

## Islamic Militancy in Central Asia: Its Origins and Its Future

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### Abstract:

*The paper seeks to examine the emergence and evolution of militant Islam in Central Asia. While undertaking the foreign influences on development of militant strain of Islam in Central Asian states, the paper also takes into account other equally important factors: corruption, authoritarianism and bad governance in those states. Furthermore, a brief introduction of various Islamic militant groups active in the Central Asian states is also given.*

**Key words:** Central Asia, Militant Islam, Jihad, IMU, Uzbekistan

### Introduction:

This paper examines the phenomenon of Islamic militancy in the Central Asian states, and argues two propositions in this regard: one, that militant Islam is ideologically alien and antagonistic to the indigenous form of Islam that prevails (to this day) in Central Asia, and that the phenomenon of militant Islam within the Central Asian states has been cultivated externally as a foreign policy tool by certain states. The second proposition is that despite its foreign roots, militant Islam has become a political reality in Central Asia, and even if it is not a popular phenomenon, it has certainly won many people's admiration and tacit support – and also the active support of

many – primarily due to the failure of the Central Asian states to move away from authoritarianism, centralization, economic stagnation, and suppression of their people.

A proper understanding of the phenomenon of militant Islam requires a thorough investigation of the political, social, cultural, and economic factors which have influenced the trajectory of Central Asia and the corresponding changes that were taking place in the societies of each of the Central Asian states before, during, and after Central Asia's incorporation into the Soviet empire. Though the history of Islam in Central Asia long pre-dates the Soviet era, this paper will be forced to restrict itself to a brief examination of the fate of Islam and the Muslim regions in Central Asia under Soviet rule. The paper moves on to describe the major Islamic movements which have held influence in Central Asia – the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and the Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT) - and investigates their social and political impacts on their respective spheres of influence. The paper concludes with the acknowledgement that the civil war in Afghanistan has emerged as the single-most significant external factor in determining the course that militant Islam will take in Central Asia, while stressing the need for internal changes in the Central Asian states if they wish to stem the rise of militant Islam and establish peace and stability in the region.

## **Islam in Soviet Central Asia**

The revival of Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia can only be understood in light of the history of the Soviet Muslim regions. When the Bolsheviks seized power in Moscow in 1917, Central Asia - then occupied by tsarist Russia - was already in a state of turmoil. The massive famine in 1916-17 accompanied by the conscription of Central Asians into the tsarist army to fight for them in World War I and severe repression of the people, resulted in revolts which quickly spread across Central Asia.

When the Communists came to power, the Basmachis (Muslims) resisted incorporation into the Soviet Union for almost a decade until their rebellion was finally crushed in 1929. Though the Bolsheviks formally acknowledged the right to self-determination of all nations, in practice this principle applied only to the Russian regions and not to other (non-Russian) peoples, ostensibly since this right was reserved for the 'proletariat' and Central Asia did not have a 'proletariat' in the classical sense at the time (Rashid 2002, 33). Initially in the form of pan-Turkism and the unity amongst Kazakh clans and tribes against Russian control, it was at this time that nationalism began to emerge in Central Asia.

In the initial years after the Russian Revolution, Muslim ideologues which supported the Communists in the hope of securing some degree of autonomy were tolerated, but only until the tsarists had been completely defeated. After establishing their dominance, the Bolsheviks set out to "re-conquer" Central Asia (Rashid 2002, 34). Stalin divided the Central Asian states not along geographical or ethnic lines as much as with the aim of suppressing dissent (Rashid 2002, 36), a move that was to create the basis for ethnic conflict in later years. The Soviet Union also closed its borders with Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, and China, thus cutting Central Asia off from the developments that were happening in the outside world.

During the Soviet period, Islam went underground in Central Asia. All religious activities were deemed 'bourgeois' and Islam was depicted as a reactionary, mullah-led, British conspiracy which was opposed to progressive ideas. Mosques were shut down, religious ceremonies were banned. However, when Stalin needed to project himself as not being 'anti-Muslim', and moreover required the support of the Soviet Muslim regions during WWII, he introduced "official Islam" (called thus by its critics), and two 'official' maddrassahs were opened in Tashkent and Bukhara. Gorbachev's 'crusade' against 'anti-modern' Islam was the last intense wave of the

Soviet repression of Islam.

However, despite the repression, Islam continued to flourish in the Soviet Muslim regions, mainly by concealing itself. The official line of the Soviet administration was that religious consciousness had been eliminated among the masses, but this line was maintained mainly through conscious deception of central authorities by the local administration (Malashenko in Naumkin 1990). People continued to pray in unregistered mosques, marriages were secretly sanctified by a mullah, and Islamic traditions were maintained in the daily lives of the people.

The mid-80s onwards, during the perestroika, Central Asia witnessed an 'Islamic Renaissance', a period which saw the emergence of militant Islam in the Central Asian states. The Islamic revival in these states is not surprising considering that the "unofficial Islam" had – as mentioned earlier – continued to be a part of people's lives. But in addition to this, a major reason for this revival can be found in the impacts of the Afghan War for which the Soviets drafted thousands of Central Asians to fight against the US-backed Afghan Mujahideen. Rather than developing a sense of solidarity with the Russians whose side they were fighting on, many of these young men returned "glowing with praise" for the Mujahideen (Rashid 2002, 5). (Juma Namangani, the founder of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, is an example). Meanwhile, the United States, Britain, Pakistan and other anti-Soviet states fuelled guerilla movements in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to cut Soviet supplies. Many Uzbeks and Tajiks were being brought secretly to Pakistan to study in madrassahs or train as guerillas to fight alongside the Mujahideen.

It is important to note here that the religious/ideological training that these fighters received in madrassahs was Deoband Islam, imported from Saudi Arabia. The Islam indigenous to Central Asia is of the Sufi tradition. However, it should also be noted that Central Asia is not a monolith, and various ethnic groups have co-existed in the region whilst

maintaining their respective traditions, civilizational associations, collective memories, and identities. The long-standing split between Uzbek and Tajik (i.e. Turkic and Persian) is significant in this regard, and can be seen at work even in the arena of their respective identifications with radical Islam. Tajikistan's Islamic opposition was more closely linked to the Tajik nationalism inspired by Ahmed Shah Masood, whereas the Uzbek militants gravitated towards the Pakistan-Saudi-Taliban inspired Wahhabism, an ideology which was explicitly aimed at destroying Sufism. It is for this reason that Wahhabism did not become popular in Central Asia, but consistent Saudi funding to the Afghan Mujahideen and to the madrassahs where many Central Asians received religious training slowly increased the influence of Wahhabi thought in these regions (Ahrari 1996, 50-52).

Pakistan deserves particular mention in this regard, as it has played a key role in the survival and flourishing of the Taliban. Islamabad's Afghan policy has been driven mainly by its animosity with India. Feeling threatened by the possibility of friendly relations between Afghanistan and India, Pakistan has wanted a friendly Pashtun government in Afghanistan since the 1950s. Since the 1980s, Afghanistan has been seen by Pakistan as a source of 'strategic depth' - as Pakistan's President General Zia-ul-Haq put it - in the event of a war in India. The United States, intent on destabilizing the Soviet Union and weakening its control in Central Asia, thus found a willing ally in Pakistan. The US funneled the finances for the militants (then called 'freedom fighters' by none less than Regan), through the Pakistani ISI, and young men from Afghanistan, Central Asia, and the Arab world were hosted and trained in Pakistan.

## **The Central Asian States at Independence**

When the Soviet Union was formally disbanded in 1991, and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) came into

being, Central Asia had seen a spate of violent protests in response to deteriorating economic conditions, ethnic tensions, and anti-Russian sentiments. The Central Asian leaders (who had not even been consulted about this major development) thus found themselves in a fix. While their peoples were far from 'upset' about this development, the leaders were almost in mourning because of the extreme dependence of these states on the Soviet Union. Their entire infrastructure – from telephone lines, electricity grids and oil pipelines to roads and military bases – was tied to Russia. The economy of the Central Asian states was also heavily dependent on Russia, which was the major market for its exports and also the main supplier of the resources required by these states to maintain their industry and agriculture. Moreover, the Central Asian leaders – most of whom were highly 'Sovietized' and heavily dependent on the Soviet Union, rather than their own people, as the source of their strength – were confronted with a plethora of potential threats to the status-quo now that their protector had abandoned them: the pressure of free-market capitalism, a revival of nationalism amongst the people, and radical Islam. Moreover, the leaders chosen by Gorbachev to lead the new 'independent' republics were all deeply conservative Communists, unwilling to discontinue the harsh dictatorial rule they got so used to during the Soviet Union. This accentuated the resentment among the people, and created conditions ripe for the radical Islamic movements to gain the people's sympathies.

### **The Islamic Renaissance Party in Tajikistan**

As mentioned earlier, a revival of Islam took place in various Central Asian states after 1991, and Tajikistan was certainly amongst them. Between 1990 and 1992, a thousand new mosques opened in Tajikistan. At the time, Mullah Rustamov Hindustani (who had studied at the madrassah in Deoband, India), and Abdullah Saidov (popularly known as Sayed

Abdullah Nuri) were the two most influential Muslim spiritual leaders in Tajikistan who had remained underground during the Soviet era and had been arrested and persecuted for their activities at that time. While Hindustani died in prison before independence, Nuri was released in 1988 and eventually became the founder and leader of the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP)<sup>1</sup>.

Despite being registered as a political party in Russia in 1990, the IRP was banned in the Central Asian republics as soon as it was founded. Despite the ban, the IRP activists continued their activities, mainly focused on promoting a spiritual revival of Islam and working for the political and economic independence of Tajikistan. Himmatzoda, among the founders of the Tajik IRP, declared that the party's aim was the establishment of a democratic state, rather than an Islamic one (Rashid 2002, 99). (This is significant when contrasted with the IMU's aims which clearly call for the establishment of an Islamic state). However, the party's agenda did pose a political challenge to the Tajik government which other Central Asian leaders feared could spread to their countries as well.

The IRP gained mass support after the 1991 elections in Tajikistan, the results of which were highly controversial and rioting and anarchy broke out. Many people were killed. The IRP leaders fled to the mountains to set up military bases, but also maintained contacts within the ranks of 'official Islam', notably with the 'grand mufti' Turajonzada, who later became part of the IRP and assumed the status of a popular leader. When civil war broke out, it became a protracted guerilla struggle with the IRP launching attacks on government installations, and many IRP leaders fled to Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

A shift in the IRP's fate came about when the Taliban

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1 The IRP here refers specifically to the Tajik IRP. The reason behind restricting the discussion about the IRP to Tajikistan is that the party held considerable influence mainly in Tajikistan, and faced considerably larger challenges to their influence in other Central Asian states.

took over in Afghanistan in 1996. The Taliban had come to power by ousting the Tajik Afghan government in Kabul, and moreover, the IRP was not ideologically aligned with the Wahhabi school of thought, which they considered foreign and clearly antagonistic to their indigenous form of Islam. Hence, now that there was a common interest between the Tajik government and the IRP, – that of inhibiting Taliban penetration into Central Asia, which neither side were capable of doing on their own – the IRP joined the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) and went into negotiations with the Tajik government. A peace deal was struck. The IRP also ran for office in the 2000 parliamentary elections, but only managed to win 7.5% of the total vote (Rashid 2002, 106), showing that the party had lost considerable influence by then.

As a result of this shift in stance, splits emerged within the IRP. On the one hand were the moderates who believed it was necessary for their political survival to engage with the Tajik government, and on the other hand were the radicals who were bitterly opposed to any negotiations and many of them refused to obey party orders. Some disillusioned IRP commanders joined up with the Uzbek commander Juma Namangani (himself an ex-IRP man) and his Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The party was further split on the issue of the IMU's presence on Tajik soil, which was in fact supported by one IRP faction to use it as a means to exert pressure on Uzbekistan (Rashid 2002, 111).

After the civil war, Tajikistan reverted to its prior secular state. Both militant Islam as well as the IRP's reformist agenda of a spiritual Islamic revival had lost their popularity, and the conflicts that emerged were once again regional, clan-based, or tribal in nature.

### **Hizb-ut-Tahrir**

The Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT) is a highly secretive, pan-Islamic organization which strives for the revival of the Caliphate and

aims to unite Central Asia, Xinjiang (the Chinese Muslim province), and eventually the entire muslim *ummah* for this purpose. Its popularity is an enigma considering that the organization does not address any issues pertinent to the present conflicts or problems of the Central Asian (or any other) states or peoples. Moreover, the movement has always remained underground and its leaders do not hold public gatherings, shrouding it in an aura of mystery and creating a cult-like following for the group.

Though the Hizb-ut-Tahrir originated in the revivalist Wahhabi movement, they differ (ideologically) from the Wahhabis on certain issues. One of these issues is regarding the means of establishing sharia – which they believe should be done through peaceful and popular means, as opposed to the forceful takeover of the state advocated by the Wahhabis. Another issue is that of modern technology and other Western creations, which the HT believes should be used as tools in the establishment of an Islamic state, a point at which they diverge from the traditionalists. However, they openly express support for the radical Islamic outfits such as the Taliban and the IMU, and vow to come to their defence in every way should these groups come under attack (Roy 1999).

The HT's reverence for the Ottoman Empire appeals to the pan-Turkic ideals of many Uzbeks. However, the HT, like the Wahhabis, is vehemently anti-Shia and anti-Sufism. From their literature it appears that no effort has been made to make its ideas more compatible with indigenous religious traditions or beliefs, so it doesn't come as a surprise that the HT's version of Islam did not find fertile ground in much of Central Asia. However, where the HT has found fertile ground is among the urban intelligentsia, particularly in Uzbekistan, but also in Kyrgyzstan and northern Tajikistan: among educated but unemployed youth, factory workers, and the like. The HT has in fact been a rapidly growing phenomenon in the urban centers, evidenced by the intensity of the crackdown against them. The fact that there are more HT members and workers in Uzbeki

jails than those of any of the other Islamic groups (Rashid 2002, 125), even the militant IMU, is significant. The severe and consistent repression faced by these young men has created greater appreciation for their cause among the populace and also served as an attraction to the frustrated and hopeless youth who find no other means of expressing their anger at the state's failure to provide for them.

After the 9/11 attacks in New York and the US invasion of Afghanistan, both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan eagerly joined the 'war on terror', hoping that their alliance with the United States would allow them a free hand to suppress organizations such as the HT and the IMU at home. In order to make themselves immune to criticism from the West, they claimed that the HT was linked to al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The HT, however, denies these claims, stating its support for the Taliban and their cause, but denying any direct links or receiving aid from the Taliban. Regardless, what is certain is that further repression of HT activists in societies rife with hunger, unemployment, lack of basic facilities and topped with human rights abuses, will only result in the strengthening of radical or militant Islam in Central Asia.

### **The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)**

It would be pertinent to note that the revival of Islamic militancy in Uzbekistan began with a takeover of the local Communist Party headquarters in Namangan by a few unemployed young men in protest against the mayor's refusal to give them land to build a mosque (Rashid 2002, 137). One of these young men was Tohir Yuldeshev, a college dropout who was also the local mullah, and another was Jumaboi Khojaev (who later became Juma Namangani, named after his home town) who had been conscripted in the Soviet Army to fight the Mujahideen and returned glowing with praise for them. Both of them were to become well-known Islamic radicals, and Namangani eventually became the founder and commander of

the IMU. Initially, disillusioned with the IRP's refusal to demand an Islamic state, they created Adolat (justice), which called for an Islamic revolution. When the government cracked down on them in 1992, they fled to Tajikistan where the Tajik IRP was on the brink of fighting a civil war against the government. Yuldeshev as well as many of the IRP leaders left for Pakistan and Afghanistan. Yuldeshev was hosted in Peshawar at one of the many ISI-funded madrassahs, and it is there that he was introduced to the Taliban and to other Afghan groups, Tajiks, and other Uzbeks, and provided funds.

Namangani and Yuldeshev set up the IMU with the consultation and financial support of Osama bin Laden (Rashid 2002, 149). The purpose of this organization was the liberation of Uzbekistan and the Fergana Valley, and believed that a violent takeover of the state was the first step which would then be followed by deliberations about how to set up an Islamic state. According to Namangani's former friends, Namangani was driven more by his hate for the Karimov government than by any kind of 'spiritualism' (Rashid 2002, 143). However, the links between the IMU, the Taliban, bin Laden's Arabs, and the IRP made it so that fighters belonging to each of these groups fought for each other as well. For instance, many IMU fighters fought alongside the Taliban during the Taliban takeover of 1996.

Ironically, the IMU and a faction of the (Tajik) IRP also found that they had common interests. When Namangani initially fled Uzbekistan in 1992, he set up his base in southern Tajikistan along with a small army of Uzbek fighters. The Tajik IRP, which was then embroiled in a war against the Tajik government, found Namangani's expertise on Soviet tactics extremely useful (as it was fighting a Soviet-trained army), and settled him in the Tavildara valley. Later when Namangani was finally extradited by the Tajik government to Afghanistan, he is said to have made frequent visits to the IRP's office in northern Afghanistan (Rashid 2002, 143).

However, when the civil war in Tajikistan came to an

end, things changed significantly for the IMU, whose former IRP allies were now promoting national reconciliation in Tajikistan. However, the IMU decided to continue with its crusade against the Karimov government, and Karimov launched crackdown after crackdown on the militants (and in the process many ordinary people were arrested and harassed), only to be further frustrated by them (Ilkhamov 2001). The IMU became such a big problem for Karimov that he even tried to reach out to the Taliban, who were then in power in Afghanistan, to persuade them to seize their support for the IMU. The Taliban refused to comply. Moreover, tensions arose between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan over accusations of harboring Namangani and the IMU.

### **Conclusion: The Aftermath of Afghanistan?**

A few conclusions can now be drawn with regards to the phenomenon of militant Islam in Central Asia.

Firstly, militant Islam is not ideologically congruent with the indigenous Islam of Central Asia, but people's sympathies for groups such as the IMU and HT, who they perceive as victims of oppression by an incompetent, uncaring state - cannot be ignored. In societies where other forms of resistance – such as ethnic nationalism for instance – are weak or non-existent, radical Islam is often seen by discontented youth as a means of resistance.

Secondly, the phenomenon of militant Islam could not have survived - or at least grown in significance to the extent of causing major shifts in the foreign policies of many countries - had this phenomenon not been deliberately cultivated by the US-Pakistan-Saudi anti-Soviet alliance. The purpose behind the cultivation and support of militant Islamic groups was initially to weaken the Soviet Union, and then after the Soviet Union's disintegration, to vie for control over Central Asia in competition with the Russia-friendly Iran and Turkey.

However, there has been a shift in the foreign policies of

the major powers since the phenomenon of militant Islam gained strength, and particularly after 9/11. Despite the continuing competition between them, the United States, Russia, and China have found one point of common interest: that of fighting militant Islam, which threatens China in its Xinjiang province, Russia in the Central Asian states, and the United States in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan has –geographically speaking- been at the epicenter of the multi-national and multi-ethnic ‘militant Islam’ phenomenon, where wave after wave of war and strife have ravaged Afghan society. The fragility of the continuing post-9/11 US occupation of Afghanistan makes it clear that the ‘war on terror’, apparently launched to eliminate radical Islamic outfits (which ironically were the creation of the United States itself), is far from over. The fate of radical Islam in Central Asia thus hinges on the future of Afghanistan and the social and political outcomes of the US occupation there. But, in conclusion, it must be stressed that changes in the internal conditions of the Central Asian states could be as important, if not more, than external factors such as Afghanistan. Social, political, and economic reforms within the Central Asian states can reduce the level of frustration, poverty, and resentment amongst the people, thus greatly reducing popular support for militant Islam in Central Asian societies.

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