

American Foreign Policy Council



HIZB UT- TAHRIR

QUICK FACTS

Geographical Areas of Operation: East Asia, Eurasia, Europe, and the Middle East and North Africa

Numerical Strength (Members): Exact numbers unknown; estimated to include tens of thousands, including at least 20,000 in Central Asia

Leadership: Ata Abu Rashta

Religious Identification: Sunni Islam

(Quick Facts courtesy of the U.S. State Department's Country Reports on Terrorism)

Banned throughout the Middle East, South Asia, and Central Asia as well as in a few European states,¹ yet ostensibly nonviolent in its methods, Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami (The Party of Islamic Liberation, or HuT) is a global organization that defies easy categorization. It is not engaged in traditional religious missionary work and although it is heavily influenced by the Leninist model, it is neither a conventional political party (it eschews political participation) nor a violent revolutionary organization or terrorist group (it abstains from violence).² In many ways Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT) operates in the gray zone between politics, ideology, and violent action.

HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY

HuT was established in Jordanian-occupied East Jerusalem in or around 1953 by Taqiuddin an-Nabkhani al-Filastyni (1909-1977), a member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.³ The group's platform and ideology are well-defined. HuT rejects the modern political state. It disavows nationalism, democracy, capitalism, and

socialism as concepts alien to Islam. Instead, the organization seeks to bring about a return to the Caliphate that ruled Muslims following the death of the Prophet Muhammad under the four “righteous caliphs.”⁴

The modern caliph envisioned by an-Nabkhani in his day, and thus by HuT, controls the religion, army, economy, foreign policy and internal political system of the caliphate. He is accountable only to God. In fact, Hizb ut-Tahrir explicitly rejects democracy and favors *sharia* – Islamic law – as the law of the land. It is left up to the caliph and his deputies to interpret and apply it and thereby solve all social, economic, and ethnic problems that the *ummah* (Islamic community) may have. Arabic will be the state language. The role of women will be restricted to the home, though they will be allowed to liberally pursue education. The defense minister will be appointed by the caliph to prepare the people for and to wage war against non-believers, including the United States. Military conscription will be mandatory for all Muslim men over 15.⁵

What distinguishes HuT from its brethren in the Muslim Brotherhood is the group’s different understanding of the relationship between piety and power. Where the Brothers accept the legitimacy of the state as a framework for transforming society, HuT rejects its legitimacy and instead focuses on the inward purification of souls in great numbers which will then lead inevitably to political revolution. As one expert has explained:

Rather than slogging through a political process that risks debasing the Koran 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 recitide.⁶

HuT’s strategy to achieve this goal consists of three stages.⁷ The first is to promote the adoption of HuT’s version of Islam in individuals’ lives. This stage is followed by HuT’s “interaction” with the *ummah* in an effort to impose its principles as the only legitimate version of

Islam, “stripped of all cultural accretions and purged of alien influences.”⁸ Finally, the ensuing grass-roots revolution will re-establish the Caliphate.

The scenario for broadening the caliphate played out in HuT literature involves one or more Islamic countries coming under the organization’s control, creating a base from which it will be able to convince others to join the fold—generating what is in essence a domino effect. Leaders of HuT—citing the lack of secular space for political opposition, increasing despair and a lack of economic opportunity—believe that much of the Muslim World is approaching a “boiling point,” making it ready for an Islamist takeover.⁹ The group seeks to take advantage of dispossessed populations to seize power in particular states such as those in Central Asia and Pakistan as a prelude to the establishment of a broader caliphate, removing wayward Muslim regimes and, eventually, overthrowing non-Muslim ones as well.

It is widely reported that HuT shuns violence in the pursuit of these goals. That is certainly true at the early stages in the organization’s strategy, and while there is no evidence that the organization is responsible for terrorist or guerilla attacks, HuT’s understanding of political violence is more nuanced than much current analysis of the group suggests. Emmanuel Karagiannis and Clark McCauley provide two useful ways of summarizing the ideological complexities of HuT’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.”¹⁰

These two perspectives may not be as different as they appear at first glance. 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,”¹¹ HuT also endorses defensive *jihad*s, where Muslims are required to fight against an invader if attacked—a position that clearly has the potential to be interpreted very broadly and has been

applied by the group to Coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹² 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.”¹³

Even within Muslim majority countries, where the organization attempts to win over mass support in the hope that one day its adherents will rise up in peaceful demonstrations to overthrow the regimes they live under, HuT has developed the concept of *nusrah* (seeking outside assistance) from other groups such as the militaries of target states.¹⁴ It might be argued that HuT’s preferred method of political change to establish the Caliphate is in fact a *coup d’état* by the military that would have first embraced Islam as its guiding politico-religious principle. It is relevant here to note that HuT encouraged elements within the Jordanian armed forces to attempt just this in 1968 and 1969, in addition to the group’s links to a failed 1974 coup attempt in Egypt.¹⁵

Ultimately, however, HuT’s present abstention from direct violent action, particularly in Muslim-majority countries, is a function of the organization’s three stage strategy. HuT does not currently use violence because it views itself as being in the second phase of its strategy – the second phase of its imitation of the Prophet Mohammed. From HuT’s point of view, the 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 the use of force to establish the Islamic state.¹⁶ Indeed, 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 this, 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.¹⁷

The adoption of violent methods for HuT in Muslim-majority countries at this point in its history, then, would be either a reinterpretation or abandonment of its ideology. Developments such as these certainly cannot be excluded, but they would risk ideological purity and credibility for uncertain gains. It must be recalled that HuT seeks to achieve a mass grassroots following through persuasion that will inevitably lead to regime change and the reestablishment of the caliphate rather than seizing the levers of power and forcing society to accept Islam.¹⁸ However, HuT makes an important distinction between *jihad* sanctioned by the caliph on the one hand and violent resistance against foreign invaders such as in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Israel/Palestine on the other, in which immediate violent action to repel the invaders is justified.¹⁹

Even if HuT as an organization does not adopt violence as a means to achieve its goals, another source of concern is that the group may radicalize members who then go on in their individual capacities to conduct violent acts. Scholar Zeyno Baran perhaps put it best when she said that HuT's activities involve "more than mere expression of opinion but less than terrorism."²⁰ She famously asserted that "HT is not itself a terrorist organization, but it can usefully be thought of as a conveyor belt for terrorists."²¹ Shiv Malik points out that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, two major al-Qaeda figures, both had ties to HuT. Moreover, British intelligence officials discovered a cache of HuT literature in the home of Omar Sharif, the Briton who attempted to blow himself up in a Tel Aviv bar in 2003.²²

Similarly, there is concern in many quarters about what is perceived to be HuT's disingenuous dual track strategy of grassroots activism amongst Western Muslims on the one hand and engagement with wider society in the West on the other. Houriya Ahmed and Hannah Stuart from the London-based Centre for Social Cohesion discuss HuT activism in Britain as consisting of two messages and two complementary aims: one for the UK's Muslim communities and one for the wider public – specifically intellectuals and opinion-formers such as journalists and politicians. Presenting itself as the vanguard of Islam, HTB works within the British Muslim commu-

nities to promote political identification with Muslims globally and discourage any other sense of personal loyalty. Within wider society, HTB works to mainstream HT ideology, presenting Islamism, the Caliphate and their interpretation of *sharia* law as non-threatening – and viable – alternative to current political thinking.²³

They add that, “[i]n order to mainstream HT ideology amongst Western Muslim communities and avoid rejection by wider society, the party has downplayed its more intolerant beliefs and presents itself as defending ‘true’ Islam in the face of a perceived Western ‘War on Islam.’”²⁴

GLOBAL REACH

Whatever the concerns over and criticisms of HuT’s goals and methods, it is increasingly clear that it is a movement with a significant following in many parts of the world. For many analysts, HuT is the most important Islamist group in Central Asia. It is certainly the largest and best-organized.²⁵ 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.”²⁶ It is also a popular organization among “young Muslims in Western Europe”²⁷ and national conferences in the U.S. and Canada in July 2009 indicate a resurgence of HuT activism there.²⁸ 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,²⁹ though some claim that Ata Abu Rashta, HuT’s suspected current global leader, is based in Lebanon.³⁰

Relatively little is known about HuT’s organizational structure, chain of command, or leadership. What is clear is that the organization is cell-based, and heavily influenced by the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary model that controls HuT’s worldwide activities and drastically reduces the possibility of the penetration of outsiders into the leadership echelons of the group. The principal leader of HuT meets regularly with regional leaders who distribute literature and funding to district leaders, who in turn redistribute these items, as well as provide strategic direction during their monthly meetings

to individual cells. For operational security, most cell members only know the other people in their cell and are kept in the dark about other cells operating locally, nationally, and regionally.³¹ Indeed, Ahmed and Stuart claim that:

HuT's ideology and strategy are centralised. HuT global leadership issues strategy communiqués to the executive committees of national branches, which then interpret them into a localised strategic action plan... Whilst HuT 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 localised needs.³²

Because the group operates clandestinely in most parts of the world, its global membership numbers are unknown. Rough estimates of its strength in Central Asia alone range from 20,000 to 100,000.³³ Emmanuel Karagiannis estimates that there are around 30,000 members and many more sympathizers in the region,³⁴ with the majority in the Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan and thousands of members in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan alongside "hundreds (perhaps thousands) in Kazakhstan and Russia, as well as Azerbaijan and the Ukraine."³⁵ The group's support base consists of college students, the unemployed, factory workers and teachers³⁶ but it also seems to be making particularly strong headway behind prison walls in the region³⁷ where between 7,000 and 8,000 of its members are thought to reside in Uzbekistan alone.³⁸

HuT's growth in Central Asia has been significantly, though unintentionally, fueled by the repressive tactics adopted by the regimes there. With few exceptions, the states that emerged out of the Soviet Union smother, rather than engage, their political opposition. The anti-democratic policies adopted by these regimes unwittingly expand the influence of extremist groups like HuT and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan from the margins of national political discourse to its center. When there is no room for moderate and reasonable opposition, the only channel for change comes through

radical elements.

South and Southeast Asia are also strongholds of HuT activism. The organization claims that it has recruited “tens of thousands” of members in Indonesia.³⁹ While these numbers are difficult to verify, a 2007 HuT conference there drew somewhere between 80,000 and 100,000 attendees from around the world.⁴⁰ HuT also holds regular public protests and demonstrations in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Although the level of popular support HuT receives is unclear, the organization’s presence at universities “points to a deliberate strategy of targeting students.”⁴¹ The group also has a presence of unknown strength in, among other places, Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Palestine, Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, Pakistan, the U.S., Canada, the UK, Russia, and the Ukraine.

Much like its opaque membership, HuT’s secrecy makes it difficult to investigate its sources of funding. However, it appears that money is raised in Europe, the Middle East, and Pakistan.⁴² Members are also expected to contribute to the operational costs of the organization including such mundane outlays as printing leaflets.⁴³ Organizational costs for HuT remain relatively low because most members live in and operate out of their own homes and very few volunteers are paid.⁴⁴ However, a great deal of the organization’s technology in Central Asia has been funded and imported from abroad, signifying 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.⁴⁵

RECENT ACTIVITY

Hizb ut-Tahrir had a busy year in 2009. It openly and actively participated in public debates and conferences in the UK, U.S., and Canada.⁴⁶ Its annual conference in the Palestinian Territories, however, was blocked by the Palestinian Authority⁴⁷ and the party claimed that “hundreds” of its activists were arrested in the West Bank in July 2009.⁴⁸ Elsewhere in the Levant it was reported that HuT joined forces with the Lebanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and Hezbollah to oppose attempts to resolve the

Arab-Israeli conflict.⁴⁹ Moreover, HuT spent 2009 under close scrutiny in Britain. There has been talk in both the Labour and Conservative parties of banning the group since the July 7, 2005 bombings in London and a school run by the wife of the group's spokesman had its public funding suspended in November 2009.⁵⁰

The organization also had several run-ins with the authorities around the world in 2009. HuT members continued to be arrested in large numbers throughout Central Asia in 2009 and in October, three suspected Hizb ut-Tahrir activists were detained in the Simferopol district of Ukraine's Autonomous Republic of Crimea.⁵¹ Approximately 200 alleged HuT members were arrested in a wide-ranging counterterrorism operation across 23 provinces in Turkey in July 2009.⁵² Turkish authorities initially claimed that two of the suspects have continuing contact with military officers suspected of involvement in the Ergenekon coup plot but no further information or evidence of the connection has been released.⁵³ Thirty-five HuT members and supporters, including a nuclear scientist, were arrested on October 17, 2009 in Pakistan under anti-terrorism legislation⁵⁴ while eight more alleged members were arrested in Karachi on March 8, 2010.⁵⁵ HuT also protested the Government of Pakistan's counterinsurgency offensive in the Swat Valley.⁵⁶ Thirty HuT members were arrested in September 2009 in Bangladesh⁵⁷ and the group was banned in the country a month later.⁵⁸ However, the group showed resilience when it organized a demonstration in February 2010 in Dhaka calling for the removal of the current government.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, arrests of alleged HuT members continue to be regular occurrences throughout Central Asia.⁶⁰

ENDNOTES

- [1] Hizb ut-Tahrir is banned in countries such as Bangladesh, Denmark, Germany, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, among others.
- [2] International Crisis Group, "Understanding Islamism," Middle East/North Africa Report, number 37, March 2, 2005, 4fn11.
- [3] Ariel Cohen, Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia, Washington, DC, October 29, 2003.
- [4] Taqiuddin an-Nabkhani, *The Islamic State* (Lahore: Hizb ut-Tahrir, 1962).
- [5] Tyler Rauert, "The Next Threat from Central Asia," *Journal of International Security Affairs* 9 (Fall 2005), 28.
- [6] Matthew Herbert, "The Plasticity of the Islamist Activist: Notes from the Counterterrorism Literature," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32 (2009), 399.
- [7] Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 248.
- [8] Herbert, "The Plasticity of the Islamist Activist," 399.
- [9] *The Methodology of Hizb ut-Tahrir for Change*.
- [10] Emmanuel Karagiannis and Clark McCauley, "Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami: Evaluating the Threat Posed by a Radical Islamic Group That Remains Nonviolent," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18 (2006), 328.
- [11] *Ibid.*
- [12] Rauert, "The Next Threat From Central Asia," 28; See also A. Elizabeth Jones, Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia, Washington, DC, October 29, 2003.
- [13] Christian Caryl, "Reality Check: The Party's Not Over," *Foreign Policy*, December 22, 2009.
- [14] "Radical Islam in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir," International Crisis Group Asia Report No. 58, June 30, 2003, 8.
- [15] Suha Taji-Farouki, *A Fundamental Quest: Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Search for the Islamic Caliphate* (London: Grey Seal, 1996), 27, 168.
- [16] Karagiannis and McCauley, "Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami," 325.
- [17] Didier Chaudet, "Hizb ut-Tahrir: An Islamist Threat to Central Asia?" *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 26, no. 1, April 2006, 117.
- [18] Karagiannis and McCauley, "Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami," 325-6.
- [19] Mahan Abedin, "Inside Hizb ut-Tahrir: An Interview with Jalaluddin Patel, Leader of the Hizb ut-Tahrir in the UK," Jamestown Foundation *Spotlight on Terror* 2, no. 8, August 11, 2004.
- [20] Zeyno Baran, "Fighting the War of Ideas," *Foreign Affairs* 84, iss. 6, Nov/Dec 2005, 80.
- [21] *Ibid.*, 79.

- [22] Caryl, "Reality Check: The Party's Not Over."
- [23] Houriya Ahmed and Hannah Stuart, *Hizb ut-Tahrir: Ideology and Strategy* (London: Centre for Social Cohesion, November 2009), 69.
- [24] *Ibid.*, 7.
- [25] "Central Asia: islamists in Prison," International Crisis Group Asia *Briefing* number 97, March 15, 2009, 3.
- [26] *Ibid.*, 3fn20.
- [27] Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Center, *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, October 26, 2009.
- [28] See Daniela Feldman, "Islamic extremists hold open conference in Chicago," *Jerusalem Post*, July 22, 2009, 7; See also "Open House with Hizb ut-Tahrir," invitation from Hizb ut-Tahrir Canada, www.torontomuslims.com/events_display.asp?ID=9232.
- [29] Cohen, Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia.
- [30] Ahmed and Stuart, *Hizb ut-Tahrir: Ideology and Strategy*, 52.
- [31] Jane's, *Hizb ut-Tahrir*.
- [32] *Ibid.*, 68.
- [33] "Radical Islam in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir," 17.
- [34] Karagiannis and McCauley, "Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami," 316.
- [35] "Central Asia: Islamists in Prison," 3.
- [36] Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2002), 124.
- [37] See "Central Asia: Islamists in Prison."
- [38] Shiv Malik, "For Allah and the Caliphate," *New Statesman* 17, no. 824 (2004).
- [39] Ahmed and Stuart, *Hizb ut-Tahrir: Ideology and Strategy*, 55.
- [40] "Stadium Crowd Pushes for Islamist Dream," BBC, August 12, 2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6943070.stm; see also "At massive rally, Hizb ut-Tahrir calls for a global Muslim state," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 14, 2007.
- [41] Ahmed and Stuart, *Hizb ut-Tahrir: Ideology and Strategy*, 57.
- [42] Jane's, *Hizb ut-Tahrir*.
- [43] *Ibid.*
- [44] *Ibidem.*
- [45] Rauert, "The Next Threat From Central Asia," 31.
- [46] See Feldman, "Islamic extremists hold open conference in Chicago," 7; See also "Open House with Hizb ut-Tahrir."
- [47] Palestinian Centre for Human Rights Press Release, "PCHR condemns ban on Hizb-Ut-Tahreer peaceful conference in Ramallah," July 5, 2009, <http://www.pchrgaza.org/files/PressR/English/2009/85-2009.html>.
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[51] Jane’s, *Hizb ut-Tahrir*.

[52] “Turkey detains ‘pan-Islamists,’” *Al-Jazeera* (Doha), July 24, 2009, <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Turkey+detains+pan-Islamists+.-a0204390803>; See also Lale Saribrahimoglu, “Turkish Counter-Terror Police Allege Hizb ut-Tahrir Link with Ergenekon,” Jamestown Foundation, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 6, iss. 147, July 31, 2009.

[53] Jane’s, *Hizb ut-Tahrir*.

[54] “35 held activists of banned outfit booked under ATA,” *The News* (Pakistan), October 18, 2009, <http://www.thenews.com.pk/updates.asp?id=89380>.

[55] “8 Hizb-ut-Tahrir suspects arrested in Karachi,” Central Asia Online available at http://www.centralasiaonline.com/cocoon/caii/mobile/en_GB/features/caii/newsbriefs/2010/03/08/newsbrief-02 [last accessed March 11, 2010].

[56] Ahmed and Stuart, *Hizb ut-Tahrir: Ideology and Strategy*, 56.

[57] *Ibid.*

[58] “Bangladesh Islamist group banned,” BBC, October 23, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8321329.stm>.

[59] “Hizb ut-Tahrir Bangladesh: Demonstration calling for the removal of Sheikh Hasina and her government,” <http://www.khilafah.com/index.php/activism/asia/8877-hizb-ut-tahrir-demonstration-in-dhaka-calling-for-the-removal-of-sheikh-hasina-and-her-government>, [accessed 11 March 2010].

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