
THE IMU AND THE HIZB-UT-TAHRIR: IMPLICATIONS OF THE AFGHANISTAN CAMPAIGN

I. INTRODUCTION

The attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001 and the U.S.-led military campaign in Afghanistan have intensified the scrutiny of Islamist movements across Central Asia. Of such movements, two – the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Hizb-ut-Tahrir al-Islami (“Party of Islamic Liberation”) – have been of greatest concern to the governments of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and to the broader international community.

This briefing considers how the allied military action in Afghanistan has changed the dynamic regarding these two organisations in Central Asia and impacted their memberships, leaderships and structures. How Central Asia deals with these two very different movements is critical. Far too often, the region’s non-democratic leadership has made repression its instrument of choice for dealing with religion and civil society as a whole, thus creating greater public sympathy for groups whose agendas, methods and rhetoric are deeply troubling. There is a danger that the international community, in its understandable eagerness to combat terrorism, will give the regions’ governments a free hand to continue and expand repression of all groups that are viewed as political threats – a dynamic that will only boomerang and further destabilise the region over time.

Far more to date has been written about the IMU¹, which U.S. President George Bush cited as a terrorist organisation of particular concern following 11 September,² than about the Hizb-ut-Tahrir. This was likely done, at least in part, to help secure Uzbekistan’s cooperation in the military campaign in Afghanistan. But the IMU has received much greater scrutiny also because of its military activities, including cross border incursions into Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan during the last three years, and allegations by the government of Uzbekistan that it was behind bombings in Tashkent in February 1999.³ The IMU was also involved in high profile kidnappings in Kyrgyzstan during 1999 and 2000. The IMU and its leadership have frequently used Afghanistan as a base of operations, and the organisation has close ties to both the Taliban and the al-Qaeda terrorist network. Given this record, it is no surprise that the IMU has found itself in

¹ See ICG Central Asia Briefing, *Central Asian Perspectives on 11 September and the Afghan Crisis*, 28 September 2001; ICG Asia Report No. 21, *Uzbekistan at Ten*, 21 August 2001; ICG Asia Report No. 20, *Central Asia: Fault Lines in the New Security Map*, 4 July 2001; and ICG Asia Report No. 14, *Islamic Mobilisation and Regional Security*, 1 March 2001.

² The U.S. government initially designated the IMU a “Foreign Terrorist Organisation” under its laws on 25 September 2000. The Clinton administration referred at the time to armed incursions into Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and the taking of hostages, including U.S. citizens.

³ The bombings are a rich source of conspiracy theories in the region. There has been speculation that everyone from the IMU, to the Russian government, to President Karimov’s political opponents or even President Karimov’s security services acting at his behest, were responsible.

the crosshairs of regional governments and the international community since 11 September.

The Hizb-ut-Tahrir has received less international scrutiny, in part, because it has advocated a non-violent approach toward its goals. However, it shares many broader aims with the IMU, primarily the institution of an Islamist political order in the region. While the IMU tends to stress more short-term political objectives, focusing on overthrowing the government of Uzbekistan, the Hizb-ut-Tahrir has the more utopian aim of re-establishing a caliphate that would encompass all Muslims.⁴ Many Hizb-ut-Tahrir members do at times speak in ways that suggest the organisation, or at least part of its base, has not precluded resorting to violence if it continues to suffer severe repression, particularly in Uzbekistan.

Nevertheless, the Hizb-ut-Tahrir presents a particularly difficult challenge to Western policymakers since it holds extremist views but openly advocates only peaceful change. Governments in Central Asia, which believe it to be a considerable threat to the political order, have responded by jailing people for the non-violent expression of ideas. Much of this briefing is directed toward exploring the Hizb-ut-Tahrir in detail, including its recruitment methods, philosophy and those elements driving its upsurge in popularity across Central Asia.⁵

II. THE ISLAMIC MOVEMENT OF UZBEKISTAN

The IMU's increased international notoriety after 11 September, driven by its links to the Taliban and al-Qaeda, appears to have come at a high cost. In late November 2001 it was widely reported that the group's 32-year-old military leader, Juma Namangani,⁶ died from wounds received during U.S. bombing in the Mazar-i-Sharif region of Afghanistan, although accounts varied.⁷ He had been sentenced to death in absentia by the government of Uzbekistan in November of 2000.

There is very little reliable information regarding the broader military impact of the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan against IMU military forces as a whole. An IMU contingent was heavily involved in fighting around Mazar-i-Sharif and Konduz in November, and it appears that substantial numbers of IMU followers were killed during fighting in the latter city. The IMU's political leader, Tohir Yuldash, is likely still alive. Some reports suggest that he fled to Pakistan while others claim he is still in Afghanistan.

Russian military sources have claimed, but again with no independent confirmation, that four IMU camps in Konduz, Balkh, and Samangan provinces remain intact.⁸ They say that IMU forces loyal to Namangani and fighting with the Taliban suffered the greatest number of casualties while those closer to Tohir Yuldash remained on the sidelines and may have survived. In fact, it seems unlikely that any IMU infrastructure has survived the bombing campaign: Uzbek intelligence is well developed on the IMU in Afghanistan, and the U.S. has been more than willing to include IMU camps on its target list. However, it is improbable that the IMU has been completely destroyed. Indeed, comments by U.S.

⁴ Turkish leader Kemal Ataturk abolished the pan-Islamic institution of the caliphate in 1925.

⁵ The organisation is active across the Middle East and in many Western countries. This briefing focuses only on its activities in Central Asia.

⁶ Namangani's name at birth was Jumaboi Ahmadjonovich Khodjiyev.

⁷ General Tommy Franks, commander of the U.S. action in Afghanistan, told journalists in Uzbekistan that Namangani was indeed dead although he did not reveal the source of this information. "Uzbekistan Gets U.S. Military Pledge", Associated Press, 24 January 2002.

⁸ "Four IMU Camps Still Remain Inside Afghan Areas", AVN Military News Agency, 27 December 2001, published on www.uzreport.com.

military leaders in January 2002 that they would continue to track down IMU elements confirm that they are still believed to be present in Afghanistan.⁹

It has been suggested that IMU leaders may have been among those reportedly spirited out of Konduz on two Pakistani aircraft in November 2001.¹⁰ Some who survived the fighting may have simply disappeared into the countryside, awaiting future chances to fight; others have probably left for Pakistan to join former al-Qaeda fighters. Some IMU leaders may also have found refuge in Iran.

A more direct threat to Central Asian security is the suggestion that some IMU fighters may have returned to Tajikistan, where they maintained bases until 2001 in the eastern Tavildara region, an area largely outside government control. Much of the region is allegedly controlled by groups loyal to Mirzo Ziyoev, who fought with Namangani during the civil war but is now Minister of Emergency Situations in the coalition government in Dushanbe. In an interview with ICG, Ziyoev denied that the IMU would return to Tajikistan.¹¹ However, there is still potential for small groups to find their way back to the region. Under Uzbek and U.S. pressure, nevertheless, the Tajik government is likely to take stronger measures against any such groups than they have done in the past.

Whatever the truth, it seems inevitable that the IMU sustained significant losses during the fighting in northern Afghanistan and now faces fundamental challenges to its leadership, organisation and viability. Regional governments, especially that of Uzbekistan, are pleased with the presumed death of Juma Namangani and the damage done to the IMU. Indeed, it was President Karimov's desire to see serious damage inflicted on the IMU that helped fuel his willingness to open Uzbek military facilities to U.S. forces operating in Afghanistan. The results are a clear victory for Karimov.

⁹ "U.S. commander pledges to 'mop up' Uzbek Islamic opposition in Afghanistan", Uzbek radio first program, 24 February 2002, reported in BBC Monitoring the following day.

¹⁰ Scott Johnson, Newsweek Online, 15 November 2001. Available at <http://www.msnbc.com/news/658465.asp>

¹¹ ICG Interview, December 2001.

Within the Uzbek ruling elite there is a sense that the threat from Afghanistan has been diminished: concerns over border security have been relaxed slightly, with steps beginning to remove mines from the Tajik-Uzbek border and open new crossings between those two countries.

Namangani was the only IMU leader who was well known throughout the region, and he cannot be easily replaced. He maintained tight control of his followers through both harsh discipline and personal loyalty, and there is no guarantee that this authority will easily transfer to his lieutenants.

While Tohir Yuldash is also an important figure, he has less charisma and authority and has not been proven as a field commander. It is possible that he will encounter considerable difficulty retaining the support of the disparate groups that comprise the IMU, and it will take time for other leaders to emerge. Consequently, a number of splinter groups and factions may develop from the remnants of the group. While they would likely employ similar aims and tactics, they would be less of a threat than a more unified IMU operating under a clear leadership that the rank and file considered legitimate.

Events in Afghanistan will have severely disrupted the IMU's funding, which is believed to come from the drugs trade in Central Asia and in part from Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda.¹² The IMU no longer controls the drug routes through Tajikistan nor will it have access to narcotics if production is brought under better control in Afghanistan. Other possible sources of money include backers in the Middle East or local political groups seeking to use the IMU as a means to build their own influence. However, without its refuge in Afghanistan, the IMU is likely to face a serious financial squeeze.

Nevertheless, while there will no doubt be a period of regrouping and reflection on strategy, it is too early to write off the IMU as a threat to security in the region. Some remnants may eventually attempt to revive the campaign against Uzbekistan. The IMU will probably be unable to mount the kind of guerrilla force incursions that it

¹² See ICG Asia Report No. 26 *Central Asia: Drugs and Conflict*, 26 November 2001.

achieved in 1999 and 2000, but it may well resort to classical terror methods, including bomb attacks against government buildings and personnel. It may also attack U.S. targets in Uzbekistan, including the air base in Khanabad. Uzbekistan's security services, although ubiquitous, may be poorly positioned to deal with such a threat given the widespread corruption in its ranks and a general lack of professionalism.

If Tohir Yuldash emerges as a leader able to reunify the IMU, he may make the movement more politically sophisticated. Yuldash has wide contacts in the Middle East, Iran and Pakistan, and has been the IMU's main conduit for external funding. If he has retained some of the IMU's military capability, he may attempt to develop a more long-term campaign that aims at weakening Karimov's rule through both violence and political propaganda.

Though the IMU's ability to act cohesively is clearly in jeopardy, this should not obscure an equally important reality: the conditions that helped create and sustain the IMU remain unchanged. As Mikhail Ardzinov, the Chairman of the Independent Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan, asserted:

Smashing the Hizb-ut-Tahrir and the IMU does not make Uzbekistan safer as the real problems have not been solved ... the authoritarian strategy of preserving stability is impossible, and in a year, we will see increased number of arrests, trials, terrorist acts and the deterioration of the political situation in the country in conditions of economic decline and absence of political rights....We have not felt an increased interest on behalf of the international community in providing support for human rights organisations as its primary focus is the fight against terrorism.¹³

The degree of support for the IMU within Uzbekistan has changed little since 11 September. Nor does the war in Afghanistan seem to have broadly affected people's attitudes toward the possibilities of political change. For Muslims with a secular orientation in Uzbekistan,

as well as non-Muslims, the news of Namangani's death was greeted with relief. The relatively small minority of the population who were supportive of the IMU before September largely continue to believe that Uzbekistan's political system can only be changed through force. Many of those who wish to see the government replaced but reject violence continue to support such groups as the Hizb-ut-Tahrir.

Nor have Uzbekistan's policies toward Islamist groups fundamentally changed since 11 September though they have been somewhat muted. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks on the United States, security measures were intensified but over the last two months there has been less overt repression. Although arrests have continued, there have been none of the major trials that have taken place in the past.

This can be explained by several factors. First, given the large number of journalists and delegations visiting the country, there may be a concerted effort by the government to improve its image in the West. Secondly, there may be a sense of relaxation among some of the Uzbek political elite, who feel that the IMU has been seriously damaged and now poses much less of a threat to the regime. Thirdly, there are believed to be a number of officials in the presidential administration and in government circles who feel that the repressive methods employed by the Interior Ministry are counterproductive, and are attempting to use the present situation to relax government policy.

If the IMU has in fact been destroyed as an effective guerrilla force, President Karimov may face increasing difficulty in justifying the failure to liberalise Uzbekistan's political and economic systems. Much of the authoritarian structure of Karimov's regime has been legitimised by the existence of serious security threats from Islamist groups, and much of the president's continuing popularity depends on his role in suppressing alleged Islamic extremists.

However, the government has yet to show much willingness to consider a more open political system. Tolib Yakobov, the Chairman of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan, argues that the government of "Karimov has been trained to rule through force and it has no intention of becoming more democratic even if the IMU and

¹³ ICG interview, 9 January 2002.

Hizb-ut-Tahrir are completely destroyed. They will have to create a new enemy".¹⁴ In this sense, the alleged death of Namangani may not fundamentally change the political situation. Unless broader measures are taken to deal with corruption and authoritarianism and to meet the economic needs of local populations, public dissatisfaction will continue to seek new outlets.

The at least severe reduction of the IMU threat may have a more long-term impact on the distribution of power within the governing elite. Relatively liberal figures will attempt to use the improved security situation and the increased pressure from the international community to begin political and economic reforms. But it is likely that change will be resisted by a range of hard-line figures who have benefited from the present system, including the external security threat. Although much of the internal politics of Uzbekistan remains murky for outside observers, it is imperative that the international community use its dialogue with the government to press for reforms and link long-term new relationships to significant domestic policy change.

Potentially a potent social force and a key constituency for the government to win over are the many Muslims in Uzbekistan who do not want to belong to any of the Islamist political groups but remain deeply resentful of the government's policy on religion. These individuals could also become a target for advocacy from groups less focused on specific political action, and more on Islamic learning, although still with the long-term aim of establishing an Islamist state.

For example, ICG interviewed a police captain in Uzbekistan, who indicated that he is a member of a secret group that does not wish to be identified with the present Islamist groups but still believes that the state should be based on Sharia law. This movement, and others like it, have attracted better-educated people than typical Hizb-ut-Tahrir members, including individuals who generally have some position in society and do not wish to be involved in radical politics. They will avoid political activity until they feel that there is real understanding in society of Islamic ideas.

It is unlikely that the IMU, even if it eventually manages to recover from the heavy losses it has suffered in Afghanistan, could ever come to power on its own in Uzbekistan but scenarios can be imagined in which it forms alliances with groups with common short-term goals. Most obviously, this could involve a tactical alliance with some Hizb-ut-Tahrir members, an idea explored below. In more extreme scenarios, there is the dangerous possibility that over time, political forces may attempt to use radical Islamist groups in their own interests. Regional elites that are currently largely excluded from power – such as the Tashkent elite, some Samarkand Tajik groups and probably some members of the Ferghana elite – could possibly find common cause with extremist groups as a means to pressure the government. This scenario is unlikely at present but it highlights the importance for Uzbekistan of establishing more inclusive governance sooner rather than later.

A long-term presence of U.S. troops in Uzbekistan could also fuel instability. Certain elements in Russia, China and Iran remain concerned about the regional geopolitical balance. Despite Russia's public support for the war on terrorism, groups within Russia's military and intelligence services are deeply hostile toward U.S. involvement in Central Asia. There is an at least small possibility for an alliance of convenience between anti-Karimov forces in the region (including the IMU) and external forces eager to see President Karimov's position weakened and U.S. influence diminished. One or more of these states – or at least elements within these states – may attempt to identify a possible candidate who would be willing to cooperate in an attempt to topple Karimov and install a regime with less overt orientation towards the U.S.

There exists a widespread perception in Uzbekistan that the Western powers, and the United States in particular, have now given anti-terrorist aims higher priority than human rights or promoting democracy. This is a dangerous perception, and it is difficult to imagine that U.S. national interests would be well served if its commitment to democracy and open markets in Uzbekistan were to come sharply into question. It is also important to note that any failure by the international community to bring stability to Afghanistan would likely mean that the IMU

¹⁴ ICG interview, 9 January 2002.

could regain its base of operations in cooperation with supportive local warlords.

III. THE HIZB-UT-TAHRIR

Though a small number of Hizb-ut-Tahrir cells nurtured by foreign missionaries existed throughout the early and mid-1990s in Central Asia, the organisation began to expand dramatically in the late 1990s. Growing out of movements in the Middle East in the 1950s, the Hizb-ut-Tahrir in Central Asia has urged the peaceful overthrow of governments across the region and the establishment of an Islamic caliphate throughout the Muslim world. Unlike the IMU, Hizb-ut-Tahrir is a real transnational movement with considerable support among young Muslims in Western Europe and a large organisational base in London. The resources and membership of the Hizb-ut-Tahrir are obviously difficult to estimate, though its membership is clearly in the thousands across Central Asia.¹⁵

A. IDEOLOGY

The Hizb-ut-Tahrir promotes a utopian view of political Islam under which social problems such as corruption and poverty would be banished by the application of Islamic law and government. Its public statements tend to be vague on how this will be achieved and do not address the many difficult questions raised by political Islam. Statements are often strongly anti-Western, anti-Semitic and anti-Shia. Indicative of the vagueness of many of the movement's views is that most members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir with whom ICG has spoken have not been able to explain how the caliphate would operate, how people of other faiths would be treated or how the economy would be managed. Nevertheless, its loose, idealistic vision has taken on an increasing political saliency because of the region's economic problems and social discontent.¹⁶

In general, the Hizb-ut-Tahrir has used a blend of indigenous history, arguments about local socio-economic and political conditions and calls for international Islamic solidarity to advance its case

¹⁵ Hizb-ut-Tahrir officials have put membership in Central Asia in the tens of thousands but have offered no proof. See the section on Hizb-ut-Tahrir support.

¹⁶ For more on the Hizb-ut-Tahrir, see its web site, www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org.

for a struggle against authorities and establishment of a more egalitarian caliphate. To get its message out, it relies heavily on leaflets, which usually contain the movement's religious theory, passages from the Koran, description of events in the region and discussions of issues such as the Palestinian conflict and Chechnya as a means to mobilise local support. The notion of world-wide Muslim unity has been a central element in its mobilisation efforts, and it has tried to use its international character to lend its cause moral authority. For example, leaflets will commonly argue that all Muslims have common problems and that conflicts in Chechnya, Israel and Afghanistan are relevant to Central Asian Muslims.

The Hizb-ut-Tahrir is a largely fringe movement in most Muslim countries, and its ideology is generally seen as heterodox by most mainstream Muslims. In Central Asia, where Islamic learning is often low among the general population, however, it finds it relatively easy to convince young people in particular. Most Muslim leaders in the region are sharply critical. For example, Imam Rahmatullah Kasimov, the President of the Scientific-Cultural Centre "Abuziya" in Osh, Kyrgyzstan claimed: "The party's Islamic ideology strongly contradicts in some parts the Islamic teachings of the Quran and *Hadiths* [narrations about the Prophet's acts and his commands to his followers]"¹⁷.

Others have argued that the Hizb-ut-Tahrir is essentially a political, not a religious, organisation and that Muslims should not be involved in politics. However, most Imams have not been willing to push Hizb-ut-Tahrir members out of their mosques, and many moderate Muslims in Central Asia who reject the movement's aims and ideology nevertheless feel sympathy for the repression they face.

B. ORGANISATION AND MEMBERSHIP

The Hizb-ut-Tahrir is organised in a secretive and hierarchical pyramid structure made up of many five-person cells whose members, after they have completed training averaging about two months, form their own groups or "halka" – also of five to

six members. Each halka has a nickname, and only its leader has a link to higher members of the organisation. New members must study the organisation's program, strategy, and literature, as well as geography, politics, religion and history. Women and men's cells are separate with the former, in general, appearing to be less politicised.

Membership is usually expanded directly through a loose association of close friends, family members and relatives, mimicking traditional social networks. Indeed, meetings are often held under the guise of traditional weekly meetings of men, who share food, either at home or in a restaurant. Some halkas – primarily those composed of 17-25 year old youths – are occasionally paid small amounts of money for delivering leaflets but members are also expected to contribute fees where possible to help cover expenses such as the purchase of equipment and printing costs. Some materials are published abroad and sympathisers in other countries provide financial resources.

Recruitment primarily takes place by recommendations from other members, though a female member of Hizb-ut-Tahrir with whom ICG spoke also indicated that she approaches people eating pork or drinking alcohol in restaurants and cafes and starts talking to them about how to live properly according to Islam. Members of the Hizb-ut-Tahrir are encouraged to view their efforts as a way of life, not simply as part of an Islamic movement or a political party. Many members emphasise an "inner jihad" or psychological transformation as a reason for joining the group. This emotional revolution, they say, has completely changed their behaviour, and they claim to have become much more disciplined people, free of alcoholism and other social ills.

Most members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir come from the ranks of the young and unemployed. Given the lack of economic opportunity, many youths appear attracted to the Hizb-ut-Tahrir out of motivations as simple as boredom and dissatisfaction with their lot in life. New recruits are particularly attracted to the Hizb-ut-Tahrir's emphasis on social order, equality and assistance to the poor, which they believe would be institutionalised in a caliphate. Most members come from uneducated, working-class

¹⁷ ICG interview, May 2001.

backgrounds, and recruitment in rural areas – where poverty, unemployment and lack of access to education are particularly acute – has been quite active.¹⁸ Initially Hizb-ut-Tahrir activists concentrated on building a grassroots support base by proselytising during the winter months when farmers and craftsmen were idle.

Most Hizb-ut-Tahrir members are ethnic Uzbeks, but the organisation also includes ethnic Kyrgyz and Tajiks. The Hizb-ut-Tahrir mostly associates itself in Central Asia with Uzbekistan, and overthrowing President Karimov is clearly a central goal. The organisation has, however, become much more active in Kyrgyzstan in recent years because of the government crackdowns in Uzbekistan. Nevertheless, ethnicity is not emphasised by members, who instead cite religious grievances against the respective governments in the region.

It is relatively simple for the Hizb-ut-Tahrir to recruit on this basis, given that most new members were previously not particularly religious. They thus have little ability to make an independent assessment of the movement's doctrine and can be indoctrinated easily. One member told ICG that "this party appeared just at the right time. We could have been led in any direction. If it hadn't been for Hizb-ut-Tahrir, we would have joined some other party".¹⁹

C. TACTICS

The Hizb-ut-Tahrir has also made increasing inroads because it has billed itself as adhering to peaceful methods, a claim that deserves more complete exploration. A number of individuals interviewed by ICG concurred that one of the principle attractions of the Hizb-ut-Tahrir is that it ostensibly rejects violence. This is particularly true in Osh and other parts of the Ferghana Valley, which have suffered from interethnic violence in the past,²⁰ and where there is strong

popular rejection of violence as a political tool. However, although the Hizb-ut-Tahrir rejects violence as a concept, some members, and apparently some of its leaders as well, appear not to exclude support for armed resistance or even the IMU.

Despite its strong opposition to governments in the region, the Hizb-ut-Tahrir has thus far spoken in one voice on behalf of non-violence, in no small part because of its tightly controlled and disciplined nature. Individual members are not allowed to give opinions or take important decisions without consulting higher ranks, and as long as the guidance from above remains to use non-violent means, members appear willing to stick to more intensively distributing pamphlets, propagating their ideas and recruiting new members. A man in his thirties who teaches at a secondary school in Tashkent and has been a member of the Hizb-ut-Tahrir for five years insisted:

We will not become violent just because the kafirs (non-believers) attacked Afghanistan. They [the kafirs] have been doing it for centuries, and this case is another example of cruelty of America and the West against Muslims. We will continue our struggle and not change our methods. The West discredited itself by killing innocent people in Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan, and they should change their behaviour not us!²¹

Some also argue that the military means employed by the IMU have only alienated the public and made it less receptive to Islamic ideals.

There is little information available about the Hizb-ut-Tahrir's future plans, however, and there should be some concern in that regard. Many feel that the potential for the Hizb-ut-Tahrir, or at least many of those now within its ambit, to resort to force is considerable. All members interviewed by ICG in preparing this report expressed sympathy with the IMU, although they did not agree with its use of violence. Having said that, several indicated that they personally

¹⁸ For example, according to materials from the Osh City Court archives, of thirteen Hizb-ut-Tahrir members sentenced in Osh city court in 2000, almost all were unemployed and had at most secondary education.

¹⁹ ICG interview, 5 June 2001, Karasu (Kyrgyzstan).

²⁰ In 1990 disputes over land in Osh and nearby towns led to ethnic conflict between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. The official death toll was 300 but unofficial reports have put

it at more than 1,000. The scale and intensity of the violence still has considerable resonance in the area.

²¹ ICG interview, January 2002.

regretted the Hizb-ut-Tahrir decision not to use violence, particularly given the thousands of Hizb-ut-Tahrir members incarcerated in Uzbekistan and the increasing pressure being placed on the group by governments throughout the region.

A human rights activist interviewed by ICG warned:

Though the Hizb-ut-Tahrir's ideology propagates peaceful means of struggle, the relatives of members of the party who have been arrested say they are willing to fight against the government with guns. They say they did not receive any understanding from the authorities and [are] now ready for anything. Some of the members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir may become disillusioned by a non-violent strategy and turn to more radical groups if they appear.²²

Similarly, in an interview by the journalist Ahmed Rashid a purported senior leader of the Hizb-ut-Tahrir demonstrated a certain ambiguity in the organisation's attitude toward the use of force: "Hizb-ut-Tahrir wants a peaceful *jihad* that will be spread by explanation and conversion not by war. But ultimately there will be war because the repression of the Central Asian states is so strong".²³

There seems to have been disagreement already within the leadership of the Hizb-ut-Tahrir on tactics and at least two cases of fairly significant groups establishing separate political movements independent of the Hizb-ut-Tahrir leadership. In early 1997 a group in the Ferghana region of Uzbekistan led by Yu. Akramov left the main body after disputes with the local leadership; a further split in 1999 reportedly took place in the Tashkent branch when a fairly significant group set up its own party, called Hizb-an-Nusra (Party of Victory). The details are not entirely clear, but this group seems to have been dissatisfied with the propaganda method of political struggle, which had led to the arrest of a significant

proportion of the younger membership, but it may even have been ready for more violent methods.²⁴ Further splits are possible, both for personal reasons, and over political tactics.

D. SUPPORT

It would be wrong to suggest that either the IMU or the Hizb-ut-Tahrir has extensive support in any region of Central Asia, but clearly both have a minority following in parts of the Ferghana Valley, in particular, and probably also in southern Uzbekistan and parts of Tajikistan. It is, of course, impossible to assess very precisely the level of this support, but local observers in the Uzbek part of the Ferghana Valley claim that current active support is less than 10 per cent of the population.²⁵ Many ordinary believers do not support political activity in mosques, and do not share their radical Islamist theory. There is, however, scope for support to grow if dissatisfaction with the present political and economic order increases. Outside the narrow group of direct supporters, there are many who respect party members for their courage in the face of repression, even if they disagree with their views or tactics.

In the immediate aftermath of 11 September, many Hizb-ut-Tahrir members went further underground fearing a widespread crackdown across Central Asia, and the organisation issued calls supporting action against the "infidel" powers (the U.S. and Britain) operating in Afghanistan. As time has passed, members have again become more active in leafleting and related activities. Observations on the ground seem to indicate that the number of Hizb-ut-Tahrir recruits continues to increase, although they are operating with more secrecy.

It is vital to understand that much support for the Hizb-ut-Tahrir is driven by the disappointments of the post-Soviet era rather than by deeply felt attachment to radical Islamist ideology. Hizb-ut-Tahrir's call for an end to corruption, greed and

²² ICG interview, 9 January 2002.

²³ SAIS Central Asia-Caucasus Institute biweekly briefing, Ahmed Rashid, "Interview with Leader of Hizb-ut-Tahrir" November 2000. Available at http://www.cacianalyst.org/Nov_22_2000/Interview.htm

²⁴ See Bakhtiyar Babadzhanov, 'O deyatelnosti <Hizb-ut-Tahrir al-islami> v Uzbekistane' [On the activities of Hizb-ut-Tahrir al-islami in Uzbekistan], in Malashenko and Olcott (Eds.), *Islam*, op. cit., pp. 164-165.

²⁵ ICG Interviews, Namangan, November 2001.

abuse of power strikes a deep chord with many ordinary people. Across the region, the ruling political elites that kept power despite the transition from communism are generally seen as discredited by corruption, greed, authoritarianism and absence of concern for ordinary people.

Given the lack of avenues for legitimate civic expression or securing practical change through democratic means, it is no surprise that many people turn to a political/religious movement that argues the current system is badly broken. For example, Sheikh Sadiq Q. Kamal Al-Deen, the director of the Islamic Centre of Islamic Cooperation in Osh and the former Mufti of Kyrgyzstan, cites the “minimal political participation of the population, the growth of distrust of authority and scepticism about the utility of democratic institutions” as key factors in the growth of the Hizb-ut-Tahrir.²⁶

Hizb-ut-Tahrir members often cite a desire to participate in political and social life as important reasons for joining. Many people are disillusioned with trying to use available channels for protest against the government and the general unfairness of modern society and so are attracted to the more idealised vision propagated by the Hizb-ut-Tahrir. The norms of Sharia and the prospect of an Islamic government are popular in large part because leaders across the region have damaged the notion of “democracy” by claiming, falsely, that their governments adhere to the practice.

Hizb-ut-Tahrir members interviewed frequently cited their hopes of peacefully overthrowing Central Asian governments and replacing them with a “just new order”. One member argued, “Even the caliph himself will be subject to punishment if he commits injustice or breaks the law”, a principle that any democratic reformer would support, but most Hizb-ut-Tahrir ideology is explicitly anti-democratic. Because of the authorities’ failure to embrace more transparent governance in the region, what they call “democracy” has been discredited in the eyes of many people. The putative authority of the Caliph is not based on votes but rather on a “higher order” of Islamic law.

Members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir are seen as incorruptible and as people with a conviction – sharply contrasting with the image of state officials. The group’s main tenets – the just distribution of resources, profits, and property, just governance, the elimination of corruption and the common “brotherhood” of the entire Muslim world – are a direct challenge to the moral authority of leaders in the region. Another Hizb-ut-Tahrir member in Kyrgyzstan claimed:

Nobody is allowed to remain hungry under the caliphate. For example, the caliph, who will sit in Bishkek, will put me in charge to look after the local population here. If I have one hungry family and do not do anything about it, then the caliph will punish me for not looking after my people”.²⁷

E. GOVERNMENT RESPONSES

Obviously, official responses to the Hizb-ut-Tahrir have varied across the region. Uzbekistan has consistently taken the hardest line, and its security services have often drawn little distinction between the IMU and the Hizb-ut-Tahrir when conducting arrests and torture of those suspected of extremism. As noted in earlier ICG reports, widespread crackdowns on all forms of religious expression are common, and despite limited releases of prisoners under an amnesty in 2001, thousands still languish in intolerable conditions in the country’s jails. Friends and families of those apprehended have also often been subjected to interrogation and extortion. The Hizb-ut-Tahrir has become a good source of income for policemen able to threaten members or potential members, further discrediting law enforcement officials.

While imprisonment of large numbers of Hizb-ut-Tahrir members seems likely to be counterproductive in the long run, it has clearly had some effect on the organisation’s ability to recruit new members and carry out propaganda activities. But the movement has also had considerable success in recruiting members inside prisons. Though both the Uzbek and Kyrgyz authorities have attempted to isolate

²⁶ ICG interview, May 2001.

²⁷ ICG interview, May 2001.

members from other prisoners, it is clear that many first become involved while in confinement. Many officials in the region understand that this hard-line approach is building up problems for the future. But the high level of influence of security services in all the Central Asian states has prevented any serious re-examination of policy.

Given the scope of extended families in the region, it is also important to note that even the imprisonment of a single person in a *mahalla* (neighbourhood) can stir sympathy and resentment among many people. If caught by police, members are expected to admit their association with Hizb-ut-Tahrir. This act of admitting membership and the associated open criticism of the government is considered to be the highest level of bravery. The imprisonment of Hizb-ut-Tahrir members generates considerable publicity for the organisation and has galvanised support in many social strata and age groups. The fact that people are frequently recruited through friends and acquaintances also paves the ground for a less critical assessment of the Hizb-ut-Tahrir.

In October 2001, President Karimov made clear that he would not soften his stance anytime soon, stating:

Indifference to, and tolerance of, those with evil intentions who are spreading various fabrications, handing out leaflets, committing theft and sedition in some neighbourhood and who are spreading propaganda on behalf of religion should be recognised as supporters of evildoers.²⁸

The failure of the Karimov government to distinguish between moderate Islamist forces in Uzbekistan and more radical elements only tends to radicalise larger and larger segments of the religious community.

In contrast to its Central Asian neighbours, Kyrgyzstan has been relatively liberal in its dealings with the Hizb-ut-Tahrir. Whereas in Tajikistan, members are sentenced to an average of eight to twelve years in prison for “anti-

governmental activities”, they receive an average of two to four years in Kyrgyzstan, and are more often fined than imprisoned. President Askar Akaev and other officials have suggested that there may be some room for dialogue with the movement. The Kyrgyzstan government does monitor the group closely – indeed it has a list of 500 suspected members in Osh district alone, according to Interior Ministry officials.²⁹

Nevertheless, the head of the National Security Service (SNB) in Osh oblast, Marat Imankulov, has said that he does not favour strong-arm methods and believes that local imams should be at the forefront of educational work among believers.³⁰ Unfortunately, many clergy are not well educated enough to conduct a real dialogue with Hizb-ut-Tahrir organisers. The Kyrgyz government has also taken a more careful approach to the Hizb-ut-Tahrir because of its potential to spark renewed ethnic tensions between ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Kyrgyz in the southern part of the country.

Uzbekistan has placed substantial pressure on the Kyrgyz government to crack down on the Hizb-ut-Tahrir and other Islamist groups. This was particularly true after the February 1999 mass arrests in Uzbekistan, following which several Hizb-ut-Tahrir members were also apprehended in Kyrgyzstan. In several instances ethnic Uzbeks have been arrested in Kyrgyzstan and then handed over to Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan has built up an intelligence network in cross-border provinces and there have been cases where ethnic Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan have been kidnapped and taken to Uzbekistan by security officers.

Although there were signs of a harsher policy emerging in Kyrgyzstan in 2000-2001, prison sentences for Hizb-ut-Tahrir membership remain the exception.³¹ Increased use of law enforcement agencies has had some effect in limiting Hizb-ut-Tahrir propaganda activities but most evidence suggests that the movement continues to expand.

²⁹ ICG Interview, Osh, 28 January 2002.

³⁰ Oibek Khamidov, “Dvoynaya igra imamov” [The Imams’ Double Game], *Vechernii Bishkek* [Evening Bishkek], 28 January 2002.

³¹ In Osh in 2001, according to local Interior Ministry figures, out of 44 activists brought to trial, only eight were sentenced to prison terms of one to five years, while the remainder were either fined or released.

²⁸ “Behind Uzbekistan's Border – Intolerance”, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 16 October 2001.

Leaflets increasingly appear not only in the Uzbek language but also in Kyrgyz and Russian. However, Hizb-ut-Tahrir seems to be operating in considerably more secrecy than formerly also in Kyrgyzstan, which not only threatens possibly more radicalisation, but also makes it difficult for the authorities and others to remain in touch with the movement's aims and tactics.

The Kyrgyz authorities appear split between embracing Uzbekistan's heavy-handed tactics and a more moderate approach based on dialogue. At the moment, they follow a mixed policy: open to dialogue, while simultaneously cracking down on Hizb-ut-Tahrir members locally (and trying to secure the support of various institutions and groups of the population for a wider attack on the movement³²). There are also vested bureaucratic interests in the government structures that have used the Hizb-ut-Tahrir 'threat' to broaden their own powers. The National Security Service and the Interior Ministry have both advocated a harder line, and there is some dissatisfaction among police and security forces that harsher methods have not been adopted.

Sheikh Sadiq Q. Kamal Al-Deen, the director of Kyrgyzstan's Islamic Centre of Islamic Cooperation, stressed that local and national government officials often seek consultations with him and other eminent clergymen on how to build a strategy to combat religious extremism. He said:

I am satisfied that our president will not allow a repeat of what happens in our neighbouring countries. Our advice brings good fruits, and I believe we will be able to prevent tragic events if the government escapes politicising the Hizb-ut-Tahrir issue. We need to counter them ideologically, but not with suppression.³³

There is a danger, however, that the stress on 'anti-terrorism' in international policies after 11 September will be interpreted by some

government members as sufficient reason to intensify repression against Hizb-ut-Tahrir.

The Tajik authorities have taken a much stronger line against Hizb-ut-Tahrir members, whose numbers have grown rapidly since 1999, mainly in the northern Sughd Province (formerly Leninabad). The first mass arrests took place in early 2000, when not only those suspected of membership were arrested, but often all the men in a suspect's family.³⁴ The growth of Hizb-ut-Tahrir in Sughd Province has surprised some observers, since the northern regions are traditionally the most secular in Tajikistan. But much of the growth is among ethnic Uzbeks, and the movement is seen by many Tajiks as an external phenomenon.

However, part of the reason for its success is disillusionment with the country's legal Islamist opposition – the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP). Co-option of IRP leaders by the government has left a gap in the political spectrum for more radical Islamist groups to fill. The heavy-handed government response can also be traced to the mistrust of political Islam among many in the security services and the elite's fear of potential destabilisation of a fragile peace process.³⁵

Opposition politicians fear that the government response is storing up problems for the future. The former Chairman of the Democratic Party, Jumaboi Niyozov, told ICG: "Party activists are put in jail and in five years' time they will be out of prison. In prison they not only get in touch with (radical) Islamist theory but also with elements from the criminal world. Once they are out of jail they will form groups and look for sponsors".³⁶

In all three countries, government responses may result only partly from real security concerns. For example, there have been suggestions that the rush of arrests in Tajikistan's Sughd Province in 2000 (about 400 charges were brought)³⁷ was provoked primarily by the desire of local officials

³⁴ ICG interview with human rights activists, Dushanbe, 5 December 2001.

³⁵ See ICG Asia Report No. 30, *Tajikistan: An Uncertain Peace*, 24 December 2001.

³⁶ ICG Interview. Khujand. 1 August 2001.

³⁷ ICG Interview, human rights activist from Khodjand, Ravshanoi Makhkamova, Osh, December 2000.

³² This has included using "people's patrols", a Soviet-era tactic involving vigilante tactics to prevent leaflet distribution. The tactic seems to have had limited effect.

³³ ICG interview, 5 June 2001.

to gain influence. Sentencing of party activists (for an average of eight to twelve years) was notably more severe than in Dushanbe, where average sentences were three to five years. Tellingly, the bribe required to get a case dropped (approximately U.S.\$500) was higher in Sughd Province than in either Dushanbe or Kyrgyzstan.³⁸

There is little talk in Tajikistan of dialogue with the movement although the legal Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) could potentially serve as an intermediary. However, government officials interviewed by ICG firmly rejected moving away from hard-line methods, and the IRP has been cautious in its relations with the Hizb-ut-Tahrir. In 2001 several members of the IRP in Sughd were charged falsely with Hizb-ut-Tahrir membership. They were released after the IRP leadership intervened, but such cases will further distance moderate Islamic movements from Hizb-ut-Tahrir.

IV. CONCLUSION

Looking toward the future, it will be important for the governments in the region, and the international community, to deal with the fundamental causes that drive the current social turmoil. As long as economic progress remains stalled and political systems are only democratic in the most rhetorical sense, more extreme Islamist organisations will be able to broaden their appeal – whether they be the Hizb-ut-Tahrir, the IMU or others.

Judging by the dynamics of the movement over the past few years, the Hizb-ut-Tahrir will continue to grow unless governments in the region take a different approach. Given the statements made privately by some members to the effect that they regret they are not allowed to use violence, their sympathy with the IMU and the fact that the movement recruits unemployed, uneducated young people, there is a chance the Hizb-ut-Tahrir will eventually be transformed into a more militant movement. The likelihood of this happening depends to some extent on the states' policies toward the movement and on general socio-economic conditions.

Much will depend on policies concerning religious freedom across the region and the general state of civil society. Although there is widespread support to tackle terrorism, if the international community allows the rule of law to continue to be obviated throughout Central Asia, the long-term consequences will be grim.

The Hizb-ut-Tahrir's relationship with the IMU deserves special attention. While Hizb-ut-Tahrir members deny substantial links with the other organisation, they also admit the closeness of their goals. There have been reports of meetings between the leaderships in the past, and comments from Namangani of support for Hizb-ut-Tahrir. Since many former IMU fighters may now be looking for a new affiliation and leadership, the Hizb-ut-Tahrir could offer an attractive new home, increasing the potential for the Hizb-ut-Tahrir to become more radical.

However, particularly given the international military force that was brought to bear on the IMU, the Hizb-ut-Tahrir leadership will likely maintain its public embrace of non-violence in

³⁸ ICG interviews, December 2001.

the near-term. On the other hand, ordinary members who have joined because they oppose governments in the region may leave if a violent alternative group like the IMU were to reappear. Either way, until the underlying conditions that produced these movements are addressed, Central

Asia will be challenged by a variety of radical Islamist movements intent on destroying the existing order.

Osh/Brussels, 30 January 2002

APPENDIX A

MAP OF UZBEKISTAN AND NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES





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