it is the largest Muslim gathering in the world after the annual *hajj* to Mecca.

In Central Asia, TJ is currently most active in the Ferghana Valley, especially in Andjian. Following their arrest in the summer of 2004, 14 members of TJ have been sent to prison. The government of Uzbekistan has accused them of organizing an extremist radical group in 1998, with the purpose of establishing an Islamic state in the country. In their defense, the Tabligh members claimed that they were apolitical, and devoted themselves solely to reading the Quran and the hadiths. As they explained, violence was unnecessary to the establishment of an Islamic state in Uzbekistan, since it can be achieved by proselytizing.

The Islamic Movement of Central Asia (IMCA)

Central Asian governments believe that in 2002 the region's Islamic radicals decided to unite in a framework of a new underground organization called the Islamic Movement of Central Asia (IMCA), which would bring together the IMU, Kyrgyz and Tajik radicals, and Uighur separatists from China, whose East Turkestan Islamic Movement had recently broadened to

include Afghans, Chechens, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks and Kazakhs who share its new goal of forming an Islamic state in Central Asia.

Kyrgyzstani authorities believe that the IMCA was indeed formed in 2003, with the immediate goal of creating a Caliphate in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, while reserving expansion to Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and northwest China for a second stage. The headquarters of IMCA, which is led by Yuldashev, are believed to be located in Afghanistan's northeastern Badakhshan province. This unified, militant Islamic force seeks to destabilize Central Asian governments by attacking American and Israeli targets. The main insurgent targets are the American bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as the embassies in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

While many other radical Islamist organizations have mushroomed in the region over the last two years, they can all be considered, in one way or another, to be under the IMCA umbrella and will be treated as such in the section below.

Recent Developments

In light of Central Asian governments' inability to deal with corruption, poverty, injustice and basic governance issues more than ten years after independence, it is not surprising that the well-organized and focused ideological work of HT is producing results. Following the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, the Islamists seem to have decided it is also time for them to rise.

In fact, since the spring of 2004, radical Islamist and terrorist activity in Central Asia has increased markedly. In 2004, Uzbekistan was hit by two waves of terrorist attacks. Between March 28 and March 31, 2004, there were four straight days of explosions, bombings, and assaults in Tashkent and Bukhara—including the region's first ever female suicide bombings. The attacks, which caused 47 fatalities in total, were aimed primarily at police and Uzbek private and commercial facilities. A second attack, on the American and Israeli embassies as well as the prosecutor general's office, took place on July 30, killing seven.

The scale and level of preparation for these attacks indicated that support was received from outside Uzbekistan. The country's chief prosecutor alleged that all 85 individuals (including 17 women) arrested had been trained as suicide bombers. Uzbekistani authorities believe that female suicide attackers are trained in Pakistan, possibly by an Uzbek woman. In the home of one suspect, authorities also found computer files detailing information on certain terrorist training camps located in Pakistan and Kazakhstan; these camps

were administered by Arab instructors who were themselves taught by al-Qaeda. Other suspects reportedly testified that they had come to Uzbekistan via Iran and Azerbaijan, in order to target police stations and prisons. They are also believed to have revealed plans to attack embassies and the offices of Western organizations.

Uzbekistani authorities labeled the attackers as “Jamaat” members and accused them of being influenced by HT’s ideology and by the radicalism of the IMCA. The name was very confusing at first, as “Jamaat” simply means community or society, and members of various radical Islamist movements have “Jamaat” as part of their name. The two principal groups are the Tabligh Jamaat (TJ) and the Jamaat Tabligh (JT). Another, less central group is the “Jamaat of Central Asian Mujaheddin,” which was also accused of involvement in the 2004 Tashkent attacks. Over two dozen of this group’s members were arrested in Kazakhstan in November 2004, and are currently on trial. According to Kazakh government sources, this group is also tied to al-Qaeda and trains women suicide bombers. It is also active in Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Uzbekistan.

Yet another group, the Islamic Jihad Group (IJG), released a statement claiming responsibility for the Uzbek attacks, which was followed by a May 2005 State Department designation of “the Islamic Jihad Group (IJG) also known as Jama’at al-Jihad, also known as the Libyan Society, also known as the Kazakh Jama’at, also known as the Jamaat Mojahedin, also known as the Jamiyat, also known as Jamiat al-Jihad al-Islami, also known as Dzhamaat Modzhakhedov, also known as Islamic Jihad Group of Uzbekistan, also known as al-Djihad al-Islami” as a terrorist organization. This designation gives one an idea of the proliferation of names by which some organizations are known. However, one must also note that the number of groups is sometimes inflated as a ruse, to make it seem as though more exist than actually do.

In the State Department’s statement, IJG is described as a splinter of the IMU, and is held responsible for the July 30, 2004 “coordinated bombing attacks in Tashkent, against the U.S. and Israeli Embassies, and the office of the Uzbek Prosecutor General, killing at least two people and wounding nine.” The statement further added that the IJG “continues to target Americans and U.S. facilities overseas and is a dangerous threat to U.S. interests.”

The statement went on to provide further information: “After an explosion at a safe-house in Bukhara, Uzbekistan, IJG suicide bombers attacked a popular bazaar and other locations in Tashkent in March and April 2004, resulting in the deaths of more than a dozen police officers and innocent bystanders and dozens of injuries. The attackers in the March and April 2004

attacks, some of whom were female suicide bombers, targeted the local government offices of the Uzbekistani and Bukhara police, killing approximately 47 people, including 33 terrorists. These attacks marked the first use of female suicide bombers in Central Asia...Those arrested in connection with the attacks in Bukhara have testified to the close ties between the IJG leaders and Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar. Kazakhstani authorities have declared that IJG members were taught by al-Qaida instructors to handle explosives and to organize intelligence work and subversive activities. Kazakhstan has arrested several IJG members and put them on trial.”

The Kyrgyz Revolution

Following the Georgian and Ukrainian revolutions, opposition forces in Kyrgyzstan overthrew their government in March 2005. Unlike the Georgians and the Ukrainians, however, the Kyrgyz opposition used violence, and in the post-revolutionary period failed to bring stability and order to the country. There is now a serious risk that if the new government does not establish democratic order and address popular needs, HT and others will take advantage of people’s disappointment with secular politics.

While the picture of Islamist activity in the Kyrgyz revolution is not yet fully clear, it is known that, for some time, Islamist groups have identified the Central Asian country as the weakest and easiest to destabilize. Already in October 2004, the US State Department issued a travel advisory for Kyrgyzstan, stating that “Extremist groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a terrorist organization with links to Al Qaeda, may be planning terrorist acts targeting US government facilities, Americans, or American interests”

In November 2004, in Jalal-Abad, where some of the strongest anti-government protests took place in March 2005, HT reportedly collected some 20,000 signatures on a petition calling for more Islamic instruction in schools and segregation of sexes. In the February 2005 parliamentary elections, candidates who supported this view received backing from HT.¹² While there was almost no overt Islamist activity during the revolution, the events began and gained momentum in the southern part of the country, which is where HT and other groups have, for several years, been urging people to rise against poverty, corruption and injustice—all of which were blamed on the government.

The March 24 revolution ushered in a period of chaos, with the new government unable to control the country’s borders or to bring about internal stability. This chaotic situation is of course a perfect opportunity for the Is-

lamists, especially since there is a US military base in Kyrgyzstan. The State Department warned on April 29, 2005 that “terrorist groups in Central Asia may be planning terrorist attacks in the region, possibly against US Government facilities, Americans or American interests...Elements and supporters of extremist groups present in Central Asia, including the Islamic Jihad Group, Al-Qaeda, the IMU, and the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, have expressed anti-US sentiments in the past and have the capability to conduct terrorist operations in multiple countries.” It is clear that Kyrgyzstan will remain a major target in the coming months.

The Provocation and Massacre in Uzbekistan

The next big event of lasting importance to the region took place in Andijan in May 2005. Andijan is close to Osh, where the Kyrgyz uprising began, and also to Namangan, where Wahhabis are strong. In many ways, Andijan is the heart of Ferghana Valley, which itself is the heart of Central Asia. The conclusion is simple: If Islamists take advantage of the instability in Andijan, then they can easily reach out to the rest of Central Asia.

As Akram Yuldashev realized, Andijan is also the first stop along the path to power in Uzbekistan. With a population of 26 million, nearly 90 percent of which is Muslim, and with its central geographic location, Uzbekistan can influence events all across Central Asia, as well as in Afghanistan and Pakistan. 300,000 ethnic Uzbeks live in Kazakhstan, and Uzbeks constitute 9.2 percent of the population of Turkmenistan, 12.9 percent of Kyrgyzstan, and 25 percent of Tajikistan. There are also significant minority populations within Uzbekistan; for example, more than 2 million Tajiks live in Bukhara. Uzbekistan is also a prize for Islamists due to its historic and cultural position in the Islamic world, and is becoming an increasingly easy target, since its government has not provided its citizens with the most basic requirements of life, such as jobs and education.

On June 23, 2004, 23 businessmen and followers of Akramiya were arrested. Their trial began in February 2005. Peaceful demonstrations in support of these businessmen took place for several weeks. All of the 23 arrested were trying to establish an alternative social system, as described above. Akramiya organized the uprising in a very carefully planned way: the accused businessmen promised to pay staff a full day’s salary if they attended the protests. Moreover, these businessmen’s relatives organized transport for others to come from other regions.¹³ The protesters were orderly and asking merely for “justice” for their relatives and friends. By May 12th, the presumed final week of the trial, there were already several thousand peaceful demonstrators.

That night, the Uzbek government arrested some demonstrators. This arrest marked the start of the uprising. On the morning of May 13, armed militants first seized a police station, then a military base, then a local prison, collecting weaponry in each place and killing the officials along the way. Negotiations between the government and the militants broke down, in part because the release of Akram Yuldashev was the latter's main demand of the insurgents. Expecting a harsh reaction from the government, the insurgents then formed human shields with women and children. While it is yet to be determined who shot first, by the end of the day, the government had killed several hundred civilians.

Looking Ahead

As of July 2005, the number of dead was still contested. OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) report estimated between 300-500 people may have been killed. The Uzbek government, however, announced that 176 people were killed—79 militants, 31 security officials and 45 civilians.

The real number of dead seems almost irrelevant now, as groups like HT have yet again won the information war. While the insurgency was an attempted coup d'état, international media have very little coverage of the armed insurgents' acts, but instead framed the story as the massacre of innocent civilians, à la Tiananmen Square. While many in the West condemned Uzbek President Islam Karimov, leaders from the Muslim world either remained silent, or, in the case of the Great Sheikh of Al-Azhar University, Mohammad Sayed Tantawi, focused on the threat of a radical takeover. He reportedly stated that the methods and tactics used by Andijan extremists resemble acts of terrorism in Egypt in 1974, when commandos of Salah Sirriya, the former chief of the military wing of the Hizb ut-Tahrir division in Egypt, attacked the military technology institute in an effort to obtain enough weaponry for a coup.¹⁴

Russian government officials have publicly supported the Uzbek government, and declared that foreign groups wanting to overthrow the government planned the uprising. On June 4th foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said, "we have data showing that various extremist groups may have been involved, among them the Taliban and Chechen terrorists, who, and we do know this, periodically meet with the Taliban on the territory of Afghanistan." Russia also backed the government's claims that about 50 foreigners were detained or killed. It also noted the ideological similarities with Chechen terrorist groups, citing the posting on a Chechen website of the IJG's call for jihad.

They also noted that the tactics which the militants used in Andijan were similar to the tactics used in Budenovsk and Pervomaysk. Moreover, they mentioned that women and children were used as human shields in Beslan and the Moscow [Dubrovka] theatre siege.

Following his meeting with Putin, in Moscow, Karimov said that the attacks were planned from abroad, by mercenaries who “were trained at military training camps...We have enough facts to prove that the operation was prepared several months and perhaps several years in advance from outside Uzbekistan.”¹⁵ Putin backed Karimov and even added that Russians had information that militants were crossing from Afghanistan into Central Asia before the Andijan uprising.

Today, Uzbekistan has become a major source of instability for the whole region. Around 500 Uzbek refugees fled to Kyrgyzstan; If there is another major clash, more are expected to flee, including to Kazakhstan. As mentioned above, there are many ethnic Uzbeks in the other Central Asian states, which is an additional source of tension.

Over the last several months, there have been numerous reports of Uzbek militants trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan going back to Uzbekistan. The militants are using networks of terrorists as well as Islamist sympathizers to cross borders, traveling either via Tajikistan or Iran. Former IMU members have identified Mashhad, Iran’s second largest city, as the transit center for Uzbek militants.¹⁶

The US has authorized the departure from Uzbekistan of its non-essential personnel as “the United States Government has received information that terrorist groups are planning attacks, possibly against US interests, in Uzbekistan in the very near future.” After the American announcement in June, Israel also evacuated all non-essential staff from its embassy in Tashkent.

It is too early to tell if Central Asia has entered a major chaotic period, during which terrorists and radical Islamists decide that the time has come for an all-out struggle. Yet, the recent increase in attacks in Afghanistan, ongoing instability in Pakistan and Iraq, the inability of Western countries to deal with the ideological element of this war, and the failure of the region’s governments to meet their citizens’ basic socio-economic needs, all indicate that the chance of success for groups like HT, IMCA and others is increasing with each passing month.

NOTES

- 1 Material in this article draws in part on the author's *Hizb ut-Tahrir: Islam's Political Insurgency* (Washington, D.C.: The Nixon Center, December 2004).
- 2 Bakhtiyar Babdjanov and Muzaffar Kamilov, *Muhammadjan Hindustani (1892–1989) and the Beginning of the "Great Schism" among the Muslims of Uzbekistan* (n.p., n.d.) p. 200.
- 3 Abdujabar Abduvakhitov, "Uzbekistan: Center of Confrontation Between Traditional and Extremist Islam in Central Asia", (presentation at Nixon Center conference, Washington, DC, July 16, 2003).
- 4 Ahmed Rashid, "Reviving the Caliphate", in *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (New Haven: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 119.
- 5 "Weak and Discredited Uzbek Regime Fails to Malign Hizb ut-Tahrir", August 10, 2004. http://www.1924.org/press/pressreleases/index.php?id=1337_0_28.
- 6 "The Method of Hizb ut-Tahrir", <http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/english/>
- 7 Michael Whine, "Hizb ut-Tahrir in Open Societies", in *The Challenge of Hizb ut-Tahrir: Deciphering and Combating Radical Islamist Ideology*, ed. Zeyno Baran (Washington, DC: The Nixon Center, 2004).
- 8 Saidjahon Zainabidinov, "Community of "Akromiya"—tendentious art of Uzbek special services and political scientists," April 5, 2005 <http://Ferghana.Ru>
- 9 "Yimyonga Yul" (translated into Russian as "Put' k Istinye"), www.centrasia.ru, August 25, 2004.
- 10 A. Abduvakhitov, "Uzbekistan: Center of Confrontation"
- 11 Marina L. Pikulina, "Hizb ut-Tahrir Organization and Financing" (paper distributed at Nixon Center conference, Washington, DC, July 16, 2003).
- 12 Kathy Gannon, "Islamists See Opening in C. Asia Chaos," Associated Press, March 24, 2005.
- 13 Igor Rotar, Forum 18 News Service, "Uzbekistan: What is known about Akramia and the uprising?" 16 June 2005.
- 14 "Cairo Sheikh: Extremists Act in Andijan Like Terrorists in Egypt in the 1970s," RIA Novosti, Moscow, May 27, 2005. .
- 15 Henry Miller, "Karimov: Andijan Uprising Planned Abroad" Associated Press, June 28, 2005.
- 16 Kathy Gannon, "Uzbeks find their way home through network of terrorist trails," Associated Press, June 12, 2005.