

Islam in Central Asia: The Emergence and Growth of Radicalism in the Post- Communist Era¹

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The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 allowed for the revival of Islam in the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan after seventy years of religious repression. Despite long-standing efforts by the Soviet regime to eliminate religious identity across the empire, the Central Asian populations maintained Islamic beliefs and traditions that had been handed down over centuries. The collapse of Communism and opening of state borders not only offered Central Asian Muslims new opportunities to practice their faith, but also allowed for the importation and development of radical forms of Islam.² Although the majority of Central Asian Muslims do not support radical Islam, radical Islamic movements have attracted followers among a growing minority of the population. Increased support for radical Islam in Central Asia over the past decade has been attributed to foreign influences, coupled with a rise in government corruption and oppression, and deteriorating economic conditions. Radical Islamic groups active in Central Asia have capitalized on public discontent and provided a voice of opposition to the secular authoritarian governments. Regional rulers have responded by outlawing all non-government sanctioned Islamic activity and have cracked down aggressively against both Islamic organizations and their followers.

Radical Islam in Central Asia also has attracted U.S. attention, particularly in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks. In 2001, the Central Asian states found themselves on the front lines of the global war on terrorism, as a U.S.-led coalition entered neighboring Afghanistan

to topple the hard-line Islamic Taliban regime. The Taliban was a known sponsor of al Qaeda—the network held responsible for the attacks on U.S. targets—and maintained ties to radical Islamic elements active in Central Asia. Central Asian leaders offered varying degrees of assistance to the U.S.-led Operation *Enduring Freedom* in an effort to enhance ties with the United States and further their fight against “Islamic terrorists” whom they blamed for anti-government activities at home. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan were particularly active in this effort, offering the U.S. military basing rights in support of the operation. Although U.S.-led action in Afghanistan ultimately disrupted Taliban sponsorship of radical Islamic activity in Central Asia, Islamic radicalism continues to draw support from Central Asian populations.

This chapter will examine the roots of Islam in Central Asia and provide a brief historical overview of the changing relationship between Islam and the Central Asian peoples. This background is essential for understanding the emergence and growth of radical Islam in Central Asia since the early 1990s. The chapter will also examine the three Islamic elements that have had the greatest impact on Central Asia in recent years, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT), and the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP). Finally, it will seek to answer two questions: Why is radical Islam being embraced by a growing segment of Central Asian populations today? Does support for radical Islam in Central Asia pose a threat to regional regimes and/or U.S. interests in the region?

A Brief History of Islam in Central Asia

Early History

The radical Islamic elements that have gained support in Central Asia over the past decade differ greatly from strains of Islam indigenous to the region. Since Central Asian Islam traditionally has diverged from Islam found in other parts of the world, including the Middle East, Asia, and Africa, the recent drive toward radicalism in the region must be viewed in the context of the global Islamic movement.³ However, before examining the factors that have given rise to radical Islam in Central Asia in the 1990s, one must briefly consider the history of Islam in the region. This history demonstrates that Islam has served and continues to serve as an important part of Central Asian identity. Although the populations of Central Asia have long embraced Islam, the identity has played a limited role as a vehicle for political mobilization. Given this history, the question arises as to whether

or not radical Islam will serve as a mobilizing factor in Central Asia in the twenty-first century.

The path of Islam in Central Asia has been one of continuity and change. Islamic traditions have been passed down for centuries, despite periods of repression of the faith. The religion was first introduced to Central Asia in the seventh century by Arab invaders arriving from the Middle East. It was not until the ninth century, however, that Islam was adopted by local rulers and became the predominant religion in the region. During this period, Islam was promoted from the top down, rather than forced upon the Central Asian populations by foreign conquerors.⁴ Central Asian rulers viewed their endorsement of Islam and its acceptance among the people as one means of creating and maintaining their bases of power. Support for Islam continued to grow in the tenth century, with the cities of Samarkand and Bukhara in present-day Uzbekistan becoming great centers of Islamic learning and culture.⁶

The majority of Central Asian Muslims embraced Sunni Islam, although Shia Muslims also can be found throughout the region. Shia minorities exist primarily in Tajikistan, but also have a presence in the cities of Bukhara and Samarkand.⁶ Sunni Islam was first embraced by the settled populations of today's Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, while the nomadic peoples of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan maintained stronger ties to their pre-Islamic culture and beliefs. Sunni Islam eventually spread to Central Asia's nomadic populations by incorporating local traditions and aspects of Sufism—an indigenous form of Islamic mysticism.⁷ Sufism appealed to the nomadic peoples by emphasizing a direct experience with God, as well as preaching tolerance and respect for other forms of worship.⁹ Early differences in how Islam was embraced in Central Asia continue to be reflected in local practices in the region. In the twenty-first century, identification with Islam remains stronger in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan than in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan.⁹

Islam under Soviet Rule

Islam was an important aspect of Central Asian culture up to and including the period of Russian colonization of the region in the nineteenth century. Central Asian Muslims did not begin to experience repression at the hands of the Russians until after the Bolsheviks came to power at the end of World War I. In the 1920s, the Soviet state launched an attack on Islamic beliefs, traditions, and institutions as it initiated the process of replacing religion with a new form of “scientific atheism.”¹⁰ The crack down on Islamic identity coincided with Soviet leader Josef Stalin's

creation of the five Central Asian republics between 1924 and 1936. The republics, including Uzbekistan (1924), Turkmenistan (1924), Tajikistan (1929), Kazakhstan (1936), and Kyrgyzstan (1936), had not existed previously as separate entities and had no historical basis for division. According to Martha Brill Olcott, Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “Stalin drew the map of Soviet Central Asia not with an eye to consolidating natural regions, but rather for the purpose of reducing the prospects for regional unity.”¹¹ Upon division, the five republics contained multiple ethnic groups, which had not yet come to view themselves as independent nationalities. As part of a larger effort to eliminate loyalty to the Islamic identity and replace it with loyalties to the newly formed republics, purges of the Muslim leadership also took place throughout the 1920s and 1930s.¹²

Official hostility toward Islam in the Soviet Union lifted slightly following World War II. The Soviet policy of suppression, which had marked the earlier period, turned to one of religious co-optation. Soviet authorities attempted to regulate Islam by creating an “official” authorized version of the religion. A Muslim Religious Board was formed and charged with overseeing “Official Islam” in the Central Asian republics. This body was one of four religious boards established in the Soviet Union. Despite these efforts to suppress and then co-opt Islam, the religion continued to serve as an important marker of identity for the Central Asian populations. Central Asian Muslims also continued to practice their own unofficial or “parallel Islam” underground.¹³

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 marked another significant turning point for Islam in Central Asia. The mobilization of thousands of Central Asian men to fight in the Soviet army against the Afghan *Mujahedeen* put many Soviet Muslims in contact with foreign Muslims for the first time. The Central Asian Muslims were impressed by the commitment the Afghan people had for Islam. They also recognized shared ethnic and linguistic ties with the people they were fighting. This reminded them of how the Soviet Union had incorporated their lands and deprived them of their true identity and national pride.¹⁴ Contacts that were made between Central Asians and Muslims from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia during this period later would weigh heavily on the resurgence of Islam in Central Asia, following the breakup of the Soviet Union.

The relationship between Islam and Central Asia again entered a new phase with President Mikhail Gorbachev’s rise to power in the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s. Along with the introduction of Gorbachev’s policies of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) came greater religious

freedom. Gorbachev's reforms led to a religious revival in which many Central Asian Muslims were allowed to make a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia for the first time. The reforms also allowed outside Islamic influences to begin filtering into Central Asia. Foreign Islamic governments, organizations, and individuals began sending money to Central Asia to fund the construction of new mosques and reinvigorate Islamic practices.¹⁵ These influences would come to play an important role in the development of radical Islam in Central Asia in the 1990s.

The Rise of Radical Islam in Central Asia Post-Independence

External Factors

The renewed interest in Islam that developed in Central Asia in the 1980s gained momentum following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Although the Soviet state actively tried to destroy the multiple loyalties of clan, family, republic, and religion, Islam remained an important source of identity for many Central Asians. Communism had promoted the idea that religion was incompatible with the Soviet ideology. Now that the ideology was discredited by the collapse of the Soviet empire, a new opportunity emerged for Central Asians to embrace their Islamic past.¹⁶

Once the Central Asian republics' borders were open to the world, among the first visitors were Islamic missionaries from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. Pakistan and Afghanistan played a particularly significant role in influencing the revival and radicalization of Islam in Central Asia.¹⁷ In addition to providing funding and religious training to support mosques and *madrassas* (religious schools), these sources distributed free copies of the Koran, which had been translated into Russian and other Central Asian languages.¹⁸

Sources in Saudi Arabia also contributed to the rise of Islam in Central Asia. In early 1990, these sources funded the development of *Adolat* (Justice)¹⁹—an Islamic movement that arose in the Uzbek part of the Ferghana Valley.²⁰ The movement worked not only to introduce Islam, but also to expose corruption and social injustice among the ruling regime. *Adolat* quickly gained support and began to spread across the Ferghana Valley in 1991. However, by March 1992, following the break up of the Soviet Union, the movement was banned by independent Uzbek authorities.²¹ Leaders of this movement then fled to Tajikistan where they helped prepare for the Tajik civil war.

In addition to developing schools, mosques, and movements inside Central Asia, foreign actors also provided opportunities for future mem-

bers of the radical IMU and HT to receive religious training abroad.²² Through their activities, supporters of the Taliban in Afghanistan, militants in Pakistan, and followers of the Wahhabi movement (an extreme Sunni Islamic doctrine) found in Saudi Arabia, brought new strains of Islam to the region. These strains differed greatly from the form of Islam that had long-standing roots in Central Asia.

Internal Factors

Although external factors played a significant role in the emergence of radical Islam in Central Asia, they have not been alone in affecting the changing nature of Islam in the region. If there were not fertile ground for the radicalization of Islam in Central Asia, foreign radical elements would have been unable to attract support among the local populations. Support for radical Islam in Central Asia developed in large part as a form of opposition to authoritarian governments in the region. As government corruption and oppression increased and economic conditions deteriorated throughout the 1990s, segments of the Central Asian population viewed radical Islam as an alternative to the status quo. Not surprisingly, the rise of radical groups has been most pronounced in Uzbekistan where government repression has been most severe. There also has been a strong show of support for radical Islamic movements in northern Tajikistan and southern Kyrgyzstan, particularly among ethnic Uzbeks who have experienced discrimination based on their ethnicity.²³

Immediately following the collapse of communism, Central Asian leaders initiated the restoration of mosques and other symbols of Islam as a means of distinguishing themselves from the Soviet system and increasing their legitimacy among the local populations. As evidence of their use of Islam to gain support, Central Asian leaders, including Uzbek President Islam Karimov, made the pilgrimage to Mecca and were sworn into office on the Koran.²⁴ Although Central Asian leadership made an effort to re-embrace Islam, the regimes kept a watchful eye on religious activity. This was particularly true in southern parts of Central Asia where Islam had developed deeper ties, such as in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and the Ferghana Valley region of Kyrgyzstan.²⁵

As it became clear that Islam was growing in importance and providing Central Asians a link with their past, regional rulers increasingly came to view Islam as a threat rather than an avenue for harnessing support for their leadership. The ruling elites wanted to ensure that Islam would not develop into a base of political opposition and, therefore, began to repress

Islam, as had been the tradition under the Soviet system. This reaction, in turn, pushed some moderate Muslims to embrace more radical views.²⁶

The failure of Central Asian leaders to introduce democratic and/or economic reforms, coupled with the repression of Islam, increased support for radical Islamic elements.²⁷ Participating in radical activities also has provided many Central Asian youth with a sense of purpose and accomplishment not available elsewhere, given the lack of jobs and educational opportunities. The Central Asian governments must address these systemic issues, if the trend toward radicalism is to be halted.

Central Asian Government Responses to Radical Islam

The Central Asian regimes have been deeply concerned by the rise in radical Islam, which they attribute to meddling from Islamic movements abroad. Despite their shared concerns, the leaders of the Central Asian republics have responded differently to the emergence and growth of radical Islam in the region. Uzbek President Islam Karimov introduced a swift and severe crackdown on Islamic activity beginning in the early 1990s. In 1992, Islamic supporters gathered in Namangan, Uzbekistan to directly challenge President Karimov's policies and demand the legalization of Islamic structures. In response to this pressure, Karimov outlawed *Adolat* and began to suppress the Islamic opposition.²⁸ Repression against Islam became even more severe following an alleged attempt on the President's life in February 1999. Although Karimov was not killed in a series of six car bombings that ripped through the capital city of Tashkent, 13 others were left dead and several more injured.²⁹ Karimov and other Central Asian leaders used this incident, as well as the previous outbreak of civil war in Tajikistan, to justify outlawing political opposition. Mass arrests were instituted in Uzbekistan followed by the subsequent torture of Islamic opponents. Karimov's response to Islam throughout the 1990s forced many Uzbek Muslims to flee to neighboring Tajikistan and Afghanistan, where they helped to form and strengthen the radical IMU—an ally of Afghanistan's Taliban.³⁰

As of 2003, President Karimov continues to keep a tight reign on Islamic activity in Uzbekistan. At present, an estimated 6,500 people are jailed in Uzbekistan due to their religious or political beliefs. Approximately half of those held have been accused of belonging to the radical Islamic movement HT, while the majority of the rest have been branded Wahhabis.³¹ Not only has Karimov jailed a large number of Muslims, but the Uzbek government—like the Soviet government before it—monitors the Spiritual Board of Muslims in Tashkent. In addition to monitoring the

Board, the state frequently dictates to official clergy what they may or may not say in their religious sermons.

The other states of Central Asia have introduced similar policies, though they vary in degree of severity. In Turkmenistan, laws on religion are very restrictive. Although Islam does not have strong roots as an organized religion in Turkmenistan, President Saparmurat Niyazov “has combined widespread repression of any independent religious activity with attempts to create a pseudo-Islamic spiritual creed centered on his own personality.”³² Turkmenistan has seen the number of mosques operating in the country rise from four during Soviet times to 318 in 2003. The spending of millions of dollars on mosque construction, however, has primarily been aimed at Niyazov’s “own glorification, rather than the religious needs of the people.”³³

Official response to radical Islam has been less in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, since these countries have not seen significant opposition from extremist groups. Unlike in Uzbekistan, religious communities have been tolerated in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, and laws on religion have remained more liberal. There have been arrests, however, particularly among individuals found distributing banned HT literature. In November 2002, Kyrgyz officials also introduced legislation restricting the licensing system for religious publications.³⁴

Tajikistan has taken a different approach to dealing with the rise of Islam than have the other countries in Central Asia. It is the only country in the region that did not outlaw the emergence of an Islamic political party. Shortly after Tajikistan gained independence, a civil war broke out between members of the Communist elite and the opposition, which had Islamic backing. Although this conflict led to the other Central Asian states banning opposition parties in their own countries, in the case of Tajikistan, the IRP ultimately was able to gain seats in the government as a result of the negotiated ceasefire.

While Tajikistan may appear to have taken a more moderate stance on Islamic participation than the other republics, it should be noted that many view the Islamic party in Tajikistan as having been co-opted by the government, and therefore not a true voice of opposition. Others argue that despite Tajikistan’s slightly more liberal laws on religion, compared to the other Central Asian republics, in reality the practice of respecting such laws has been undermined.³⁵ For example, the Tajik government requires the collection of 15,000 signatures for the building of a Mosque, whereas only 10 to 15 signatures are required to build a Christian church.³⁶ Tajik

authorities also have cracked down on the expression of Islam in Soghd, the Tajik-controlled territory of the Ferghana Valley.

Although the Central Asian governments have taken different approaches to the rise of radical Islam in their respective countries, each is cautious about what public support for radicalism might mean for their leadership. This concern has led to the arrest of thousands of ordinary practicing Muslims along with the militants. Not only have prisoners been subjected to long jail terms, but they also have been tortured at the hands of the regimes.³⁷ In an attempt to gain tacit support for their repressive practices, the Central Asian governments have argued that their domestic fight against Islamic radicalism is but a small part of the global war on terrorism. By violating human rights in the name of cracking down on “radical Islamists” and “terrorists,” however, regional rulers have strengthened support for the very opposition they have attempted to eliminate. The Central Asian leaders have tried to convince the United States that their secular, albeit authoritarian leadership, is the only alternative to the acceptance of radical Islam in the region.³⁸ This puts the United States in the position of choosing between two unwelcome options, and in the process legitimizing the actions of the current regimes.

Islamic Opposition in Central Asia

In order to translate support for radical Islam and opposition to regional governments into action, several organizations have been formed in Central Asia in support of radical ideals. These organizations differ in their tactics (violent vs. non-violent) as well as their goals (overthrow of existing government vs. becoming a viable opposition party). The three most significant organizations to emerge are the previously mentioned IMU, HT and IRP.

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

Among Islamic groups active in Central Asia, the IMU has received perhaps the most attention. Prior to the U.S.-led Operation *Enduring Freedom*, the IMU was considered the most radical Islamic organization operating in the region. The IMU was known to have close ties with the Taliban and had set up training bases in the north of Afghanistan. The IMU also reportedly was receiving financial backing from Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda network, as well as from Saudi Arabia. Given the IMU’s cooperation with known terrorists and involvement in violent attacks against regional regimes in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, the U.S. State

Department designated the group as a foreign terrorist organization in September 2000.³⁹

The IMU began forming in 1992-1993, when future IMU members fled Uzbekistan in response to President Karimov's crackdown on Islamic activities. Some of these members, including future IMU military leader Juma Namangani, fled to Tajikistan and joined the Islamic Tajik opposition (later United Tajik Opposition) in its fight against the Communist government of Tajikistan from 1992 to 1997.⁴⁰ During the course of the Tajik civil war, Uzbek fighters met up with Afghan groups and began forging relationships with members of both the Taliban and the Northern Alliance. This led to the initial military training of Uzbek fighters in Afghanistan.

The IMU was founded officially in 1998 by ethnic Uzbeks dissatisfied with the more moderate stances of the IRP in Tajikistan. The initial goal of the IMU was to topple the Uzbek leadership. The organization's mandate was later enlarged to include overthrowing all of the region's secular governments and replacing them with regimes based on *Shari'a* (Islamic law). The IMU promised to form a state in the Ferghana Valley—a center of Islamic traditionalism for centuries.⁴¹ In order to achieve their goal of removing Uzbek President Karimov from power, the IMU launched terrorist attacks against the Uzbek government in 1999, 2000, and 2001 from bases in neighboring Afghanistan and Tajikistan.⁴² Although the IMU mainly operated out of Afghanistan, the movement also had set up bases in Tajikistan prior to 2001 and the beginning of the U.S.-led Operation *Enduring Freedom*.⁴³

As of September 11, 2001, between 3,000 and 5,000 members of the IMU were believed to be operating in Central Asia. It was reported in early 2001 that the IMU had formed an umbrella organization called *Hezb-e Islami Turkestan* (Islamic Party of Turkestan) with the intention of expanding its areas of operation to include Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and China's Xinjiang region.⁴⁴ IMU activities were significantly curtailed by U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. In November 2001, the IMU's military commander, Juma Namangani, was killed in a U.S. attack, and its political leader went underground. Most observers argue that the IMU no longer poses a significant threat in Central Asia, having lost its bases in Afghanistan, as well as its Taliban and al Qaeda sponsors.⁴⁵ Although the IMU is no longer active in Afghanistan, it continues to maintain ties to the IRP, which remains active in Tajikistan.⁴⁶

Hizb-ut-Tahrir

HT, the Party of Islamic Liberation, is a second well-known Islamic movement that has taken hold in Central Asia and is steadily increasing its influence. It draws a large base of support among ethnic Uzbeks, as well as recruits among Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Tajiks. HT shares with the IMU the desire to overthrow the secular governments of Central Asia. In their place, HT proposes to introduce an Islamic Caliphate across present state borders in Central Asia similar to that established in seventh century Arabia following the death of the Prophet Mohammed. Like the IMU, HT does not offer a specific social, economic, or political agenda for governing the Caliphate. An important difference between HT and the IMU is that HT rejects violence as a means of bringing about political change. This has allowed the group to gain a broader base of followers than the IMU, which was in part discredited as a result of its support for violence.

The HT movement, headquartered in London, was first founded between 1952 and 1953 in the Middle East, and has since grown to operate in approximately forty countries worldwide. The movement was originally established by Palestinian activist Taqiuddin an-Nabhani Filastyni, who served as a judge in the Jerusalem appeals court. Filastyni's successor, Abd al-Kadim Zallum, oversaw the introduction of HT to Central Asia in 1995 when the party opened its headquarters in Uzbekistan. HT activities quickly spread to the Ferghana Valley between 1995 and 1996, where it has been particularly successful in attracting support. By 2000, HT activities had branched out further to include parts of northern Tajikistan and southern Kyrgyzstan. As of 2003, the organization claimed to have 80,000 members from across Central Asia.⁴⁷

HT originally drew its support from educated urban youth, mainly in Uzbekistan, who then helped to spread the HT message among poorer segments of the population living in rural areas.⁴⁸ HT has successfully drawn upon networks of family and clans in Central Asia, particularly in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, to recruit new members and increase participation in group activities. HT has relied on traditional social networks to distribute leaflets on HT goals. It also has developed a Web site to circulate information on the organization and its activities.⁴⁹ Although HT has increased its membership in recent years, there is little evidence that Central Asian Muslims support the introduction of *Shari'a*, or other strict Islamic practices as the organization advocates.⁵⁰ Instead, HT has gained support in Central Asia by serving as a voice of opposition in otherwise repressive political environments.

In response to growing popular support, the governments in Central Asia have cracked down on HT activities, and the organization has been banned across the region. In 2001, hundreds, if not thousands, of alleged HT members were arrested in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Despite the arrests, HT continues to attract followers, especially in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. In southern Kyrgyzstan, 10 percent of the population is believed to be involved in HT activities.⁵¹ The success of HT in Central Asia has been attributed in part to its ability to target its message to post-Soviet grievances. Unlike HT activities in London and elsewhere in the West, where the organization distributes leaflets and holds meetings denouncing the United States and Israel, in Central Asia the organization criticizes local governments for their inability to fight corruption, poverty, drug use, HIV/AIDS, and other social and economic ills. Since the outbreak of war with Iraq in 2003; however, there has been an increase of anti-Western/anti-U.S. sentiment expressed in HT literature being distributed in Central Asia.

HT has not been as broadly successful in Kazakhstan as it has been in other Central Asian countries, since Islam is not as widely embraced there as in the other former Soviet republics. Further, Kazakhstan's oil-economy has not left it in the dire conditions shared by other Central Asian states. Although HT is not likely to make significant inroads into Kazakhstan by capitalizing on poor economic conditions or anti-U.S./Western sentiment, support may be gained as popular disillusionment with Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev increases. There is evidence that HT has made some headway in Kazakhstan, where HT literature has become more aggressive since the recent war in Iraq. In April 2003, two members of HT were detained by Kazakh authorities in the South of the country for distributing leaflets with statements against the United States and its British ally.⁵²

Unlike the IMU, the United States has not designated HT to be a foreign terrorist organization, since it has not used violence to achieve its political goals. Although the United States distinguishes between the IMU and HT with respect to the "terrorist" label, the U.S. government continues to closely monitor HT activities.⁵³ There is concern that since the start of Operation *Enduring Freedom* and the global war on terrorism, the HT message has become increasingly militant. The fliers distributed by the group throughout Central Asia have begun to denounce the presence of coalition forces in Central Asia and have praised suicide attacks in Israel. Although HT has not been directly linked to involvement in violent activities, it is believed to incite violence, and could become a stepping-stone for disenfranchised youth who could be recruited into more violent Islamic

groups. Some also fear more radical members of HT could break away from the organization and promote the use of violence to increase the pace of reforms in Central Asia.

Islamic Renaissance Party

The IRP was established in 1991 as an outgrowth of Gorbachev's reforms for the purpose of protecting the Islamic identity of the Muslims in the former Soviet Union. Given its objective, the party was able to gain publicity not only in the Soviet Union, but also among academics and strategists in the West.⁵⁴ IRP sought to increase awareness and understanding of Muslims in the Soviet Union, while representing their voice within the Communist framework.⁵⁵ However, the party remained fragmented with regional branches introduced throughout the Soviet Union.

The IRP gained increased attention during the civil war in Tajikistan from 1992 to 1997. The party, which claimed to support a moderate, nationalist version of Islam, was part of a larger anti-government coalition active during the Tajik civil war.⁵⁶ Although many labeled the party "fundamentalist," the IRP sought to unite clans during the civil war, and did not use the party to push for establishment of an Islamic state in Tajikistan.⁵⁷ The IRP is the only legally recognized religious party in Central Asia and entered the Tajik government as a result of a peace agreement ending the conflict.⁵⁸ Since becoming part of the government, the IRP has kept its commitment to work within the constitutional framework of Tajikistan. IRP Deputy Chairman Muhiddin Kabiri has emerged as the face of the party. He says that the IRP supports the existence of a secular democratic Tajikistan, but notes that the party approves of increasing religious traditions and values in state political life. According to Kabiri, Turkey is an example of a state that has been able to incorporate these values and could serve as a model to other states in the region.⁵⁹

Although IRP has entered the Tajik government, its position as a voice of opposition has been weakened. Tajik President Imomali Rakhmonov has increasingly consolidated power in his own hands. While the ruling elite continues to view the IRP as "too Islamic for the government," radical Islamic forces have accused the party of selling-out to the state's interests. According to Kabiri, this view could serve to benefit radical Islamic elements, which can attract support from a population that continues to view itself as having little to no voice in general.⁶⁰

Some observers have argued that the success of the IRP in working within the Tajik coalition government must not go unnoticed. Referring to IRP's participation in Tajikistan's governance, President of the Eur-

asia Foundation Charles Maynes said, “Unfortunately, the world largely ignored this experiment, the success of which could have had profound implications for the way that the Western world reacts to resurgent political Islam elsewhere . . . The Tajik example could well inform political developments in the region and elsewhere—and should help define Western perceptions of Islam.”⁶¹ Although Tajikistan continues to face multiple political and economic challenges, there is evidence that it remains one of the more open countries in Central Asia.

U.S. Interest in Central Asia and the Future

No single factor can fully explain the emergence and rise of radical Islam in Central Asia. The states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have faced multiple and varied internal and external pressures since gaining independence, which have contributed to differing levels of support for Islamic radicalism. These pressures include: increasing government corruption and repression, declining economic conditions, and growing influence from foreign Islamic elements. The rise in popular support for radical Islamic groups in Central Asia can be viewed as a sign of discontent with the status quo, rather than a voice in support of Islamic government and radical views. The majority of Central Asian Muslims do not support the end of the secular state and many perceive radical Islamic groups as a threat to state and regional stability.

Scholars and practitioners continue to debate the nature of the threat posed by radical Islamic elements in Central Asia to regional regimes and/or U.S. interests. The majority of the Central Asian regimes have labeled all non-government sanctioned Islamic activity as “radical” and banned Islamic groups as “terrorist” organizations. The United States should guard against this hardline approach and consider that not all forms of Islam are dangerous or antithetical to U.S. interests. This is especially true in Central Asia, where Islam has long been respected as a tolerant religion and an important source of identity. In order to combat the spread of radical Islam in the region, the U.S. government and the Central Asian regimes should work to promote and incorporate moderate strains of Islam in a way that does not allow it to destroy the current order.⁶² By banning all unauthorized Islamic activity, the regional regimes have effectively eliminated independent, moderate voices of Islam, which could be used to attract people away from radical groups and activities.⁶³

In order to neutralize the influence of radical Islamic elements in Central Asia, significant political and economic changes also are needed. The introduction of reforms leading to political change and economic

growth could lessen the appeal of radical Islamic organizations as a voice of opposition in Central Asia. However, if the current regimes disregard the worsening political and economic conditions, membership in organizations such as HT will grow and could have an increasingly destabilizing effect. Another danger is that HT or other radical Islamic groups could resort to violence in order to ensure that their message is heard.⁶⁴

The United States is likely to maintain a long-term interest in Central Asia, given the region's strategic location, natural resources, and contributions to the global war on terrorism. While the United States seeks to maintain stability in Central Asia, it must not be perceived as blindly backing authoritarian secular governments without recognizing the need for opposition and reform. Recent global events have clearly demonstrated the importance of encouraging voices of moderation, while simultaneously promoting state stability. The United States does not want to see a situation in Central Asia where the only alternative to authoritarian regimes is radical Islam.

Notes

¹ The views expressed in this chapter are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of DFI Government Services or the U.S. government. The author would like to thank Daniel Burghart, Sylvia Babus, Daniel Chiu, and Erin Craycraft for their comments on this chapter.

² In this chapter, the term "radical" refers to anti-Western forms of Islam that espouse the overthrow of secular regimes and introduction of *Shari'a* (Islamic law). It is recognized that the majority of Central Asian Muslims do not support this radical strain of Islam, though there is concern that support may rise and, in turn, threaten regional regimes and U.S. interests.

³ Radical Islamic movements are not entirely new to Central Asia. For example, during WWI, Islamic militants forcefully opposed Russian government attempts to deploy Muslims to work near the front. Again in the 1920s, Muslim partisans in the so-called *Basmachi* movement opposed the takeover and advance of Soviet power into Central Asia. See Fiona Hill, "Central Asia: Terrorism, Religious Extremism, and Regional Stability," *Testimony before the House Committee on International Relations Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia* (July 23, 2003), 2.

⁴ Nazif Shahrani, *The Islamization of Central Asia: Politics, Economics and Society*, Woodrow Wilson Conference Participant June 11, 2003.

⁵ The cities of Samarkand and Bukhara grew in wealth and prestige as a result of their location along the Silk Road, the trade route between the West and East. See Edward W. Walker, "Roots of Rage: Militant Islam in Central Asia," *Panel presentation at the University of California, Berkeley* (October 29, 2001), 1-9. Available at <<http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~isees/>>, accessed July 2003.

⁶ Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 26.

⁷ Walker, 3.

⁸ Rashid, *Jihad*, 27.

⁹ Walker, 3.

¹⁰ Shahrani

¹¹ "A History of Islam in Central Asia, Part II," July 25, 2002. Available at <<http://www.muslim-uzbekistan.com/eng/ennews/2002/07/ennews25072002.html>>, accessed July 6, 2003.

¹² Walker, 3.

- ¹³ Walker, 4.
- ¹⁴ Rashid, *Jihad*, 6.
- ¹⁵ Walker, 4.
- ¹⁶ Rashid, *Jihad*, 5.
- ¹⁷ Rashid, "Islam in Central Asia: Afghanistan and Pakistan," 213.
- ¹⁸ Rashid, *Jihad*, 5.
- ¹⁹ Michael Fredholm, *Uzbekistan & the Threat From Islamic Extremism*, Conflict Studies Research Centre (England: Defense Academy of the United Kingdom), 3.
- ²⁰ The Ferghana Valley encompasses bordering areas of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan and claims a population of more than 10 million.
- ²¹ Fredholm, 3.
- ²² Rashid, *Jihad*, 10.
- ²³ Hill, 1.
- ²⁴ Shireen Hunter, *The Islamization of Central Asia: Politics, Economics and Society*, Woodrow Wilson Conference Participant, June 11, 2003.
- ²⁵ Svante E. Cornell and Regine A. Spector, "Central Asia: More than Islamic Extremists," *The Washington Quarterly* (Winter 2002), 194.
- ²⁶ Rashid, *Jihad*, 11.
- ²⁸ *Central Asia: Islam and the State*, (Osh/Brussels: International Crisis Group, July 10, 2003), 4.
- ²⁹ Walker, 7.
- ³⁰ *Central Asia: Islam and the State*, i.
- ³² "Islam in Central Asia: Contrasts between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan," *The Economist* (May 15, 2003). Available at <<http://www.uzland.uz/2003/may/16/11.htm>>, accessed July 6, 2003.
- ³³ *Central Asia: Islam and the State*, i.
- ³⁴ Mike Redman, "Hizb-ut-Tahrir: Making Inroads into Kazakhstan?," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst* (June 4, 2003). Available at <http://www.cacianalyst.org/view_article.php?articleid=1460>, accessed July 6, 2003.
- ³⁵ *Central Asia: Islam and the State*, i.
- ³⁶ Hunter.
- ³⁷ Rashid, *Jihad*, 8.
- ³⁸ Rajan Menon, "The New Great Game in Central Asia," *Survival* 45(2003), 191.
- ³⁹ "Frequently Asked Questions about U.S. Policy in Central Asia," *U.S. Department of State Fact Sheet: Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs* (November 27, 2002). Available at <<http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/fs/15562.htm>>, accessed July 6, 2003.
- ⁴⁰ Cornell and Spector, 196.
- ⁴¹ Fredholm, 2.
- ⁴² Rashid, *Jihad*, 8.
- ⁴³ "Frequently Asked Questions about U.S. Policy in Central Asia"
- ⁴⁴ Fredholm, 10.
- ⁴⁵ "Islam in Central Asia: Contrasts between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan"
- ⁴⁶ Cornell and Spector, 196.
- ⁴⁷ Fredholm, 13.
- ⁴⁸ "Frequently Asked Questions about U.S. Policy in Central Asia"
- ⁴⁹ For more information on Hizb-ut-tahrir see www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org
- ⁵⁰ David Lewis, ICG. Guest speaker at the Brookings Institution on July 11, 2003.
- ⁵¹ Cornell and Spector, 200.
- ⁵² Redman.
- ⁵³ "Frequently Asked Questions about U.S. Policy in Central Asia"
- ⁵⁴ "A History of Islam in Central Asia, Part III," July 27, 2002. Available at <<http://www.muslim-uzbekistan.com/eng/ennews/2002/07/ennews27072002.html>> accessed July 6, 2003.
- ⁵⁵ "A History of Islam in Central Asia, Part III"

- ⁵⁶ “Islam in Central Asia: Contrasts between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan”
- ⁵⁷ “A History of Islam in Central Asia, Part III”
- ⁵⁸ Neighboring Uzbekistan was disturbed by this development.
- ⁵⁹ “Islam in Central Asia: Contrasts between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan”
- ⁶¹ Charles William Maynes, “America Discovers Central Asia,” *Foreign Affairs*, 82 (2003), 120-132.
- ⁶² Cornell and Spector, 203.
- ⁶³ Azizulla, ICG. Presenter at the Brookings Institution on July 11, 2003.
- ⁶⁴ Cornell and Spector, 203.