Uzbekistan

Quick Facts

Population: 30,565,411 (July 2020 est.)

Area: 447,400 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Uzbek 83.8%, Tajik 4.8%, Kazakh 2.5%, Russian 2.3%, Karakalpak 2.2%, Tatar 1.5%, other 4.4% (2017 est.)

GDP (official exchange rate): $48.83 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated September 2020)

Introduction

Uzbekistan's struggles with Islamism predate the formation of the country, as several Islamist groups were active in the former Soviet state before the collapse of the USSR. Uzbek militant groups hold sway and significance throughout the wider theater of Central Asia, most notably the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Prior to his death in 2016,[1] President Islam Karimov attempted to control Islamists in Uzbekistan, with growing success. Karimov was succeeded by former Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev,[2] who has taken a more proactive stance in the field of religion, seeking to counter extremism by advancing an "Enlightened Islam." While Central Asia has been a prominent source of foreign fighters traveling to Iraq and Syria to join the Islamic State and other jihadi groups, the majority are recruited as labor migrants in Russia, not in the region.

Islamist Activity

For most of the quarter-century since it declared independence from the USSR, Uzbekistan has been an active arena for a range of Islamist groups. These groups vary in their ideologies, objectives and methods. All, however, share the broad goal of transforming Uzbekistan from its current status as a secular authoritarian regime into a state based upon, and governed by, *sharia* law. Most, however, operate outside the country's boundaries.

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is one of the most important militant groups in Central Asia. The IMU grew out of an amalgam of Islamist groups that were active in the late 1980s and early 1990s, most notably the Adolat (Justice) group, which was formed by Tahir Yuldashev and Jumabai Khojiyev (also known as Juma Namangani). Adolat, formed in 1991 in the city of Namangan in the Ferghana Valley, had the aim of building an Islamic state in Uzbekistan.[3] During the slow decay of Soviet

power, Islamist militias in Namangan sought to effectively replace Soviet authorities, and began to enforce Islamic dress code and close down establishments serving alcohol. On December 8, 1991, Adolat organized a violent takeover of regional power structures, subsequently levying an ultimatum at Uzbek authorities and demanding President Islam Karimov proclaim the establishment of an Islamic state.[4] The resulting government clampdown a few months later led to thousands of arrests, prompting an exodus of Islamic radicals from Uzbekistan to Tajikistan.[5] In 1992, Karimov formally banned Adolat. Yuldashev and Namangani fled to Tajikistan, and subsequently to Afghanistan and Pakistan.[6]

In total, about two thousand Uzbeks are estimated to have left the country during the 1990s, with many of them subsequently taking part in Tajikistan's civil war on the side of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO).[7] In Tajikistan, the Namangan Battalion (NB) was formed in 1992 (named after the majority of the group's members, who hailed from the city of Namangan). Namangani became the commander of this militia, which established a network of military bases and training camps for the IMU in northern Tajikistan, mostly in the Jirgatal and Garm regions. The Namangan Battalion was well-armed and developed a special system of training, focusing on guerrilla warfare, sabotage and terrorist activities. Uzbek instructors as well as instructors from Islamic organizations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir, and some Middle Eastern countries worked at the NB's Tajik bases. Many of them collaborated with foreign intelligence services, most prominently Pakistan's spy agency, the Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).[8]

During the 1990s, Yuldashev and others traveled to Afghanistan, where they made contact with alumni of the Afghan *jihad* and established training camps for Uzbek militants.[9] These contacts created an avenue for further radicalization, and the following years saw a number of Uzbek militants pass through Afghan training camps before returning to Uzbekistan with the aim of destabilizing the country. By 1998, Yuldashev and Namangani had officially formed the IMU,[10] with Yuldashev serving as the IMU's political leader, or *emir*, and Namangani heading its military wing. The organization's headquarters were established in Peshawar, Pakistan, but later relocated to Taliban-controlled Kabul, Afghanistan.

Militants trained in IMU camps in Tajikistan and abroad, mostly in Afghanistan and Pakistan, in camps belonging to Islamist organizations such as al-Qaeda, Harkat-ul-Ansar, Hezb-e-Islami, Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, and the Taliban. However, in most cases, instructors were Uzbek Islamists affiliated with the Bin Laden network, as well as specialists from Pakistan's ISI.[11] In total, during the 1990s more than a thousand militants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan received military training in training camps in these two countries.[12]

Notably, creating a militia between 500 to several thousand fighters, including all the necessary support, equipment, and arms, posed a significant financial challenge. Accordingly, analysts presume that significant foreign funding aided the effort.[13] Thereafter, the IMU financed its activities in Central Asia, as well as in other regions, primarily through involvement in narcotics trafficking[14] and support from international Islamist organizations as well as wealthy members of the Uzbek diaspora in Afghanistan, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Beginning in the mid-1990s, Uzbek Islamist opposition leaders bolstered this aid with active fundraising activities, with the aim of generating support for a powerful military-political structure.

In 1999, the IMU commenced an organized insurgent campaign against the Uzbek state.[15] Given its lack of capability to seize power through large-scale violence, the IMU's tactics were to destabilize the Ferghana Valley by armed incursions on the territory of both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. These incursions continued until U.S. counterterrorist operations in Afghanistan in 2001 weakened the Taliban and al-Qaeda, and inflicted heavy losses on the IMU itself, including killing Namangani near Mazar i-Sharif in November 2001.

The IMU survived by relocating to the Waziristan area of northwest Pakistan, and merging with a number of like-minded groups. Yuldashev was reportedly killed in August 2009 in South Waziristan as a result of a U.S. Predator drone strike.[16] His death appears to have resulted in a downturn of the group's

militant activities, with the last large-scale attack by the IMU being the September 19, 2010 ambush on a convoy of government troops in the Kamarob valley of Tajikistan – an operation that killed 25.[17]

Nevertheless, elements of the IMU have remained active, particularly in Afghanistan. In 2012, the International Security Assistance Force and the Afghan armed forces conducted 26 raids against the IMU in eight Afghan provinces—Badakhshan, Baghlan, Faryab, Logar, Helmand, Kunduz, Takhar and Wardak—with eight of them occurring in Kunduz province alone.[18]

However, the emergence of the Syrian civil war and the rise of the Islamic State changed matters. Many Uzbek and other Central Asian militants were attracted by the prospect of *jihad* in the core Middle East, where some joined ISIS and others the al-Qaeda-aligned Nusra Front. In 2015, the IMU formally broke away from the Taliban and al-Qaeda and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. This was made official on August 6, 2015, when the IMU released a video depicting its leader, Usman Ghazi, pledging allegiance to IS.[19] The IMU statement declared that the Taliban "cannot be trusted," and accused the Afghan militant group of collaboration with Pakistan's ISI.[20]

The IMU's pledge to the Islamic State placed the organization in conflict with Taliban. In December 2015, pro-Taliban Sabiq Jihadmal declared the death of Ghazi in a Twitter message that claimed to show Ghazi's corpse. A pro-IMU fighter, known as Tahir Jan, recounted the group's collapse. Jan alleged that the Taliban and Afghan government cooperated to destroy the remainder of the IMU. The Taliban's forces quickly laid siege to the organization's bases, slaughtering hundreds of IMU partisans, and effectively spelling the end of the organization.[21] As Jan described it:

> The former Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan has almost been completely destroyed unfortunately, and maybe less than 10% of those who were in the fronts or on other assignments remain after the events of Zabul.[22]

Akramiyya

The founder of Akramiyya, Akram Yuldashev, was born in 1963 in Andijan, Uzbekistan.[23] A teacher by profession, his 1992 treatise "Lymonga Yul" emphasized that the ultimate goal of his organization is the assumption of power and the creation of an Islamic state.[24] Members of Akramiyya called themselves *birodarami*, or brothers. There were in the late 2000s several thousand adherents.[25] The organization first appeared in the Ferghana Valley in 1998, where—motivated by the ideology of Hizb ut-Tahrir—it espoused a selective reading of the Quran, arguing in favor of *sharia* as the answer to the modern, "unfavorable" period for Muslims in Central Asia. Yuldashev is said to have structured the activities of his group in five phases, beginning with the indoctrination of new members, extending to the accumulation of wealth for charitable Islamic works, and culminating in the gradual, "natural transition" to Islamic rule in Uzbek society.[26]

Ideologically, Akramiyya is an outgrowth of the Ahl al-Quran movement which existed in the 1940s in Uzbekistan. Members of this movement categorically refused to recognize the teachings of other Sunni schools (*mad'hab*). They adhered to very austere views, rejected the "Soviet way of life" and did not recognize official clergy. Members of Akramiyya believe only in Allah, and do not worship the Prophet Mohammed; they also do not recognize any nation in the world. They ignored state laws, renounce their parents, and subjected themselves exclusively to the direction of the group's leaders.[27] Most Akramiyya members were of Uzbek ethnicity. Its members were mostly businessmen with small agricultural enterprises, funds and industrial warehouses. The organization was known to control dozens of commercial firms, which did business under a unified leadership.

Authorities in Tashkent took an ambivalent approach to Akramiyya. But gradually, they began to see the movement as a threat and crack down on it. Yuldashev was sentenced in 1998 to two-and-a-half years in prison for violating Article 276 (drug possession) of the Uzbek Criminal Code.[28] In late December

of the same year, he received amnesty, only to be arrested again the day after a bombing in Tashkent in February 1999 that sought to assassinate President Karimov. In May 1999, Yuldashev was sentenced to 17 years in prison on charges of terrorism, incitement of religious hatred, possession of weapons and drugs, among others.[29] During the same period (1998-1999), 22 other young members of Akramiyya were given varying terms in prison.[30] However, members of the group continued to exist and to thrive, including in the Ferghana Valley city of Andijan, where they established a working relationship with the local authorities. President Karimov, usually no friend of Islamist organizations, even went so far as to praise the group's charitable activities in 2004.[31]

The organization continued to exist until the Andijan uprising of 2005, which occurred after the group had a falling out with a newly-appointed governor in Andijan and two dozen of its members were jailed. This appears to have led to a rapid radicalization of the group, which attacked an interior ministry compound, freed prisoners at the Andijan jail, stormed a national security service headquarters, and took over the provincial capitol building. The group took human shields, resulting in a standoff and an armed confrontation with security forces, which led to some 200 deaths.[32] In the aftermath, many members of fled from Uzbekistan through Kyrgyzstan to the West, leading to the gradual dissolution of the group. In 2016, Uzbek authorities announced Yuldashev had died of tuberculosis in prison in 2011.[33]

Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT)

Unlike the IMU, HuT is a truly transnational movement that enjoys considerable support among young Muslims in Western Europe and has a broad organizational base in London. HuT was founded in 1952 by Sheikh Taqiuddin al-Nabhani in Jordanian-ruled East Jerusalem, who died in 1977.[34]

The main goal of HuT 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, HuT acknowledges that violence may eventually be necessary in order to overthrow the regimes standing in the way of the *caliphate*. It is anti-Semitic and anti-American, and disseminates a radical ideology fundamentally opposed to democratic capitalism and to Western concepts of freedom. While HuT as an organization does not engage in terrorist activities, it does operate as an ideological vanguard that supports and encourages terrorist acts.[35]

HuT ideology was imported to Uzbekistan in 1955 by a Jordanian named Atif Salahuddin. That same year, the organization was founded in the city of Tashkent, and subsequently in the Andijan, Samarkand, Tashkent and Fergana provinces of Uzbekistan. HuT cells were mostly composed of local youth. Members of HuT were distinguished not so much by their desire for strict adherence to Islamic norms, but by their religious and political activities. HT acquired adherents first in Uzbekistan, and then migrated to the neighboring former Soviet republics of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. In these countries, the party first recruited its followers among ethnic Uzbeks, but gradually young ethnic Kyrgyz, Tajiks and Kazakhs became involved in HT, causing a rapid expansion of the group during the late 1990s.

HuT activities did not attract the attention of Uzbek authorities until May 1998, when party members began to distribute leaflets in public places. The response was rapid; between August and November of 1998, at least 15 members of the Tashkent branch of the movement were arrested. Mass arrests of members throughout Uzbekistan began the following year. According to the State Department, "approximately 6,800 to 7,300 persons were arrested between 1999 and 2001 on suspicion of Islamic extremism or terrorism."[36]

Following the events of September 11, 2001, many members of HT in Uzbekistan went underground, fearing large-scale retaliation. The group has largely continued to operate covertly to this day, as a result of unprecedented (and often violent) persecution on the part of Uzbek authorities. This led it gradually to reduce its presence in the country, and in recent years it can be deemed to have effectively been neutralized in Uzbekistan. In recent years, the group has exhibited only nominal activity, although experts caution that this lull may be temporary in nature.[37] In May 2020, Uzbek authorities rounded up HT supporters in the Ferghana valley.[38] Elsewhere in the region, however, HT expanded its activities. As authorities in

Uzbekistan ratcheted up their counterterrorism efforts, party activists were forced to seek refuge among Uzbek communities in neighboring countries, primarily in Kyrgyzstan, to where its focus appears to have moved.

Islamism and Society

Although the majority (88 percent) of Uzbekistan's population of more than 30 million is Muslim,[39] most of them Sunni, this population appears to be broadly supportive of a secular state system. Muslim leaders in Uzbekistan have been very critical of Islamist organizations, and have argued that these movement are essentially political rather than religious organizations.

While most moderate Muslims in Uzbekistan reject the goals and ideology of both the IMU and Hizb-ut-Tahrir, the latter had some success in drawing attention to official corruption. HuT leaflets highlighting corruption, inequality and oppression tended to find a receptive ear, especially among more disadvantaged members of society. Nevertheless, neither the IMU nor HuT can claim widespread support anywhere in Central Asia. Both organizations appeal only to a small fraction of the regional population—and even then this support was localized, strongest in parts of the Fergana Valley, possibly in south Uzbekistan, and in some areas of Tajikistan.

In the decade between the violence in Andijan and the death of President Karimov, there was a noticeable decrease in Islamist activity in Uzbekistan. The limited data available also suggests that Islamist ideology had little appeal to the country's population. A Pew poll conducted worldwide in 2013 was not allowed to ask questions on the most sensitive questions, such as support for *sharia*. However, results in Uzbekistan are in line with findings in other Central Asian states, with one exception: only 39 percent of Uzbeks – the lowest number in the sample – felt they were "very free" to practice their faith, compared to between 60 and 70 percent in other regional states. However, on social issues, Uzbeks were as liberal or more compared to regional states. For example, two-thirds of Uzbeks thought women themselves should decide whether to wear the veil – more than in Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan, but less than in Azerbaijan or Turkey. Only three percent see tensions between devout and less devout Muslims, whereas only 18 percent – the lowest number in Central Asia – think there is a conflict between religion and science. Uzbeks appear slightly more conservative in many of their values than Kazakhs or Azerbaijanis, but more liberal than Tajiks, and certainly than the average Middle Eastern or South Asian Muslim society.[40]

Islamism and the State

In September 2016, Uzbekistan underwent a political sea change with the death of its longtime president, Islam Karimov. Karimov, the leader of the Uzbek Communist Party during the Soviet era, became president after the country's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.[41]

Virtually from its formation, Karimov's government strived to control the Uzbek population, and temper political and religious activism in the country. In the early 1990s, the government launched a series of measures to marginalize secular opposition groups, and thereafter directed its attention toward Islamic associations. The government feared that any form of religious expression not controlled by the state could serve as a vehicle for alien, Islamist ideology to enter the country and jeopardize the delicate process of nation- and state-building that was taking place after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This pattern continued for two decades; state intelligence agencies worked to eliminate and marginalize those Islamic leaders who deviate from the official state-sponsored Hanafi Sunni Islam. Uzbek security forces, meanwhile, routinely utilized repressive methods against Islamic organizations indiscriminately, often failing to differentiate between terrorist groups like the IMU and non-violent groups. Adherents to all of these organizations were subject to arbitrary arrest, based upon suspicions of extremism.[42]

The Uzbek government continues to take a hostile approach toward anyone engaged in unregulated religious activity. This, however, has increasingly been coupled with a subtle and surprisingly sophisticated "soft power" approach to combating Islamist ideology. This approach finds its roots in the nature of Central Asian Islam itself, where the dominant branch of Sunni Islam is the Hanafi school—one of the most tolerant and liberal of the faith. Hanafi Islam was, nevertheless, considerably suppressed during the Soviet period, as Communist authorities sought to apply a divide-and-rule approach which included tolerating, if not encouraging, the influx of more radical theological approaches that undermined the compact, Hanafi tradition in the region.[43]

This approach leverages an asset shared by the Central Asian states: a strong knowledge base with which to fight radical Islamists. Since gaining independence, the countries of the region have managed to educate considerable numbers of knowledgeable experts in Islam. Moreover, in these countries, the Quran and Hadith have been translated into local languages, and many academics and *imams* are applying their knowledge on a practical level. By necessity, Central Asian governments, especially those in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, have created and developed an extensive educational system—spanning from kindergarten to university level—that inculcates the moral norms and social principles of tolerant Islam, and which respects the value of human life (be it Muslim, Christian, Jewish, or other). The system provides textbooks for schools, cartoons for children, education for imams of local mosques, a network of counselors in Islamic affairs for central and local administrations, and television and radio talk shows that challenge the intolerant Salafi interpretation of the Quran and *Hadith* and provide listeners with a religious alternative.[44]

Since coming to power, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has doubled down on this approach. He has increased the state's emphasis on promoting the tolerant Islamic tradition indigenous to the region, something he has termed "Enlightened Islam." This has included a state policy that now embraces public expressions of religion, including the holding of competitions in Quran recital and the building of roadside mosques. Mirziyoyev has, importantly, announced the creation of several new institutions in the religious field. This includes an Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan, as well as an Islamic Culture Center that is specifically designed to "fight religious ignorance and promote Islam's true values."[45] In addition, an Imam Bukhari International Scientific Research Center was created at the Imam Al-Bukhari Academy in Samarkand to focus both on religious and scientific research.

The government has also removed 16,000 of 17,000 names registered as "religious radicals" from a state-held list, and has encouraged the return of religious dissidents to the country. The government has also begun to engage with international bodies promoting the freedom of religion, including UN agencies as well as NGOs such as Human Rights Watch.[46] In September 2020, legislation was introduced that further relaxed restrictions on religious freedom. While strict guidelines for the registration of religious organizations remained, the changes will allow the wearing of religious garb in public for people other than clerics, and allow parents to teach children the basics of religion at home and for minors to attend mosque services. In a sign that the government remains wary of alien religious influences, the censorship of religious materials will remain, as will the prohibition of private religious education.[47]

Mobilization of Foreign Fighters

Central Asian and Russian foreign fighters make up as much as a third of the total *jihadis* that traveled to Iraq and Syria between 2011-2016, according to some estimates.[48] The exact number of Uzbek fighters is difficult to gauge, especially when considering the intricacies of the divide between ethnicity and nationality, and the close linguistic ties between Uzbeks and China's Uighurs. In October 2017, the Soufan Group estimated that fewer than 1,500 Uzbeks had become foreign fighters.[49] Meanwhile, the Uzbek government's approach to repatriation of families of foreign fighters suggests a confidence that the Uzbek government and society can handle their reintegration. In 2019, the government arranged for the repatriation of over 400 individuals, almost exclusively women and children, stranded in camps in Syria

and Iraq.[50]

Uzbek authorities are according great attention to strengthening their police and internal security agencies in order to counter the internal extremist Islamic terrorist organizations. Yet it should be noted that the vast majority of Uzbek nationals, as well as other Central Asians, who have joined the ranks of *jihadi* groups in the Middle East have been recruited while labor migrants in Russia, and not in Uzbekistan itself. Leon Aron of the American Enterprise Institute estimates that over 80 percent of Islamic State fighters from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan were recruited in Russia.[51] Uzbekistan, however, is vulnerable to this trend, as individuals radicalized in Russia may return to Uzbekistan to spread their ideology there. This problem will remain until the country's domestic economic development—which President Mirziyoyev is trying to kick-start—reduces the appeal of labor migration.

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