

# **ISLAMIC REVIVALISM IN CENTRAL ASIA AND THE ISLAMIC MOVEMENT OF UZBEKISTAN**

By

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The Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have largely been overshadowed by Russia since their independence from the latter a decade ago.<sup>1</sup> As early as 1991, when the five Soviet Central Asian republics gained independence, some voiced fears that a radical Islamic movement would engulf these countries. Since then, religion has undoubtedly revived fundamentalist sentiments throughout the region. This revival was a natural and potentially stabilising factor, as it filled an ethical void that the collapse of the Communist value system had left. Initially, the various governments of these Central Asian countries facilitated the building of mosques to help restore religion, while trying to keep religious activity under state supervision. This course of action was followed in particular in the southern parts of Central Asia, namely Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and the Ferghana Valley region of Kyrgyzstan.<sup>2</sup>

Concerns about the radical movements that formed part of this Islamic revival in the Central Asian republics existed for quite a few reasons. The region borders the two crucial countries of the global radical Islamic movement: Iran and Afghanistan. Although of different and often antagonistic persuasions, these two countries became the centre of Islamic radicalism in the 1990s. The disintegration of the Soviet Union also seemed to highlight the destructive potential of political Islam. Shortly after independence, Tajikistan was

embroiled in a murderous civil war that pitted the former Communist elite against an opposition force containing strong Islamic groups. This conflict led the four other regional states to outlaw most opposition parties and movements in their countries, halting the development of political opposition.

Conflicts such as those in Central Asia are commonly assumed to be between Islam and secularism, whereas, in fact, the real dispute lies within Islam. The traditional, tolerant, and moderate faith to which the overwhelming majority of Central Asia's Muslims adhere to conflicts with a more radical doctrine that is followed religiously by small groups. These latter forces are mistakenly grouped under the term "Wahabbi," referring to a form of Islam practiced in its modern form in Saudi Arabia. Thus, the Central Asian elites have fervently battled what they interpret as the onslaught of an alien and inherently violent brand of Islam, exemplified by the Taliban regime that has controlled most of Afghanistan since the mid-1990s.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan**

During the erstwhile Soviet era, Islam in Central Asia was officially suppressed and all contact with the wider Muslim world was severed. This isolation ended with the Soviet war in Afghanistan, when thousands of conscripts from Soviet Central Asia were sent to fight the Afghan *mujahedin*. Many of these conscripts returned home impressed by the Islamic zeal of their opponents, and aware of the religious, cultural and linguistic characteristics they shared with their neighbours in the South - and which distinguished them from their rulers in Moscow.

Around this time some Salafist groups with a revolutionary agenda appeared, in particular in the Ferghana Valley. Salafism already had deep roots in Central Asia.<sup>4</sup> With independence, in the Uzbek part of the Ferghana Valley, fundamentalist groups appeared. Their goal was to restore order to the streets

and to regulate prices in local markets. A group called the *Adolat* (Justice) made itself known in the early 1990s. Originally a local militia, it was quickly influenced by a more Islamic agenda. It was led by Juma Namangani, an ex-*mujahedin*, who had fought against the Soviets during the war of Afghanistan. Another branch of the movement responsible for religious propaganda was controlled by Tohir Yuldashev, a local cleric who quickly became one of the most influential Salafist leaders in the Ferghana Valley.<sup>5</sup>

The Salafists soon showed their intention of taking over power: in December 1991 they took over the local headquarters of the former Communist Party in the city of Namangan. From the Ferghana Valley, *Adolat* also tried to expand its activities to Tashkent itself. In some ways, the jihadist vision that gave birth to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in 1998 appeared to be of Islamo-nationalist origin. The jihadists, like their leading military commander, Juma Namangani, did not have a clear ideological approach: their only goal was to overthrow Karimov.<sup>6</sup>

In 1999, a series of explosions in the capital Tashkent were orchestrated in an unsuccessful attempt on Karimov's life. Karimov placed the blame on radical Wahabbi Islamists and the IMU in particular. The result was an escalation in Karimov's suppression of Islam, particularly in the traditionally observant Fergana Valley - a move which only increased the number of those fleeing Uzbekistan to join up with Namangani and the IMU in the Tavildara Valley of Tajikistan.

Later, in the same year the IMU conducted its first significant operations, with an incursion into the Batken region of southern Kyrgyzstan - a region populated mainly by ethnic Uzbeks, and lying between Tavildara in Tajikistan and the Fergana Valley in Uzbekistan. These raids had a major impact in Central Asia, and resulted in considerable international pressure on Tajikistan, to expel the IMU from its base in the Tavildara Valley. Controversially, Namangani and his fighters were then flown from Tajikistan to northern Afghanistan in Russian military helicopters - a move which enraged Karimov,

who claimed the Russians were aiding the IMU in an attempt to undermine Uzbekistan.<sup>7</sup>

In Afghanistan Yuldeshev was able to exploit the contacts he had made on his earlier travels to negotiate freedom of operation from the Taliban, in return for providing them with assistance in their battle with Massoud's Northern Alliance. The IMU established offices and training camps, and began expanding their recruitment of disaffected Uzbeks. Under pressure from China to expel Uighur militants the Taliban simply sent them north to the IMU's camps.<sup>8</sup> Links with the Taliban inevitably led to IMU's contacts with Al Qaeda.

By the summer of 2000 Western and CIS intelligence sources claimed that the IMU were equipped with more advanced weaponry such as sniper rifles and night-vision goggles, and had been supplied with a pair of heavy transport helicopters by Osama bin Laden. Namangani led IMU fighters back to the Tavildara Valley in Tajikistan, and from there launched multi-pronged attacks into Batken in Kyrgyzstan, and also into northern Uzbekistan, close to Tashkent. In August 2000 the IMU also kidnapped four U.S. mountain-climbers in the Kara-Su Valley of Kyrgyzstan, holding them hostage until they escaped on 12 August.<sup>9</sup> In response, the United States classified the IMU as a Foreign Terrorist Organization.<sup>10</sup>

Once more these raids were followed by a strategic retreat to Tavildara, and once again international pressure on the Tajik government saw Namangani agree to his men being flown by the Russians back to Afghanistan, where they arrived in January 2001. Following 9/11 and the US-led coalition's intervention in Afghanistan, the IMU was largely destroyed while fighting alongside the Taliban, and Namangani himself was killed. The IMU's fighters were scattered, with Yuldeshev and many others fleeing along with remnants of the Taliban to the tribal areas of Pakistan. They are now believed to have bases in both Tajikistan as well as in the Waziristan area of Pakistan. Further, from 2002 onwards, certain disaffected elements broke away from IMU to form the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), which has in fact contributed more to the jihadi ambience of Islamic Central Asia.

Some could have thought that Yuldashev would make the movement take an Islamo-nationalist turn. On the contrary, it has seemed of late that he himself has converted to global jihad. In recent tapes, widely available in the Ferghana Valley, he has stated: "the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan used to fight Karimov alone once. No more. We are going to war on all enemies of Islam worldwide. [...] The jihad is the only means of dealing with the Jews and Christians who demean Islam."<sup>11</sup> Hence the IMU is now rhetorically aligned with the "Al Qaeda" way of thinking. As explained during a speech given by Yuldashev in March 2007, the most important battles now are in Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition, the IMU has since then aligned its methods with those of Al Qaeda.

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<sup>1</sup> Central Asia, defined geographically, is commonly understood as the region encompassing the five former Soviet "stans," which are now states celebrating the tenth anniversaries of their independence this year: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The region that is Central Asia, however, historically extends beyond the borders of the five newly independent Central Asian republics to western China and Afghanistan. The term "Central Asia" in this article refers to the wider definition of the region, which includes Afghanistan. The term "Central Asian republics" refers exclusively to the newly independent Central Asian states.

<sup>2</sup> Svante E. Cornell and Regine A. Spector, "Central Asia: More than Islamic Extremists," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 1, Winter 2002, Washington, D.C., pp. 193-206.

<sup>3</sup> For a wider discussion on political Islam, see Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, Tauris, London, 1994; John L. Esposito, *Political Islam: Revolution, Radicalism, or Reform?*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, Colorado, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Didier Chaudet, *Islamist Terrorism in Greater Central Asia: The "Al-Qaedaization" of Uzbek Jihadism*, Russia/NIS Centre, Paris, 2008, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> "Islamic Movement of Afghanistan," *James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies*, Monterey Institute of International Studies, Monterey, California, accessed electronically at <http://cns.miis.edu/research/wtc01/imu.htm>

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> "Significant Terrorist Incidents, 1961 – 2003: A Brief Chronology," U.S. Department of State, Washington, D.C., March 19, 2009, accessed electronically at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/pubs/fs/5902.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Richard Boucher. "Redesignation of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan as a Foreign Terrorist Organization," United States Department of State, Washington, D.C., September 25, 2002, accessed electronically at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2002/13708.htm>

<sup>11</sup> Ferghana.ru news agency, "Tahir Yuldash: US Fiasco is Nearing. Look us up in Washington", 15 October 2007, accessed electronically at <http://www.ferghana.ru>