American Foreign Policy Council

Uzbekistan

QUICK FACTS

Population: 27,865,738

Area: 447,400 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Uzbek 80%, Russian 5.5%, Tajik 5%, Kazakh 3%, Karakalpak 2.5%, Tatar 1.5%, other 2.5%

Religions: Muslim 88% (mostly Sunnis), Eastern Orthodox 9%, other 3%

Government Type: Republic; authoritarian presidential rule, with little power outside the executive branch

GDP (official exchange rate): $30.68 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated June 2010)

Recent political developments in Uzbekistan confirm the thesis that, in the process of violent interaction with authorities, religious political organizations undergo a transformation into extremist ones. Already a decade ago, largely as a result of repressive measures on the part of Uzbek law enforcement agencies, various religio-political groups banded together under the banner of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). In turn, the IMU became part of the global network of international terrorism spearheaded by al-Qaeda. While today the IMU is in retreat in Uzbekistan, battered by effective Uzbek and Coalition counterterrorism action, the organization still holds the potential to become a serious and real threat to the security of the Central Asian states. So do other Islamist

groups, such as Akramiyya, now active on Uzbek soil, which advocate the removal of Uzbekistan's authoritarian government and its replacement with a "just" Islamic one.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Uzbekistan has been the site of activity for a range of Islamist groups for most of the two decades since its independence from the USSR. These groups range in their ideology, objectives and methods. All, however, share the broad goal of transforming Uzbekistan from a secular authoritarian regime into a state based upon – and governed by – *sharia* law.

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)

The IMU traces its origins back to 1988-1989, when the group's leaders, Tahir Yuldashev and Jumabai Hodgiev (Juma Namangani), became members of the extremist organization *Tablykh*, which was aimed at overthrowing the existing political system of Uzbekistan.[1] In January 1991, in the city of Namangan, the two established another radical religious/political group, known as *Adolat* (Justice), with the aim of building an Islamic state in Uzbekistan.[2] This was followed by the creation of multiple, disparate religious groups in Uzbekistan, including the *Markazi Islam* (Islamic Center) in the city of Namangan, which became a hub for *jihadi* activity. On December 8, 1991, it organized an unauthorized rally and they captured the office building of the Namangan regional committee of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan, levying an ultimatum to Uzbek authorities and demanding President Islam Karimov swear on the Koran and proclaim the establishment of an Islamic state.[3] The resulting state clampdown led to thousands of arrests, prompting an exodus of Islamic radicals from Uzbekistan to Tajikistan.[4]

During this early period, Yuldashev and others are known to have traveled to Afghanistan, where they made contact with alumni of the Afghan *jihad* and established training camps for Uzbek militants.[5] These contacts created a conveyor for radicalization, and the following years saw a number of Uzbek militants pass through Afghan training camps before returning to Uzbekistan to destabilize the situation in the Ferghana Valley and elsewhere in the former

Soviet republic.

In 1995, the "Islamic Center" became the foundation for the Islamic Revival Movement of Uzbekistan (IRMU), which officially became known as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) the following year. The organization's headquarters, headed by its leader (*amir*), Tahir Yuldashev, was set up in Peshawar, and later relocated to Kabul. Given the difficulty in creating such a militia, and in supporting, clothing, equipping, and arming between 500 to several thousand fighters in another country, significant foreign funding is presumed.[6]

Beginning in 1997, the IMU commenced an organized insurgent campaign against the Uzbek state. Its strategy was not to conduct large-scale violence against Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, but to seize power by way of destabilizing terror, sabotage and banditry. It was only after the Taliban and al-Qaeda suffered defeat as a result of U.S. counterterrorist operations in Afghanistan in October 2001 that the IMU – which also suffered heavy losses, including the death of its head, Juma Namangani, near Mazar i-Sharif in November 2001 – ceased its armed incursions in the region.

The organization survived by rebranding itself the *Hizb Islami Turkestan*, or Islamic Party of Turkestan. This organization, still led by Tahir Yuldashev, maintains the same outlook and ambitions as its precursor, the IMU. Estimates of its strength vary; according to Pakistani officials, Yuldashev could command as many as 4,800 Uzbek militants, as well as "groups of Chechens, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, [and] Uighur militants of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement."[7] The organization is currently believed to be most active in Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan. Yuldashev himself was reportedly killed in August 2009 in South Waziristan as a result of a U.S. Predator drone strike.[8]

The group remains active in Central Asia, and the past year-and-a-half has seen an upsurge in terrorist activity in that theater, including:

- Bombings in Khanabad and Andijan in May 2009 claimed by the Union of Islamic Jihad, an offshoot of the IMU;[9]
- Attacks by IMU fighters in the Jalabad region of Kyrgyzstan in June 2009;[10]

- CLashes between suspected IMU militants and security forces in the Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous region of Tajikistan in July 2009;[11] and
- An August 2009 shootout between Islamic militants and police in Tashkent that killed three people.[12]

Akramiyya

The founder of Akramiyya, Akram Yuldashev, was born in 1963 in Andijan, Uzbekistan.[13] A teacher by profession, his 1992 treatise "Lymonga Yul" emphasizes that the ultimate goal of his organization is the assumption of power and the creation of an Islamic state.[14] Members of Akramiyya called themselves *birodarami*, or brothers, but the people of Central Asia know them as *akramists*. There are now said to be tens of thousands of such "brothers."[15] They first appeared in the Ferghana Valley in 1998, where – motivated by the ideology of Hizb ut-Tahrir – they 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 concluding with the gradual, "natural transition" to Islamic rule in Uzbek society.[16] 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 (*mazh'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. Nor do they recognize any nation in the world. They ignore state laws, renounce their parents, and subject themselves exclusively to the direction of the group's leaders.[17]

Most Akramiyya members are of Uzbek nationality. Its members are mostly businessmen with small agricultural enterprises, funds and industrial warehouses. The organization is known to control dozens of commercial firms, which do business under a unified leadership.[18]

Akramiyya has been targeted by authorities in Tashkent for

some time. Its leader, Akram Yuldashev, was sentenced in the spring of 1998 to two-and-a-half years in prison for violating Article 276 (drug possession) of the Uzbek Criminal Code.[19] In late December of the same year, he was amnestied, only to be rearrested the day after a bombing in Tashkent in February 1999. In May 1999, Yuldashev was sentenced to 17 years in prison under several articles of the Uzbek Criminal Code: 155 (terrorism), 156 (incitement of religious hatred), 159 (encroachment on constitutional system), 161 (sabotage), 216 (unlawful association), 216-1 (luring into an illegal organization), 242 (organization of a criminal association), 244-1 (dissemination of materials against public safety), 276 (drug possession) and 248 (possession of weapons, ammunition and explosives).[20] As of this writing, Yuldashev remains jailed in Tashkent.

During the same period (1998-1999), 22 other young members of Akramiyya were given various terms in prison. They were accused of the following articles of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan: 159-4 (anti-constitutional activity), 242-1 (the organization of a criminal association), 244-1, (distribution of materials containing a threat to public safety) and 244-2 (establishing, managing participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organizations). Two of the arrested members – Jurakhon Asimov (aged 34) and Hamdamzhon Bobojonov (29 years old) – died from torture while in prison. Others are still at large.[21]

The organization continued to exist until the Andijan massacre of 2005, when some of its members were shot by state security forces for participating in riots. In its aftermath, many members of fled from Uzbekistan through Kyrgyzstan to the West, leading to the gradual dissolution of the group.

Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT)

Unlike the IMU, Hizb-ut-Tahrir is a truly transnational movement, which enjoys considerable support among young Muslims in Western Europe and has a broad organizational base in London. HuT originated in the Middle East in 1950, and is aimed at creating a worldwide Caliphate. The dissemination of its ideas in Central Asia began in early 1990.[22] The party acquired adherents first in Uzbekistan, where it had (and still has) the greatest number

of followers, and then migrated to neighboring Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. In these states, the party first recruited its followers among ethnic Uzbeks, but gradually young ethnic Kyrgyz, Tajiks and Kazakhs became involved in HuT, causing a rapid expansion of the group during the late 1990s.

The ideology of Hizb ut-Tahrir was "imported" to Uzbekistan by a Jordanian, Atif Salahuddin, in 1995. The same year, the organization was officially 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. Party members condemned the "godless government" in Uzbekistan, "the enemies of Islam" – the United States and Israel – and called for the creation of a worldwide Islamic state. Members of Hizb ut-Tahrir, distinguished not so much by their desire for strict adherence to Islamic norms, but by their religious and political activities. Young people enjoyed the opposition position of the party and open discussion of political issues inside the party.

The activities of HuT 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 party were arrested. Mass arrests of members of Hizb ut-Tahrir throughout Uzbekistan began the following year.[23]

Following the events of September 11, 2001, many members of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Uzbekistan went underground, fearing large-scale retaliation. The group has largely remained there to this day, as a result of unprecedented violent measures on the part of Uzbek authorities. In 2008, the group exhibited only nominal activity within Uzbekistan, although experts caution that this lull may only be temporary.[24]

Elsewhere in the region, however, HuT has expanded its activities. As authorities in Uzbekistan ratcheted up their counterterrorism activities, party activists were forced to seek refuge among Uzbek communities in neighboring countries, primarily in Kyrgistan, to where the headquarters of the party has moved.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Although the majority of the Uzbekistan's population of 27.6 mil-

lion is Sunni Muslim (88 percent), this group by and large does not support the idea of the establishment of the Caliphate in their country and prefer a secular state system. Muslim leaders in Uzbekistan have demonstrated themselves to be very critical of Hizb ut-Tahrir, and have argued that the movement is essentially a political rather than religious organization, and that Muslims should not be engaged in politics. However, some *imams* do not want to alienate members of Hizb ut-Tahrir from their mosques, because the number of parishioners determines the level of donations (*Sadaka-Fitr* and *zakat*) that flow into their coffers.[25]

While most moderate Muslims in Uzbekistan reject the goals and ideology of the movement, they tend to sympathize with its members because of the repression the latter face at the hands of local authorities, and as a result of the movement's efforts to draw attention to official corruption. HuT leaflets highlighting corruption, inequality and oppression tend to find a receptive ear among the Uzbek population, and especially among its more disadvantaged segments. The organization's call for social justice, meanwhile, appears to resonate at a grassroots level among a population that routinely experiences hardship and privation.

Nevertheless, neither the IMU nor Hizb ut-Tahrir can boast widespread support anywhere in Central Asia. both organizations appeal only to a small fraction of the regional population – and then this support is localized, strongest in parts of the Fergana Valley, possibly in south Uzbekistan, and in some areas of Tajikistan. While it is impossible to accurately determine the level of this support, Uzbek observers place the current number of active supporters of these groups at less than 10 percent of the regional population.[26]

Most ordinary Muslims in Uzbekistan do not support political activities in mosques, and do not share radical Islamist ideas. Nevertheless, the scale of support received by radical groups may expand if dissatisfaction with the current political and economic system increases. It is understood that support for Hizb ut-Tahrir and other extremists in Uzbekistan is fed more by disappointment with the state of contemporary politics than by a conscious commitment to

extremist ideology. After years of government enforced repression, many have been discouraged from trying to use the available ways to protest against the government and in general against the injustices of modern society, and therefore they were attracts by a more idealized vision. The fact that people are often recruited by their friends and acquaintances contributes to a less critical view of Hizb ut-Tahrir among Uzbek Muslims.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

In early 1990, the newly independent Uzbek government launched a series of measures to eliminate all secular opposition groups, and therafter directed its attention toward Islamic associations, fearful that any form of religious expression not controlled by the state could serve as a vehicle for popular discontent. This pattern has continued uninterrupted for the past two decades; state intelligence agencies work to eleminate and marginalize those Islamic leaders who do not share the official vision of religion as an instrument of a state policy. Uzbek security forces, meanwhile, routinely utilize the most repressive methods against Islamic organizations, often failing to differentiate between radical groups like the IMU and more grassroots oriented ones like Akramiyya. Adherents to all of these organizations are subject to arbitrary arrest and torture, based upon suspicions of extremism.[27]

Today, the Uzbek government continues to prosecute any activity which is regarded as the uncontrolled expression of the Muslim faith. This state repression, however, has 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 Khanafi school – one of the most tolerant and liberal in that religion. Its pluralistic and largely apolitical disposition is one of the main reasons that Khanafi believers survived and avoided mass repression during the Communist era, when Soviet ideologues sought to eliminate doctrinal competition with Marxism-Leninism.

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 Koran 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 – 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 Wahhabi interpretation of the Koran and *Hadith* and provide listeners with a religious alternative.[28]

These realities have bred a cadre of Central Asian scholars and religious authorities that are ready and able to confront radical Islam. Dr. Abdujabar Abduvakhitov, the rector of the Westminster International University in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, is one such official. According to him, the mission of state educational establishments should be to erode the base of "supporters" of radical Islam, and to educate young Muslims in the spirit of tolerant, traditional Central Asian Islam. Other experts have echoed these prescriptions. Dr. Zukhriddin Khusnidinov, rector of the Islamic University of Uzbekistan, believes that university activities – as well as radio and TV broadcasting – are necessary in order to provide young people with a proper understanding of Islamic principles.[29]

ENDNOTES

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[4] Ibid; See also *Res Publica*, September 15-21, 1998.
[5] Moldaliyev, *Islam i Politika*, 271.
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[7] Author's interview with Pakistani researcher, Almaty, Kazakhstan, July 24, 2009.
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[12] Confidential materials provided by Uzbek human rights activist. (author's collection)
[13] Bakhtiyar Babadjanov, "Akramia: A Brief Summary," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2006, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/Akramiya.pdf.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Author's interview with Uzbek expert on Islam B. Babadzhanov, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, September 14, 2009.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Author's interview with Uzbek expert on Islam I. Mirsaidov, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, September 16, 2009.

[18] Author's interview with B. Babadzhanov.
[19] Moldaliyev, *Islam i Politika*, 286.
[20] Ibid., 286-287.
[21] Ibidem.
[22] Ibidem, 283.
[23] Ibidem.
[24] Author's interview with Uzbek expert on Islam P., Tashkent, Uzbekistan, September 11, 2009.
[25] Author's interview with I. Mirsaidov.
[26] Timur Kozukulov, *Problemy Borby s Religioznim Ekstremismom v Usloviakh Globalizatsiyii v Ferganskoy Doline (Problems of Combating Religious Extremism in the Ferghana Valley under Globalized Conditions)* (Osh, Kyrgyzstan: Oshskii Gosudarstviniy Universitet, 2008), 72.
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