



## Islamic Extremism in Uzbekistan: Is it a threat?

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After a period of little international interest, Uzbekistan found itself a focal point for world attention in May of 2005. Mass-demonstrations in the large city Andijan in the volatile Fergana valley were suppressed with extreme violence by governmental military forces. Official sources spoke of just over 150 deaths, whereas more reliable independent sources report that more than 700 people, mainly unarmed protesters who demonstrated on the main city square for better living standards, were killed in the massacre. The unrest started after relatives and friends of 23 jailed businessmen and traders launched an armed attack against the prison where the latter, and a significant number of other people convicted on charges related to radical Islamic activities, were held; the attack resulted in the freeing of around 4000 inmates.

The 23 local businessmen had all recently been arrested and were on trial on suspicion of membership in a radical Islamic group which the authorities claimed was an off-shoot from Hizb ut-Tahrir, the transnational organization that operates underground in Central Asia and conducts a non-violent struggle to overthrow the existing political regimes with the ultimate goal of “reestablishing” an Islamic caliphate<sup>1</sup> (more about the organization below). According to what has become a pattern after violent acts against government institutions in Uzbekistan, the president Islam Karimov and his administration blamed the subsequent violence in the city on “Islamic extremists.” Ample evidence, however, suggests that the governmental forces were firing indiscriminately on civilian protesters.<sup>2</sup>

The EU and the US have since demanded an independent investi-

gation of the massacre, and Western critique of the Karimov regime's lack of respect for human rights has increased significantly. These efforts produced little result, however, other than the official Uzbek demands for a complete American troop withdrawal from its bases in the country. Putin's Russia, on the contrary, has given Karimov its wholehearted support for the determined suppression of the "rebellion," and the two countries have recently signed a security pact which opens up the possibility of the establishment of a permanent Russian military base in Uzbekistan.<sup>3</sup>

This Russian sympathy for Karimov's harsh policies towards what at least officially is presented as a substantial Islamist threat may be explained by a parallel to the Russian fear of the spread of radical Islam in the northern Caucasus, where the second Chechen war still rages with instability in the whole region as a result.

Alexander Knysh, professor of Islamic studies at the University of Michigan, has pointed out the increasing use of the term "Wahhabism" by Russian authorities and media outlets, to describe a large spectrum of activities connected with the imagined revival of Islam in Russia, as a way to simplify the understanding of the "Islamic threat." Since the horrible apartment-complex bombings in Russian cities in September 1999, which were blamed on "Chechen terrorists" and provided Putin an excuse to launch a new full-scale military attack against Chechnya, the Chechen separatists have increasingly been portrayed as "Wahhabis," and anti-Muslim sentiments have been growing rapidly in Russia.<sup>4</sup>

The demonizing term "Wahhabis" has in a similar way frequently been used also by the authoritarian Uzbek president Islam Karimov, probably partly influenced by the Russian discourse, to defend his crackdown on independent Muslim associations in Uzbekistan. This paper is an attempt to explain what Wahhabism in the original sense is and thereafter give an overview of which groups the Uzbek state in fact has been persecuting under the pretext of fight against "Wahhabism." I will also contrast the actions of the state with its official policies against religious fundamentalists as stated by the president and, finally, try to draw some conclusions concerning the extent to which the "security and stability" (as Karimov prefers to formulate it) of Uzbekistan actually is under threat from "growing Islamic extremism."

## Who are the “Wahhabis”?

### *Wahhabism*

“Wahhabism” has often been used in Uzbekistan and Russia to denote “Islamic fundamentalism” and “extremism.” The Pakistan-based journalist Ahmed Rashid states that the Uzbek government already in 1992 began to label anyone who was perceived to be an adherent of radical Islam as a Wahhabi and by 1997, he underscores, “the government was labeling as Wahhabis even ordinary Muslims who practiced Islam in unofficial mosques or engaged in private prayer or study. Any Muslim who associated with unregistered prayer leaders or taught children how to read the Koran was also termed a Wahhabi.”<sup>5</sup> Sometimes, Wahhabism has in Uzbekistan incorrectly been portrayed as a third school of Islam in addition to Sunni and Shi’a. In fact, Wahhabism is a branch of Sunni Islam that grew out of the Hanbali school, one of the four main Sunni schools.

The name ‘Wahhabi’ derives from the founder of the movement, the eighteenth century Hanbali teacher and reformer Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab. The followers of Wahhabism – many of which prefer to refer to themselves as *Salafi*, a broader term which is seen as a less derogatory – advocate a purification of Islam, reject Islamic theology and philosophy developed after the death of the Prophet, and emphasize the Koran and hadith (the recorded practices of the Prophet) as the definitive sources of Islamic law. In promoting what they view as precepts of an early Islam, they adhere to a strict and puritanical view of religious rites and reject “innovations” such as the worship of saints, mysticism and decoration of graves. Dancing and music are also prohibited. The Wahhabi intolerance leaves little room for cooperation with the state, official Islamic institutions or other faiths. On the contrary, the Wahhabis interpret the so-called “verse of the sword” in the Koran as a command to all Muslims to attack disbelief until it is exterminated from the earth, and claim to be ready to fight for the restoration of the Islamic Caliphate (which some claim lasted till the end of the Ottoman empire in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>6</sup>

Two major Islamic groups in Uzbekistan have been labeled Wahhabis by the government and been the object of persecutions. As we shall see, one of them deserves it more than the other, but it is clear, as Rashid

points out, that the vast majority of those labeled “Wahhabis” have little in common with the relatively small group that actually follow Wahhabi doctrine.

*Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan*

The group that to some extent deserves to be labeled Wahhabi is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) which was founded by the Uzbeks Juma Namangani and Tahir Yuldeshev while in exile in the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan in the late 1990s. The group is renowned for having no respect for official Islam, no patience with tradition, and no fear of the political regime - three traits which clearly resemble the Wahhabi doctrine. It has been claimed by initiated sources that the creation of this violent organization was a result of the repressive policies of the Uzbek government against a peaceful Muslim organization, Adolat, led by Yuldeshev, which operated in the Fergana valley in the early 1990s.<sup>7</sup>

The IMU has largely been funded by Saudi money and had clear ties to the Taliban in Afghanistan, which are now largely based in the mountainous western part of Pakistan. Some even claim that it was bin Laden who encouraged the two Uzbeks to create a distinct Islamic party whose aim would be the liberation of the Fergana Valley and Uzbekistan from Karimov’s rule. The goal of the movement was clearly stated from the beginning by Yuldeshev to be a jihad against the Uzbek government leading to the overthrow of the Karimov regime, the freeing of all prisoners convicted for their religious beliefs, and the establishment of an Islamic state: “We declared a jihad in order to create a religious system, a religious government. We want to create a sharia system.” Yuldeshev also noted, however, that “before we build an Islamic state we primarily want to get out from under oppression.”<sup>8</sup>

Yuldeshev also claimed that the IMU has its origin in the Bas-machi movement which fought against the Soviet red army in the 1920s and 30s, a claim which according to Rashid not is completely unfounded.<sup>9</sup>

After a number of high-profile kidnappings, such as that of a group of Japanese geologists and four American mountain-climbers in 2000, the IMU was labeled a terrorist organization by the US State Department. The most famous attacks attributed to the group, however, were a series of

bombings against governmental buildings in February 1999 in Tashkent, apparently an attempt to assassinate Karimov. Sixteen innocent civilians died and more than one hundred were wounded, but the president himself escaped unhurt. After the bombings, the government went on a rampage, accusing not only IMU but all opposition groups, including the exiled secular political parties Erk and Birlik, of responsibility for the bombs. According to Rashid, many theories regarding who organized the bombings circulated but the most common hypothesis among Uzbeks themselves was that clan and political rivals of Karimov, believing that his policies were ruining the country, had carried out the attacks.<sup>10</sup>

Subsequently, in the summer of 2000 and then again in 2001, the IMU carried out military campaigns, involving several hundred guerilla fighters, from bases in Tajikistan and Afghanistan, taking hostages and attacking military posts in both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Aside from international condemnations and several hundred dead, however, the raids produced little result.

Several experts have pointed out the heavy involvement of the IMU in the drug and weapon trafficking between Afghanistan, Central Asia and Russia, and some even claim that the main driving force for their activities has been economic gain through criminal activities. The crime and terrorism expert Tamara Makarenko, for example, wrote that “Throughout 1998 and 1999, IMU insurgents appeared to concentrate most of their efforts on locating trafficking routes and, as a result, had little reason to conduct terrorist activities.”<sup>11</sup>

However, even more critical for the relative strength of the IMU than the financial resources gained by kidnappings and trade of drugs and weapons, according to Rashid, was the continued repression by the Uzbek government and the desperate poverty of the Uzbek people.<sup>12</sup>

The US-led anti-Taliban campaign in Afghanistan probably weakened the IMU considerably and many, including IMU military leader Juma Namangani, are believed to have been killed in 2001. In July 2004, however, Tashkent was again shaken by several bomb attacks, this time conducted by suicide bombers and aimed at the US and Israeli embassies. Responsibility for the attacks was claimed by a little known Islamic Jihad group, but the authorities, with some support from Israeli sources, suspected involvement of Al-Qaida and the IMU. Given that IMU has been labeled a

terrorist organization by the international community, it is more difficult to launch operations in Uzbekistan under that name nowadays. The initiative for the political opposition in Uzbekistan is therefore likely to shift towards the nonviolent but clandestine radical group Hizb ut-Tahrir.<sup>13</sup>

### *Hizb ut-Tahrir*

Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) (or Party of Liberation) is, like the IMU, a radical Islamist group. Common with the IMU is the goal to overthrow the Karimov regime and to “reestablish” the Caliphate as an Islamic state based on sharia law. The means with which they strive to reach this goal, however, are completely different. Uzbek HT members condemn the activities of the IMU and think it is completely wrong to attack the country from the outside. Instead they consider persuasion the right method with which to obtain change and believe that a more or less peaceful revolution from within is possible.<sup>14</sup>

Another major difference compared to the IMU and its mainly local focus on Uzbekistan is the global structure of HT. The party was founded by Taqi ud-Din al-Nabhani in Jerusalem in 1952 and today claims to have members all over the world. As the organization began to establish small subgroups in other Arab countries (Jerusalem still belonged to Jordan at that time), it found itself moving underground and developed a highly fluid structure organized around a series of hierarchical committees. The party maintains a central leadership but its location is kept secret. In countries where it has been persecuted by the government (most of the Muslim countries), it has been known to adopt a rigorously enforced cell structure.

A third important difference compared to IMU, which has its main support base in rural areas, is that HT is supported mainly by educated people in cities. Similar to the IMU, though, is its use of populist rhetoric designed to link socioeconomic disenfranchisement to religiosity.

HT came late to Central Asia; it was not introduced in Uzbekistan until 1995. The growth has been phenomenal, though, and one of its leaders, interviewed by Rashid, claimed that they today have sixty thousand supporters in Tashkent alone and tens of thousands in other cities. Even if those numbers were greatly inflated, the number of arrested members of HT hints at a rapid growth. According to human rights organizations like

Human Rights Watch, there are around seven thousand people imprisoned in Uzbekistan today because of their religious beliefs and close to five thousand of them are allegedly members of HT.<sup>15</sup>

The Uzbek regime has insisted for several years that HT is a fundamentalist organization with links to the IMU, the Taliban and al-Qaida, and Karimov's administration has lobbied Russia, the EU and the US to list HT as a terrorist organization. Unlike the clear case of the IMU, however, the case presented against HT is not convincing and Western powers have been reluctant to comply with Tashkent's requests.<sup>16</sup> The persecution of HT has, nevertheless, been extremely harsh in Uzbekistan with arrests, torture and long prison terms for thousands of people just for alleged membership in HT. Given this brutal crackdown on its opponents, it is interesting to look at how the official Tashkent formulates its view on religious extremism and the threat it poses.

### **Karimov's views on religious extremism**

In the book *Po Puti Bezopasnosti i Stablnogo Razvitiia* (On the Way to Security and Stable Development), the Uzbek president Islam Karimov elaborates on his views on religious extremism and fundamentalism.<sup>17</sup> Surprisingly enough, given his record of human rights abuses against dissidents, Karimov declares that "A human being can and must make his ideological, moral and spiritual choices himself, without any kind of pressure and force. And this choice must be respected."<sup>18</sup> His acknowledgement that "surges of religious fanaticism are caused not only, and not as much, by individual religious contradictions, as by unsolved social, political and economical problems,"<sup>19</sup> may also seem surprising, given how little attention he has given to economic and social reforms in his country.

Having stated that Uzbekistan hosts 15 different religious confessions, Karimov goes on to list the state policies on religion. According to him, they include: respect for the religious feelings of the believer; recognition of religious views as the private business of the citizens and their associations; guarantee of equal rights and inadmissibility of persecution of citizens due to their religious views or absence of such; necessity to strive towards a dialogue with various religious associations in order to confirm all-human moral values; and, finally, recognition of the inadmissibility of

the use of religion for destructive goals.<sup>20</sup>

The last of these policies is the only one Karimov elaborates on, and here it gets more interesting: “We will never allow religious slogans to become a banner for power struggles, or a cause for interference in politics, economics or jurisprudence, since we therein see a serious potential threat for the security and stability of our state.”<sup>21</sup>

A few quotations from public speeches by Karimov regarding the activities of the IMU may illustrate how he thinks this policy should be carried out in practice. Warning young men from being brainwashed by fundamentalists he declared that “Trying to escape the subordination to authority may result in a personal tragedy.”<sup>22</sup> After the 1999 bombings Karimov gave examples of such tragedies when he stated that he would arrest every father whose son joined the IMU. “If my child chose such a path, I myself would rip off his head,” Karimov said.<sup>23</sup> Urging for tougher repressions against terrorists, Karimov at another occasion stated in the parliament that “Such people must be shot in the head. If necessary I will shoot them myself.”<sup>24</sup>

### Closing remarks

Given the violent attacks conducted by IMU, Karimov’s harsh treatment of that organization might be understandable. The problem, however, is that the authorities have been using the same methods to suppress the increasingly popular and non-violent Hizb ut-Tahrir. Many analysts have expressed a fear that this may be a crucial mistake, not only by Karimov and his regime, but also by western governments which have supported him within the common global “war on terror.”<sup>25</sup> “We have fear,” states one Uzbek human rights activist, “that the repression against Hizb ut-Tahrir will lead to yet another extremist terrorist organization.”<sup>26</sup> Another analyst concludes that “the current government’s extremely repressive policies are actively contributing to the growth of – and popular support for – radicalized groups there that the campaign against terrorism is attempting to counter.”<sup>27</sup> Rashid, the Pakistani journalist, has expressed similar thoughts: “The longer that Karimov carries out acts of repression, the greater the likelihood that Islamic extremism spreads.”<sup>28</sup>

Given all these concerns, my conclusion is that if there is not a real threat from Islamic extremism in Uzbekistan already today, then there will

be soon. The IMU was a threat as long as the Taliban ruled in Afghanistan but not so any more. Today the threat comes from a possible radicalization of Hizb ut-Tahrir. Having “played the Wahhabi card” against HT and prohibited the secular opposition, Karimov has probably helped HT recruiting. If there will ever be a “color revolution” in Uzbekistan, it will most likely be led by HT members, who in Uzbekistan see their great chance to establish the first part of the new global Caliphate.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> By “reestablishing an Islamic caliphate,” Hizb-ut-Tahrir means replacing the governments in the Muslim world with an Islamic state in the form of a caliphate resembling that of the Ottoman Empire, which they regard as the last caliphate (abolished by Kemal Ataturk in 1924).

<sup>2</sup> See “Dozens killed in Uzbek city, as security forces crush protests in Andijan” (5/13/05), “Uzbekistan: on the slippery slope” by Ahmed Rashid (5/17/05) and “Uzbekistan: no good political options in sight” (5/18/05), all published on the Open Society Institute in New York’s www.eurasianet.org

<sup>3</sup> See “Uzbekistan emerges as Russia’s new ‘strategic bridgehead’ in Central Asia” by Igor Torbakov (12/14/05) on www.eurasianet.org

<sup>4</sup> See Alexander Knysh, “A clear and present danger: ‘Wahhabism’ as a rhetorical foil” in *Die Welt des Islams*, vol 44, no 1, 2004

<sup>5</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad .- the rise of militant Islam in Central Asia*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 46

<sup>6</sup> On Wahhabism in Central Asia see Rashid, *Jihad* pp. 45-46, Human Rights Watch, *Creating Enemies of the State: Religious Persecution in Uzbekistan* (New York: HRW, 2004) pp. 47-50 and Troy S. Thomas & Stephen D. Kiser, *Lords of the Silk Route: Violent Non-State Actors in Central Asia* INSS Occasional Paper 43, May 2002, pp. 90-91.

<sup>7</sup> Abdusalom Ergashev, Head of Fergana Branch of the Independent Human Rights Organization of Uzbekistan in *Escalating Violence and Rights Violations in Central Asia* Briefing of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Washington 107<sup>th</sup> Congress 2<sup>nd</sup> Session March 28, 2002), p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Cited from Rashid, *Jihad* pp. 148-49.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 149.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. pp. 150-151.

<sup>11</sup> Tamara Makarenko, *Crime, Terror and the Central Asian Drug Trade* in Harvard Asia Quarterly vol.6, no. 3 (Summer 2002). See also Vitaly Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia –Between Pen and Riflei* (New York: Roman and Littlefield, 2005) pp.72-73 and Rashid, *Jihad*, p. 154.

<sup>12</sup> Rashid, *Jihad* p. 155.

<sup>13</sup> For a more detailed description of the Rise and Fall of IMU, see Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia* pp.37- 118. See also Rashid, *Jihad* pp.137-186; Human Rights Watch, *Creating Enemies of the State* pp. 30-33; Neil J. Melvin, *Uzbekistan: Transition to authoritarianism on the silk road* (Amsterdam: Harwood academic publishers, 2000), pp. 52-59; and Aleksandr Kniazev, *Istoriia Afganskoi Voiny 1990-kh gg. i prevrashchenie Afganistana v istochnik ugroz dlia Tsentral'noi Azii* (Bishkek: KRSU, 2002) pp.148-159.

<sup>14</sup> See Igor Rotar, *Pod Zelenym Znamenem Islama – Islamskie radikaly v Rossii i SNG*, (Moskva: AIRO-XX, 2001) pp. 77-78. See also Hizb-ut-Tahrir's website: [www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org](http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org).

<sup>15</sup> See Peter Mandaville, "Sufis and Salafis: the Political Discourse of Transnational Islam" in Robert W. Hefner, *Remaking Muslim Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005) pp.307-310. See also Rashid, *Jihad*, pp. 115-136 and Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia*, pp.127-194.

<sup>16</sup> Shahram Akbarzadeh, *Uzbekistan and the United States: Authoritarianism, Islamism & Washinton's Security Agenda* (New York: Zed Books, 2005) p. 36 and Human Rights Watch, *Creating Enemies of the State* p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> Islam Karimov, *Po Puti Bezopasnosti i Stabilnogo Razvitiia* (Tashkent: Uzbekiston, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 49-50.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p.50.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p. 54.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p. 55.

<sup>22</sup> Rashid, *Jihad* p. 147.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p. 150.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 146.

<sup>25</sup> See e.g. Thomas & Kiser, *Lords of the Silk Route* p. 86; International Crisis Group "The Failure of Reform in Uzbekistan" *ICG Asia Report* No 76, 11 March, 2004, p. 29.

<sup>26</sup> Ergashev in *Escalating Violence and Rights Violations in Central Asia* p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> Nina Shea in *U.S. Policy in Central Asia and Human Rights Concerns*, Briefing of the Commission on Security and cooperation in Europe, Washington, March 7, 2002.

<sup>28</sup> Rashid, *Uzbekistan: On the slippery slope*.

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