

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): Unknown

Leadership: Ata Abu Rashta

Religious Identification: Sunni Islam

Quick Facts Courtesy of the Counter Extremism Project,

OVERVIEW

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 HT) is a global Islamist 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.² In many ways, Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) operates in the gray zone between politics, activism and extremism.

HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY

Taqiuddin an-Nabhani al-Filastyni, an Islamic scholar of Palestinian origin, founded HT in Jordanian-occupied East Jerusalem around 1953. An-Nabhani had been a student at Egypt's prestigious al-Azhar University, and had interacted with members of the Muslim Brotherhood during his time there (although it is not clear if he ever became a member).³

The group's platform and ideology are well defined. HT views itself not as a religious organization, but rather as a political movement whose ideology is based on Islam.

Therefore, it disavows nationalism, capitalism, and socialism as western ideologies alien to Islam. Instead, the organization seeks to re-establish the Caliphate that ruled Muslims following the death of the Prophet Muhammad under the four “righteous Caliphs.”⁴ Furthermore, the group rejects contemporary efforts to establish Islamic states, claiming that Sudan, Iran and Saudi Arabia, among others, do not meet the necessary criteria.

The modern Caliph envisioned by an-Nabhani and HT controls the religion, army, economy, foreign policy and political system of the Caliphate. In fact, HT 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* (the Islamic community) may face. Arabic will be the state language, which non-Arabic speakers would have to learn. One element that makes Hizb ut-Tahrir different from many other Islamist groups is that the group has welcomed female members. However, women are barred from key positions in the proposed Caliphate such as that of Caliph, Chief Judge, and provincial governors. An *amir* (defense minister) will be appointed by the Caliph to prepare the people for and to wage war against non-believers, including the United States, the European countries and Israel. Military conscription will be mandatory for all Muslim men over 15.⁵

HT has criticized attempts by other Islamist parties (such as the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Hamas) to utilize democratic structures by holding ministerial posts in existing governments, or to participate in the electoral and legislative processes in order to achieve some influence in high-level decision-making.⁶ Instead, HT has favored peaceful, but radical, political change through the demolition of the existing state apparatus and the construction of a new Islamic state. Nevertheless, HT does not favor the idea of forcibly seizing the state and mandating that society accept its ideology; rather, it prefers to persuade society to gradually accept its ideas, which would lead inevitably to a change in regime. As one expert has 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.”⁷

HT’s strategy to achieve this goal consists of three stages.⁸ The first is to recruit members and build a strong organization. This stage is followed by HT’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.”⁹ Finally, the ensuing grassroots revolution will re-establish the Caliphate.

The scenario for broadening the Caliphate which plays out in HT literature involves one or more Muslim 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 HT—citing the lack of political space for opposition parties throughout the Muslim world, 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. The group seeks to take advantage of dispossessed populations to seize power in particular states, such as those in Central Asia, Pakistan, or Indonesia, as a prelude to the establishment of a broader Caliphate, removing wayward Muslim regimes and eventually overthrowing non-Muslim ones as well. The organization welcomed the overthrow of Arab dictators during the Arab Spring revolutions.

It is widely reported that HT 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, HT’s understanding of political violence is more nuanced than current analysis of the group suggests. Emmanuel Karagiannis and Clark McCauley provide two ways of summarizing 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.”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 the Caliph. HT 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

But 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, HT has developed the concept of *nusra* (seeking outside assistance) from other groups such as the militaries of target states.¹⁴ It might be argued that HT’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 HT encouraged elements within the Jordanian armed forces to attempt just this in 1968 and 1969, and the group was later linked to a failed 1974 coup attempt in Egypt.¹⁵

From HT'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, 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

Although HT 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. 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."¹⁸ Indeed, several notable militants associated with more radical Islamist groups are known to be previous members of HT, as was the case with Omar Sharif. British intelligence officials discovered a cache of HT literature in the home of Sharif, a British citizen who attempted to blow himself up in a Tel Aviv bar in 2003.¹⁹

Similarly, there is concern in many quarters about what is perceived to be HT's disingenuous dual track strategy of grassroots activism amongst Western Muslims on one hand and engagement with wider Western society on the other. Houriya Ahmed and Hannah Stuart from the London-based Centre for Social Cohesion discuss HT 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 and specifically intellectuals and opinion-makers such as journalists and politicians. Presenting itself as the vanguard of Islam, HT works within the British Muslim communities to promote political identification with Muslims globally and discourage any other sense of political loyalty. Within wider society, HT works to present Islamism, the Caliphate, and their interpretation of *sharia* law as a non-threatening and viable alternative to current political thinking.²⁰

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.'"²¹ The group has denounced the declaration of a caliphate by ISIS in Syria and Iraq because it did not follow the Prophet's methodology and the security situation there is too precarious.²²

GLOBAL REACH

Whatever the concerns and criticisms regarding HT's goals and methods, it is increasingly clear that it is a movement with 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."²³ It is also a popular organization among young Muslims in Western Europe²⁴ and national conferences in the U.S. and Canada in July 2009 indicate a resurgence of HT activism there.²⁵ 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,²⁶ although some claim that Ata Abu Rashta, HT's current global leader, is based in Lebanon.²⁷

Relatively little is known about HT'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 HT's worldwide activities and drastically reduces the possibility of the penetration of outsiders into its leadership echelons. The global leader of HT meets 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 other people in their cell and are kept in the dark about other cells operating locally, nationally, and regionally.²⁸ Indeed, 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.²⁹

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 100,000.³⁰ Emmanuel Karagiannis estimates that there are around 25,000 members and many more sympathizers in the region,³¹ 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."³² The group's support base consists of college students, the unemployed, factory workers and teachers,³³ but it also seems to be making particularly strong headway behind prison walls,³⁴ where between 7,000 and 8,000 of its members are thought to reside in Uzbekistan alone.³⁵

HT'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 HT 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. Thus, in May 2015, British members of HT gathered outside the Uzbek embassy in London to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Andijan massacre, despite the fact that the group was not directly involved.³⁶

South and Southeast Asia are also strongholds of HT activism. The organization claims that it has recruited "tens of thousands" of members in Indonesia.³⁷ While these numbers are difficult to verify, a 2007 HT conference there drew somewhere between 80,000 and 100,000 attendees from around the world.³⁸ HT also holds regular public protests and demonstrations in Pakistan and Bangladesh. The organization's presence at universities "points to a deliberate strategy of targeting students."³⁹ Yet, the group has been banned in both countries. HT also has a presence of unknown strength in, among other places, Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Palestine, Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, Afghanistan, Malaysia, China, Canada, Australia, South Africa, Russia, and Ukraine.

Much like its opaque membership, HT's secrecy makes it difficult to investigate its sources of funding. However, it appears that most of its money is raised in Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia.⁴⁰ Members are expected to contribute to the operational costs of the organization, including such mundane outlays as printing leaflets.⁴¹ Organizational costs for HT remain relatively low because most members live in and operate out of their own homes and very few, if any, volunteers are paid.⁴² 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.⁴³

RECENT ACTIVITY

During the past five years, HT activities in Western countries have included the organization of protests, sit-ins and petitions. The group asked Muslims to abstain from the 2015 parliamentary elections in Great Britain.⁴⁴ HT staged a protest against the killing of civilians in Aleppo outside the Syrian embassy in London in December 2016.⁴⁵ In the United States, the local branch organized two events about the siege of Aleppo by Syrian regime forces and pro-Iranian militias.⁴⁶ In November 2015, the group organized a conference in Australia against "forced assimilation".⁴⁷ The branch of HT in Australia has become increasingly active in recent years due to the presence of a sizeable Arab community.

South Asia has remained an important area of HT activities. The Pakistani branch suffered a major blow in March 2012 when 19 members, including some university professors, were arrested by police in Lahore.⁴⁸ The newly-established branch of HT in Afghanistan organized a conference, with limited participation, on corruption in April 2012.⁴⁹ Despite being banned by the Bangladeshi government in October 2009, HT organized a rally in Dhaka in December 2012. The local branches have maintained strong links to the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities in the UK.

Members of Hizb ut-Tahrir were arrested in Muslim-populated areas of Russia in August 2012.⁵⁰ Three months later, 18 HT members were arrested in Moscow, although the group claimed that the actual number of its arrested members was much higher.⁵¹ As a result, the Palestinian branch of HT organized a protest at the Russian Representative Office in Ramallah, as did the Indonesian branch outside the Russian embassy in Jakarta.⁵² The Russian security agencies have also arrested members in the Crimea following the annexation of the peninsula by Moscow in March 2014.⁵³

Although state repression has led to a decrease of HT activities in Central Asian republics, Hizb ut-Tahrir has made inroads in southern Kyrgyzstan, which has suffered from ethnic tensions in recent years.⁵⁴ Moreover, the group held a demonstration outside the Uzbek embassy in Brussels during Islam Karimov's visit to the European Union and NATO in January 2011, which was apparently the first open manifestation of HT in Belgium.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, it seems that the group has scaled down its activities in Central Asia following the Arab Spring.

There are indications that the group's leadership has shifted its focus to Arab countries. Following the Arab Spring revolutions of 2010-2012, there is a renewed quest for religious identity, which partly manifests itself in a renewed interest in political Islam. HT organized a much-publicized female conference in Tunisia in March 2012.⁵⁶ Additionally, HT has paid increased attention to the crisis in Syria by organizing public events and protests, including one in Chicago on December 24, 2011. The group even organized a protest in the Syrian city of Aleppo on November 9, 2012.⁵⁷ In April 2013, female members of HT staged a press conference in Amman, Jordan to discuss the situation in Syria, especially as it relates to women and children.⁵⁸ The group has also faced a few setbacks in the region. In September 2016, the Tunisian government considered the banning of Hizb ut-Tahrir because it is "undermining public order".⁵⁹ During the same month, the Jordanian government arrested 15 senior members of Hizb ut-Tahrir for campaigning against changes to the school curriculum.⁶⁰

The group is likely to maintain its level of engagement in Arab countries. It has paid increased attention to human right abuses committed by authoritarian regimes in North Africa and the Levant. The ongoing Syrian crisis has also allowed Hizb ut-Tahrir to mobilize Muslims living in western countries. The group has also launched a campaign for the support of the Rohingya Muslims in Burma. In this way, it has

portrayed itself as a defender of Muslim populations in war zones. Finally, the group will probably attempt to increase its activities in Muslim-majority countries in South and South-East Asia.

ENDNOTES

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