



HIZB UT-TAHRIR

Quick Facts

Geographical Areas of Operation: Global
Numerical Strength (Members): Unknown
Leadership: Ata Abu Rashta
Religious Identification: Sunni Islam

Source: Counter Extremism Project

INTRODUCTION

Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami or Hizb ut-Tahrir (“Party of Islamic Liberation,” “Party of Liberation,” HT, or HuT) is a complex pan-Islamist organization, with branches around the world. Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT) is banned in numerous countries throughout the Middle East, South and Central Asia, and parts of Europe for its extremist beliefs.¹ The group ostensibly renounces violence, armed revolution, and political participation, and it does not fit the model of a terrorist organization, a political party, or a revolutionary movement. However, this is misleading.² In reality, its ideology sanctions military coups and the mass killing of innocents to achieve its desired political objectives, helping to inspire jihadist terrorism.³ Currently, there is no proof of a working relationship between HuT and the activities or funding of more violent groups, but its ideology has influenced many in the West and elsewhere to join violent jihadist groups.⁴ As such, Hizb ut-Tahrir occupies a unique space among global Islamist movements, becoming what has led many experts to believe that the group could act as a ‘conveyor belt to terrorism’.⁵

HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY

In 1953, an al-Azhar University-trained Palestinian Islamic scholar, Sheikh Muhammad Taqiuddin al-Nabhani, founded Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT) in East Jerusalem (occupied by the Kingdom of Jordan at that time). While HuT alleges that Sheikh al-Nabhani had no prior political experience, he engaged with Muslim Brotherhood members during his time in Egypt although it is unclear whether he was a member.⁶ Al-Nabhani continued to have extensive contact with the Muslim Brotherhood, and exchanged views with Sayyid Qutb, whose works later inspired al-Qaeda, as well as influential Palestinian Sheikh Izz al-Din al-Qassam. Al-Qassam spent time with Al-Nabhani during the latter’s teens and twenties helping plan revolutionary activities against British colonial rule.⁷

HuT’s structure as a modern political party was influenced by contemporary Middle Eastern pan-na-

tional identities and ideologies, such as Arab nationalism and Ba'athism. Like these parties, HuT adapted Leninist revolutionary vanguard concepts, such as the formation of a modern political party.⁸ However, unlike Arab nationalism's embrace of a secular, pan-Arab identity to promote unity, al-Nabhani based his views and those of HuT on the centrality of Islam in politics. HT differentiated itself from other emerging Islamist organizations by implementing these elements into the organizational political structure.

Hizb ut-Tahrir has a well-defined platform and ideology, both rooted in Islam. It disavows nationalism, capitalism, and socialism as Western ideologies that are antithetical to Islam. Instead, the organization seeks to re-establish the *caliphate* that ruled Muslims following the death of the Prophet Muhammad.⁹ HuT rejects the legitimacy of modern states – such as Saudi Arabia and Iran – that claim to be Islamic.¹⁰ However, the group also denied the legitimacy of the Islamic State's claim that it had reestablished the *caliphate* under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.¹¹

The modern *caliph* envisioned by al-Nabhani and HuT would control the religion, army, economy, foreign policy, and political system of the *caliphate*. The *caliphate*'s draft constitution considers *Aqeedah* (the Islamic belief system) as the foundation of the state. All legislation and the constitution itself must be based on the Quran, Sunnah, the consensus of the companions of *ashab al-ijma* (the four righteous *caliphs*), and *qiyas* (analogy).¹² The *caliph* and his deputies interpret and apply these instructions and thereby solve all social, economic, and ethnic problems that the *ummah* (the Islamic community) may face. Should HuT succeed, Arabic would be the state language.

While HuT does welcome female members into its ranks, it would relegate them – as well as non-Muslims – to subordinate administrative positions, as only male Muslims can govern.¹³ The *caliph* appoints an *emir* (commander) to prepare the people for and wage *jihad* (holy war/struggle) against non-believers, as well as mandates compulsory military service for all Muslim men over the age of 15.¹⁴ While the *caliphate* is able to make treaties with friendly, non-Islamic countries, it is forbidden from participating in international organizations governed by non-Islamic rules, such as the United Nations. Furthermore, the *caliphate* cannot make treaties with Britain, America, France, and Russia, as those countries are considered “imperialist states.” The *caliphate* remains in a state of war with Israel.¹⁵

HuT criticizes other Islamist parties for their use of democratic structures to gain political advantage. For example, the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Hamas have all engaged with non-Islamic governments by holding ministerial posts or participating in elections in order to become influential.¹⁶ HuT, in contrast, believes that all Muslims who adopt democracy reject *Allah* as the universe's sole legislator, and thus making apostates of those who accept democracy.¹⁷ In this vein, al-Nabhani completely rejected the concept of gradualism as espoused by the Muslim Brotherhood. Instead, HuT favors peaceful, but radical, political change through the demolition of the existing state apparatus and the construction of a new Islamic state.

Nevertheless, HuT prefers to persuade society to gradually accept its ideas, which it believes will inevitably lead to regime change. As one expert explained: “Rather than slogging through a political process that risks debasing the Quran and perpetuating the *ummah*'s subjugation to the West, Hizb ut-Tahrir aims at global, grassroots revolution, culminating in a sudden, millenarian victory... when Muslims have achieved a critical mass of Koranic rectitude.”¹⁸

HuT's strategy consists of three stages.¹⁹ The first is to recruit members and build a strong organization. Next is HuT's “interaction” with the *ummah* in an effort to impose its principles as the only legitimate version of Islam – one “stripped of all cultural accretions and purged of alien influences.”²⁰ Finally, the ensuing grassroots revolution will re-establish the *caliphate*. HuT wants to bring one or more Muslim countries under its control to create a base and to convince others, generating a domino effect. The group seeks to use dispossessed populations to seize power in other states as a prelude to a broader *caliphate*, removing wayward Muslim regimes and eventually overthrowing non-Muslim ones as well. Thus, the organization welcomed the overthrow of Arab dictators during the Arab Spring revolutions.

HuT reportedly shuns violence; its justification for non-violence lies in the example of the Prophet, who criticized the Pagan leaders of Mecca, gathered followers around him, and initially resisted using force to establish his Islamic state.²¹ According to one expert:

The Party still thinks that it must follow the strategy of the Prophet: like Muhammad in Mecca, they must preach without violence. In practical terms, it means that when HT achieves a large following for its ideology, they could overthrow... regimes through peaceful demonstrations. Also, like Muhammad in his war against the Arab tribes in Mecca, they could get outside assistance or *nusrah* from the military to organize a coup.²²

Emmanuel Karagiannis and Clark McCauley provide two arguments for the ideological complexities of HT's position on violent action: "The first is to say that they have been committed to non-violence for fifty years. The second is to say that they have been waiting fifty years for the right moment to begin violent struggle."²³

The two perspectives are more similar than they first appear. Historically, few groups are unconditionally committed to nonviolence, and "Hizb ut-Tahrir is not exceptional but typical in this regard. Its commitment to nonviolent struggle is conditional and the condition sought is the declaration of *jihad* by legitimate authority," (i.e., the *caliph*).²⁴ HuT also endorses defensive *jihads*, where Muslims are required to fight if attacked. This position clearly has the potential for broad interpretation, and has already been applied to promote violence against coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.²⁵ Moreover, the group was proscribed in Denmark after distributing pamphlets urging Muslims to "kill [Jews] wherever you find them, and turn them out from where they have turned you out."²⁶

HuT has developed the concept of *nusrah* (seeking outside assistance) from other groups, such as the militaries of target states.²⁷ One could argue that HuT's preferred method of establishing the *caliphate* through political change is, in fact, a *coup d'état* by a military that has embraced Islam as its guiding politico-religious principle. HuT has been directly or indirectly linked to a number of unsuccessful coup attempts in Jordan, Bangladesh, Syria, and Egypt.²⁸ HuT infiltrated Tunisian politics, as well as the Syrian and Pakistani militaries; members of the latter, including a general, have been arrested or fired for their activities in service of the political party.²⁹ Hizb ut-Tahrir also attempted to persuade Libyan leader Moamar Ghaddafi, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, and Iranian Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini to assume the role of *caliph*.³⁰

Radicalization of group members who then conduct violent acts as individuals without explicit direction remains a source of concern. According to Zeyno Baran, "Hizb ut-Tahrir is part of an elegant division of labor. The group itself is active in the ideological preparation of the Muslims, while other organizations handle the planning and execution of terrorist attacks... Hizb ut-Tahrir today serves as a *de facto* conveyor belt for terrorists."³¹ Several known militants and *jihadists* associated with more radical Islamist groups were previously members of or radicalized by HuT. For example, Omri Bakri Muhammed, founder and former leader of Hizb ut-Tahrir-Britain, left the group to found al-Muhajiroun, which was later banned in the United Kingdom for funding and supporting terrorist organizations.³² Another is Omar Sharif, in whose home British intelligence officials discovered a cache of HuT literature after Sharif blew himself up in a Tel Aviv bar in 2003.³³ Al-Qaeda's leader and 9/11 mastermind, Khaled Shaikh Mohammed, reportedly spent time with the group.³⁴ Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who led the Islamic State's predecessor organization, al-Qaeda in Iraq, also spent time as a member.³⁵

Hizb ut-Tahrir's strategy in the West raises concern among many observers as the group appears to pursue a disingenuous dual-track strategy: grassroots activism among Western Muslims on one hand and engagement with wider Western society on the other. According to Houriya Ahmed and Hannah Stuart of the London-based Centre for Social Cohesion, HuT activism in Britain consists of two messages and two complementary aims. One message is aimed at the UK's Muslim communities, and the other at intellectu-

als and opinion-makers such as journalists and politicians. Presenting itself as the vanguard of Islam, HuT works within the British Muslim community to promote identification with the global Muslim community and discourage any other political loyalties.³⁶ Within society, HuT presents Islamism, the *caliphate*, and its interpretation of *sharia* law as a tenable alternative to current thinking.³⁷ Despite this, the group rejects moderate clerics who embrace *al-Wasatiyyah*, or Islam as a religion of tolerance, arguing that it amounts to an attempt to secularize religion.³⁸

GLOBAL REACH

Whatever the concerns and criticisms regarding HuT's goals and methods, the movement has a significant following in many parts of the world. Some even claim that "of all the banned Islamist groups in the former Soviet Union, Hizb ut-Tahrir is the only one that can be called a mass organization."³⁹ It is also a popular organization among young Muslims in Western Europe.⁴⁰ The group's major organizational center is said to be in London, where most of its literature is published and a good deal of its fundraising and training occurs.⁴¹

The global leader of HuT meets with regional leaders who distribute literature and funding to district leaders. In monthly meetings, the district leaders then redistribute these items and provide strategic direction to individual cells. For operational security, most cell members only know other members of their cell and are kept in the dark about any other cells operating locally, regionally, or nationally.⁴² Ahmed and Stuart claim that:

HT's ideology and strategy are centralized. HT global leadership issues strategy communiqués to the executive committees of national branches, which then interpret them into a localized strategic action plan... Whilst HT core ideology stressed the indivisibility of the Muslim 'ummah' and rejects national identity, national strategies often reflect the ethnic origins of the various Muslim communities... National executives are encouraged to interpret strategy to best suit their localized needs.⁴³

Because Hizb ut-Tahrir leadership and cells operate in secret, there is little reliable information on global membership numbers. Hizb ut-Tahrir's support in Central Asia grew in the 1990s. As of 2015, experts estimate that the group has some 25,000 members in Central Asia alone.⁴⁴ The group's support base consists of college students, the unemployed, factory workers, and teachers,⁴⁵ but it also seems to be making particularly strong headway among prison inmates.⁴⁶

HuT's growth in Central Asia is significantly, though unintentionally, fueled by repressive tactics used by local regimes. With few exceptions, the states that emerged out of the Soviet Union smother – rather than engage – their political opponents. The anti-democratic policies adopted by these regimes unwittingly expand the influence of extremist groups (like HuT) from the margins of national political discourse to its center.⁴⁷ Despite efforts by Central Asian authorities to infiltrate and crack down on the group's local branches – often successfully disrupting the link between the party's international and local leadership – the group continues to maintain a sizeable presence in the region.⁴⁸

South and Southeast Asia are often seen as strongholds of HuT activism. The group's recruitment in Pakistan relies on pamphlets, conferences, seminars, and *daroos* (religious lectures), as well as individual proselytization, mainly in urban centers. HuT Pakistan mainly targets the urban middle class and "opinion-makers" such as journalists, trade unionists, teachers, and lawyers. However, the party has failed to achieve a widespread presence in the country, due to both competition from other Islamist parties and its Pan-Islamist outlook on the Pakistani military.⁴⁹ In Indonesia, Hizb ut-Tahrir claims that it recruited "tens of thousands" of members there.⁵⁰ A 2007 HuT conference in Indonesia drew between 80,000 and 100,000 attendees from around the world.⁵¹ HuT also holds regular public protests and demonstrations in Pakistan,

Indonesia, and Bangladesh, and has a presence of unknown strength in Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Palestine, Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, Afghanistan, Malaysia, China, Canada, Australia, South Africa, Russia, Ukraine, and others.

In the West, Hizb ut-Tahrir's strategy uses Muslim identity and contemporary events in the organization's outreach. The party's 1998 strategy document instructs its Western national executives to "incorporate localized international incidents" – such as the Palestinian-Israeli confrontation, the Balkan wars, and ostensibly the War on Terror into a clash of civilizations narrative as part of an appeal to Western Muslims. HuT's objective is to "inflare and co-opt grievances" within Muslim communities in the West, and prevent their assimilation into Western society.⁵² The organization specifically targets young, second-generation Muslims to exploit their alienation from both the Western society in which they live and the culture of their parents.⁵³ Through mosques, HuT-run schools, sports clubs, and workshops, the group works to proselytize vulnerable audiences.⁵⁴ Furthermore, members are encouraged to recruit through their existing social networks: "mother-and-baby groups, student unions, even a chat with the neighbors." As one former member notes, the group offers young Muslims "a single, simple solution to all the political, social and economic problems of the world, from a religious perspective."⁵⁵ The delegation of important duties at a young age provides for an "intoxicating" sense of power and community.⁵⁶

Most of HuT's money is raised in Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia.⁵⁷ Members are expected to contribute to the operational costs of the organization, including mundane outlays like printing leaflets.⁵⁸ Most HuT members operate out of their own homes, and very few, if any, are paid.⁵⁹ A great deal of the organization's technology in Central Asia is funded and imported from abroad, reflecting both the international scope of the movement and potentially the complicity of at least some officials responsible for customs and border controls among local governments.⁶⁰

RECENT ACTIVITY

In recent years, HuT activity in Western countries has included organizing protests, sit-ins, and petitions. The group, for example, asked Muslims to abstain from the 2015 parliamentary elections in Great Britain.⁶¹ It also staged a protest against the killing of civilians in Aleppo outside the Syrian embassy in London.⁶² In March 2019, the group's Scandinavia branch organized a prayer and demonstration of several hundred at the Danish Parliament in Copenhagen, Denmark in response to the New Zealand Mosque shooting.⁶³ In the United States, the local branch organized two events about the siege of Aleppo by Syrian regime forces and pro-Iranian militias.⁶⁴

The Australian HuT branch is increasingly active. In March 2015, a video emerged of Hizb ut-Tahrir's Australia leader Ismail Alwahwah calling for *jihad* against Jews at a rally in New South Wales.⁶⁵ In November 2015, the group organized a conference in Australia against "forced assimilation,"⁶⁶ and two years later it received criticism for releasing "Women of Hizb ut-Tahrir," a video that supported domestic violence against "disobedient" wives.⁶⁷ The group also publicly blamed the West for a June 2017 terror attack in Melbourne.⁶⁸

In 2017, the group launched a campaign to exploit the plight of the Rohingya Muslims displaced from Myanmar in Bangladesh.⁶⁹ In the Bangladeshi port city of Chittagong, HT posted and distributed posters calling for "fellow Muslims to unite" to support the Rohingya and also for "devoted army officers" to dethrone the ruling Awami-League government of PM Sheikh Hasina.⁷⁰

Hizb ut-Tahrir is banned in the Russian Federation after it was labelled an "extremist organization" by the country's Supreme Court.⁷¹ Hizb ut-Tahrir members were arrested throughout Russia's Muslim-populated areas in August 2012.⁷² In 2017, the Russian FSB detained six Crimean locals on accusations of being members of the group.⁷³ In June 2019, a Russian court sentenced five Crimean Tatars to hard labor for their membership in the group in a move that was condemned by the Ukrainian and the United States

missions to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OCSE).⁷⁴ The FSB arrested another eight Tatars on charges of membership of the group during the same month.⁷⁵

The group held a demonstration outside the Uzbek embassy in Brussels during Islam Karimov's January 2011 visit to the European Union and NATO, which was the first open manifestation of HuT in Belgium.⁷⁶ While the group appears to have scaled down its activities in Central Asia following the Arab Spring, it continues to face government persecution.

In 2017, the Kyrgyz government shut down more than a hundred websites alleged to be affiliated with extremism, including Hizb ut-Tahrir's regional language webpages.⁷⁷ Kyrgyz authorities also arrested eleven alleged HuT members, including a local leader of the organization in December 2017.⁷⁸

Following the Arab Spring revolutions of 2010-2012, a renewed quest for religious identity in the Middle East and North Africa partly manifested itself in the pursuit of political Islam. Seeking to capitalize on this trend, HuT organized a much-publicized female conference in Tunisia in March 2012.⁷⁹ In April 2013, hundreds of women, including journalists, representatives of organizations and other female opinion-makers gathered at a critical press conference in Amman, Jordan, organized by Hizb ut-Tahrir to discuss the establishment of a Caliphate to protect the women and children in al-Sham from Bashar al-Assad and his regime.⁸⁰

In the Palestinian Territories, where the group was founded, the movement has gained traction. In 2015, the group attempted to hold a caliphate conference in Ramallah despite Palestinian Authority (PA) opposition. In May 2015, the group incited protests against a Jordanian cleric's visit to the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, prompting the PA to arrest several members.⁸¹ In 2017, global HuT branches organized rallies calling for the destruction of Israel.⁸² In June 2019, the group's Palestinian branch clashed with the PA's police after attempting to celebrate the Eid al-Fitr holiday in Hebron on the day declared by Saudi, Emirati, Qatari, and Kuwaiti religious clerics to be the end of Ramadan, rather than the day declared by clerics in Palestine, Egypt, and Jordan.⁸³

The group also faced setbacks in the Middle East and the Arab World. In September 2016, the Tunisian government asked a military court to outlaw Hizb ut-Tahrir. A year later in July 2017, the Tunisian government successfully banned HuT for one month on the grounds of "inciting hatred."⁸⁴ Following the month, the party successfully appealed the original decision and continues to operate in Tunisia today.⁸⁵ In December 2017, Tunisian police arrested forty HuT members at a broader protest in Sidi Bouzid for carrying "banners hostile to the state."⁸⁶ In late 2016, the Jordanian government, arrested 15 senior members of Hizb ut-Tahrir for campaigning against changes to the school curriculum.⁸⁷ In Turkey, HuT and its annual conference are now outright banned after the government conflated it with the Gülen movement and imprisoned 58 of its members.⁸⁸

After months of Hizb ut-Tahrir protesting against Jakarta's former Christian governor Basuki "Ahok" Tjahaja Purnama and accusing him of blasphemy, the Indonesian government banned HuT for opposing the state's secular ideology and "causing friction in society."⁸⁹ The public pressure by both HuT's organized campaign against Ahok and others involved in the increasing Islamist trend resulted in the former governor being sentenced to two years in prison on blasphemy charges.⁹⁰ In order to skirt the Indonesian government's ban on its activities, the group allegedly rebranded itself the Islamic Royatul Community (KARIM), which upheld the ideology, symbolism, and tactics of the group under a new name.⁹¹ Beyond Indonesia, the BRICS countries – Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa – agreed at their annual 2017 meeting to label the group a terrorist organization, along with several other violent South Asia-based groups.⁹²

The ongoing Syrian crisis has allowed Hizb ut-Tahrir to mobilize Muslims living in Western countries. HuT has portrayed itself as a defender of Muslim populations in war zones. It will continue to appeal to these grievances, and to Muslim identity, in its recruitment across the Islamic world, and to minority Muslim communities in the West, where it can particularly capitalize on rising anti-Muslim, nationalist,

and nativist sentiment. Finally, the group will likely attempt to increase its activities in Muslim-majority countries in South and South-East Asia. However, it will likely continue to meet resistance and be deemed a threat to ruling authorities in countries where it gains sufficient strength.

ENDNOTES

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