

Myth and Reality of Islamist Extremism in Central Asia

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Introduction

Problems associated with growing Islamist fundamentalism in Central Asia, especially in the Ferghana Valley, have increasingly attracted public attention for over a decade. Some have argued that the problem is going to pose a threat to regional security. Militant Islam became a reality in the 1999 and 2000 insurgent raids of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in Kyrgyzstan. Recently, the destruction of the Taliban regime and al Qaeda strongholds in Afghanistan have badly damaged the IMU, and some believe it no longer presents a serious threat to Central Asian security, although there is a concern about its resurgence. The secular governments of Central Asia now worry more about an elusive Islamic political party such as Hizb-ut Tahrir al-Islami (HT) and a number of less well-known extremist groupings (Taza Islam, Akramiyya, Lashkar Toiba, among others). These groups are feared to be advocating violence and gaining enough popular support to threaten existing rulers, absent an active government crackdown. A review of some of the Western publications and news reports as well as speeches of regional government officials often points to a serious threat posed by uncompromising and potentially militant Islamists. In the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks, such rhetoric appears to be increasingly popular. However, this threat is usually exaggerated.

This paper will assess and analyze the threat of Islamist extremist groups in Central Asian countries. It argues that Islam is gaining a strong foothold in the region; however, political and extremist forms of Islam have not received popular support, making the appeal of subversive Islamist groups limited. It also argues that there is a direct correlation between repressive policies of the region's governments and the growth of radical Islam in Central Asia.

This paper will first look into the roots of religion-based extremism in Central Asia. Second, it will define the threat of religious extremism in the region, looking at specific Islamic groups and assessing the threat level posed by each group. Third, it will analyze the response of individual countries to this Islamic challenge, followed by policy recommendations.

Causes of Political and Extremist Forms of Islam in Central Asia

Islam began re-energizing in Soviet Central Asia during Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost liberalization period after near seven decades of Soviet-led secularization and de-Islamization of Central Asia. Uzbekistan's "Birlik" (Unity) party and Tajikistan's Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) emerged in late 1980s as two of the first opposition parties espousing Islam as part of their platform. The collapse of the Soviet Union and independence of Central Asian states spurred the revival of Islam in the region, partly as a reaction to religious repression during the Soviet years, but also because it started to become an element of national identity and a vacuum filler amidst ideological deficiency. In the early 1990s, with the beginning of a state-led crackdown on Islamic groups in Uzbekistan and a civil war in Tajikistan, in which the IRP and the Movement for Islamic

Revival in Tajikistan (MIRT) were important players, Islam increasingly became politicized and its radical interpretation drew support from extremist fringes in Central Asian countries, especially, in the densely-populated and poor parts of the Ferghana Valley, an area shared by Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Protracted socio-economic crises, deepening corruption and authoritarian tendencies added to the public's frustration over the failure of the governments to deliver to their citizens, making the Islamic alternative more appealing to certain elements. With the growing disenchantment with managed democracies, the seemingly nefarious influence of the Western culture and the lack of strong ideology, Islam seemed to be an answer to a growing number of followers. It must be pointed out that it has been a more general trend in Central Asia to follow a moderate form of Islam, and only a minority is on the radical side. Kathleen Collins stresses that Central Asia's younger generation (under 25 years of age), a clear majority in the region, appears to be increasingly more supportive of political Islam than the older generation, which seems to look at things with a more critical eye, because of the "frustration with heavy-handed authoritarianism, failures of democratic opposition, lack of faith in the government due to corruption, near state failure and failed ideologies," part of which is driven by a belief in easy answers.¹

Former Uzbek Ambassador to Iran and Afghanistan, Abdusamat A. Khaydarov, also suggests that external factors influenced the religious revival in Central Asia:

The 1978-89 Afghan crisis in which Islamic militants fought and ultimately defeated the pro-Soviet government, followed by years of infighting that ended with the capture of power by the Taliban in 1996, created regional Islamic networks "linked to the Taliban and al Qaeda."²

In addition, the Pakistani and Saudi Arabian governments actively spread Islamic literature, built mosques, and supported Islamic education in Central Asia. A brand of radical Wahhabi Islam took root, giving rise to groups such as Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT). The history and activities of these groups have been extensively reported, which need no repetition,³ but it is worth briefly mentioning why they emerged and why they appealed to some.

¹ A presentation by Kathleen Collins "The Resurgence of Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia and Azerbaijan," Women's Foreign Policy Group, Washington, DC, September 19, 2005.

² Leslie Evans, "The Rise of Islamic Extremism in Central Asia," UCLA International Institute. URL: <http://www.isop.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=23631>

³ For more information on the IMU and HT, see "Radical Islam in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir," ICG Asia Report, #58, Osh/Brussels, June 30, 2003; "Central Asia: Islam and the State," ICG Asia Report #59, July 10, 2003; "Is Radical Islam Inevitable in Central Asia? Priorities for Engagement," ICG Asia Report #72, December 22, 2003; "The IMU and the Hizb-ut-Tahrir: Implications of the Afghanistan Campaign," ICG Asia Briefing #11, January 30, 2002; Vitaly V. Naumkin, "Militant Islam in Central Asia: The Case of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan," (University of California, Berkeley, 2003), Alexei Malashenko, "Islam in Central Asia," in Roy Allison & Lena Jonson, ed. Central Asian Security (London : Royal Institute for International Affairs, 2001); Ahmed Rashid, "Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia," (New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press, 2002).

Evaluating the Threat of Religious Extremism in Central Asia

Central Asian leaders have grown accustomed to labeling Islamic practitioners with terms such as Islamic extremists and terrorists. Such confusion is often deliberate and politically motivated, directed against rivals and popular figures. They are also attempts to quell public support of Islam. These states strictly control the practice of Islam and the punishments for people who promote Islamic values over the status quo are often severe, especially in Uzbekistan. All religious groups have been outlawed across the region and thousands of Muslims, “suspected” of having links with extremist groups, have been arrested and jailed, particularly in Uzbekistan. Existing groups have gone underground, making their membership numbers and popularity difficult to estimate. However, none of the groups currently pose a clear and present danger to regional security, despite all the fears about militant Islamist threat IMU has collapsed as has the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2002, following the U.S.-led military campaign. It is worth looking more closely at some of these groups to understand the viability of their threat.

Hizb ut-Tahrir

Although there are reportedly several radical Islamist groups in Central Asia, much of the fear in recent years has been centered on Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of God), whose membership is estimated in the thousands in the Ferghana Valley and is reported to be rapidly spreading across the region. HT is a global, radical, Islamist political party. Its roots trace back to 1953 in Jerusalem when Taquiddin an-Nabhani al-Falastani, an ethnic Palestinian, formed the movement with the goal of spreading an Islamist revolution. HT is known for advocating non-violent means to replace existing Central Asian regimes with an Islamic state (caliphate). However, some of its rhetoric suggests a more violent struggle and the word *jihad* is interpreted loosely in its leaflets distributed around the region.⁴ HT’s involvement in repeated coup attempts in Jordan in the late 1960s and 1970s⁵ suggests its stated goals and methods cannot be accepted at face value.

There appears to be a division within HT over the best course of action to pursue the party’s goals. Some sources indicate that dissenters within the party are dissatisfied with its non-violent approach. According to a 2003 commentary in *Vecherny Bishkek*, the Kyrgyz daily, “the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq has helped fuel the internal tactical debate within Hizb ut-Tahrir... Calls for more active and radical steps became increasingly frequent.”⁶ Local authorities in Central Asia question HT’s non-violent rhetoric due to some reported evidence indicating involvement of some HT members in the IMU.⁷

The reason why this organization is able to attract followers has to do with several factors. Although there are arguments denying a direct correlation between poverty and

⁴ “Radical Islam in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir,” ICG Asia Report N58, June 30, 2003, p. 8

⁵ Ibid, p. 9

⁶ Alisher Khamidov, “Hizb ut-Tahrir Faces Internal Split in Central Asia,” Eurasianet.org, October 21, 2003. URL: <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav202103.shtml>

⁷ See report of documents found in an IMU camp in Afghanistan. “Radical Islam in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir,” ICG Asia Report N58, June 30, 2003, p. 8

radicalization, which is important considering that HT members in the West come from well-to-do and educated backgrounds, socio-economic conditions play an important role in the rationale of many people in Central Asia in joining HT because the membership brings some financial awards.⁸ Psychological factors are also essential. Seeing the future fraught with uncertainty, failures, and endemic corruption, young people with no jobs find ideological guidance, a sense of belonging and something to do by becoming a member of HT or other Islamist groups.

Considering the HT's alleged popularity in the region, the possibility of its members taking a more violent path would be a menacing prospect to regional security. However, the threat of a violent Islamist movement against secular governments is unlikely, especially it being mounted by the HT. First, HT is not a mass movement and its radical ideas are quite alien to the majority of Central Asians, where Muslim populations prefer practicing Islam freely under a secular governments. Despite the rise of religiosity (both Islam and Christianity) in Central Asia, there will be no popular support for a primacy of religion over secularism in politics. Even in Uzbekistan, where jailed suspected HT members are numbered to be 4,000 and thousands more adherents are present in the country, an Islamic party would not even garner 5% of vote if it was allowed to participate in free elections.⁹ Although Islamic revolution is not a likely prospect in Central Asia, the failure of the states to improve socio-economic conditions and potential succession issues may lead to uncertainty, creating a gateway through which Islamic elements could promote their values as an alternative. However, an open confrontation between religious groups and the state is not likely.

Second, HT is too fragmented to stand as a viable force with well-defined plans and methods to act upon. It has a decentralized and loose cell-like structure, made up of groups of five people. Members in one country know little of members in another country, except for their leaders, making the organization uncoordinated and weak. In addition, it does not appear that transitioning HT to a mass movement is inevitably its goal in Central Asia - spreading its own interpretation of Koran to people and earning supporters to its ideas would be more important than a membership in the organization at this juncture.¹⁰ Because HT's activities in Central Asia are limited to distributing propaganda leaflets and books, often of poor quality, it is not difficult to finance them locally. Law enforcement authorities know little about HT's funding sources but there is some information confirming that it is partially financed by membership fees.¹¹ Drug trade and other criminal activities, rampant in the region, are also easy sources of income.

Third, even if the secular Central Asian governments were less repressive and more inclusive, the idealistic views of HT lack a comprehensive plan addressing vital socio-economic issues, which is a priority to the impoverished masses, without such plans, HT will not be widely accepted in Central Asia. Islamist radical ideas do not

⁸ An ICG report notes that according to some analysts, members are paid U.S. \$50-\$100 for distributing leaflets "but there is no hard evidence of this," "Radical Islam in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir," ICG Asia Report N58, June 30, 2003, p. 15

⁹ Former British Ambassador Craig Murray, "Uzbekistan's Challenge to Human Rights," RFE/RL Briefing, Washington, DC, September 22, 2005

¹⁰ "Radical Islam in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir," ICG Asia Report N58, June 30, 2003, p. 21

¹¹ Interview with HT member in Kyrgyzstan Dilyer Dzhumabayev. See "Hezb-e Tahrir is Ideologica, Not Terrorist - Kyrgyz Activist," Vecherny Bishkek, July 22, 2005.

currently constitute a threat to the region's status quo; however, with worsening political and socio-economic conditions sporadic terrorist and insurgent strikes carried out by the militant minority are a likely scenario.

The threat from the battered IMU is not immediate. The IMU has been severely fragmented and weakened after the invasion of Afghanistan, its nerve center. But according to some sources, the IMU has begun to regroup, becoming especially active in Iraq.¹² There are also less known small extremist groups in Central Asia reportedly advocating violence. I will discuss HT's splinter groups that have received some media attention and reportedly pose a threat to their respective countries.

Akramiyya

Akramiyya is a splinter group of HT created in 1996 by Akram Yuldashev, a former HUT member from Andijan, who advocated using violence in order to overthrow the Uzbek President Islam Karimov's regime and establish Islamic governance, which "should be based on a local level, rather than on a national level."¹³ Some of Akramiyya's leaflets encouraged suicide bombings. In Yuldashev's view, cells would bring together "individuals from the same professional background and... the organization would seek legalized status so that it could operate openly on the grassroots level."¹⁴ Today, Yuldashev is in prison in Uzbekistan on charges of illegal activity and extremism. It has never been clear whether Akramiyya had a definite structure or even existed as a group.¹⁵ According to the Uzbek political scientist Dr. Bakhtiar Babajanov, Akramiyya groups existed in "the Andijan region, Namangan, Kokand, Osh (Kyrgyzstan and some other regions of Uzbekistan."¹⁶

In May 2005, the Uzbek government arrested 23 businessmen for "Islamic conspiracy" and membership in Akramiyya, which drew thousands of protesters in Andijan who believed that the charges against the businessmen were trumped up. Protesters also expressed grievances over deteriorating socio-economic conditions in Uzbekistan. The government responded by using excessive force against unarmed civilians. According to eyewitnesses and refugees from Andijan in Kyrgyzstan, hundreds of civilians were killed as a result of the massacres. The Andijan tragedy is a testament to the government's justification of use of force by exaggerating the threat of Islamists in order to maintain the status quo.

¹² Zhu Zhenghong, "Regional Security in Central Asia and Russia after 9/11," *Far Eastern Affairs*, 2005, Vol. 33, Issue 1, p.21.

¹³ <http://www.newnations.com/archive/2004/February/uz.html>

¹⁴ <http://www.newnations.com/archive/2004/February/uz.html>

¹⁵ Paul Tumelty, "Analysis: Uzbekistan's 'Islamists'," May 15, 2005. URL: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/4548371.stm>

¹⁶ Dr. Babajanov notes that he is not informed about the situation in the Tajik part of Ferghana. See Bakhtiar Babajanov, "The Ferghana Valley: Source or Victim of Islamic Fundamentalism?" *Central Asia and the Caucasus: Journal of Social and Political Studies*.

Hizb an-Nusra

Hizb an-Nusra is another splinter group of HT, which, according to a report prepared by the International Crisis Group entitled "IMU and Hizb-ut-Tahrir: Implications of the Afghanistan Campaign," was formed by Sharipzhon Mirzazhanov in the Tashkent area in 1999.¹⁷ Similar to Akramiyya, Hizb an-Nusra believes in the violent overthrow of the current regime in Uzbekistan and the creation of an Islamic state. The group's structure, membership numbers and the level of support are difficult to ascertain due to the government's repression and paucity of information. Similar to Akramiyya, it is not clear whether Hizb an-Nusra has been active in Uzbekistan.

Jamaat Mojahedin of Central Asia

A cell of Jamaat Mojahedin of Central Asia, which allegedly had ties to al Qaeda, was dismantled in November 2004 in Kazakhstan. The Kazakh security forces stressed that the group did not plan terrorist actions inside the country but planned a series of attacks in neighboring countries, including Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Russia. It also sought to establish training bases in southern Kazakhstan.¹⁸ Large numbers of extremist literature, audio and videotapes, including Osama bin Laden's speeches calling for armed jihad, were seized during the raid. Some sources claim that Jamaat was involved in the 2004 bombings in Tashkent.¹⁹ The group was financed both internally and from outside, led by a Kyrgyz and an Uzbek emir from abroad. Nartay Dutbayev, Kazakhstan's chairman of the National Security Committee, said that Jamaat leaders would recruit citizens of mainly Central Asian states and send them on the route Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan-Azerbaijan-Iran-Pakistan for training at al Qaeda training camps... [where] the quality of training was very high."²⁰ Kazakh law enforcement is convinced that the group has been uprooted in Kazakhstan.

There are a number of other extremist and terrorist groups that reportedly seek to gain influence and support in some Central Asian countries. For example, according to the Kazakh Deputy Interior Ministry Alik Shpekbayev, several international extremist organizations have been banned in Kazakhstan, including Usbat al-Ansar, Muslim Brotherhood, the Taleban, Boz Gurd, Lakshar-i-Toiba, Social Reform Society, Hizb ut-Tahrir, People's Congress of Kurdistan (PKK), the IMU and the Islamic Party of East Turkestan. Except for the IMU, none of these groups have established themselves yet in

¹⁷ Alisher Khamidov, "Hizb ut-Tahrir Faces Internal Split in Central Asia," Eurasianet.org, October 21, 2003. URL: <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav202103.shtml>

¹⁸ "Terror Network Want Bases in Kazakhstan – Security Chief," Interfax, August 17, 2005.

¹⁹ According to Igor Rotar, "throughout the investigations into this year's [2004] terrorist acts in Uzbekistan, allegations of "Kazakhstani fingerprints" frequently arose. Thus, during the trial of the alleged organizers of the attacks, before the Supreme Court of Republic of Uzbekistan, prosecutor Murad Khalikov presented an indictment that charged that the terrorists had trained in militant camps located on the territory of Kazakhstan (Interfax, July 26, 2004)," Igor Rotar, "Demographics, Borders Complicate Anti-Terrorism Efforts in Central Asia," Jamestown Foundation, November 18, 2004. See also Transnational Threats Update, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Volume 3, # 1, November 2004, p. 3. URL: <http://www.csis.org/tnt/ttu/0411.pdf>

²⁰ "Investigation into Terrorist Group Nearly Over – Kazakh Security Chief," Interfax-Kazakhstan News Agency (Almaty, Kazakhstan), December 13, 2004.

Kazakhstan or anywhere else in Central Asia and their threat to regional or country-specific security is limited at best. These groups, formed and based outside of Central Asia, usually send their missionaries to the region from abroad to spread radical ideas.²¹ Although they were banned in Kazakhstan, law enforcement authorities there do not rule out that these organizations “are likely to continue to infiltrate the country from abroad,”²² and even set up training bases in the country.²³ The Kazakh authorities also worry about the activities of a Wahhabi group called Taza Islam (Pure Islam), which initially appeared in the southern part of the country but more recently showed signs of presence in the west of Kazakhstan as well. Alik Shpekbaev, Kazakhstan’s Deputy Interior Minister, claims that “the reasons for this are poverty and unemployment, especially in the countryside.”²⁴

There is no evidence of these groups in Kyrgyzstan, where the main irritant remains Hizb ut-Tahrir. In 2004, the deputy chairman of the Kyrgyz National Security Service, Boris Poluektov, warned that HT was spreading actively to Kyrgyzstan. “Most cells of the party operate in the country’s south, in the Osh region, but they are observed to have stepped up their activities in Bishkek and Issyk-Kul region (northern Kyrgyzstan) of late. Moreover, women are now being actively involved in its work,” said Poluektov.²⁵ A Kyrgyz analyst Orozbek Omuraliev argues that HT takes advantage of Kyrgyzstan’s relatively liberal system. Kyrgyz security authorities also expressed some concern about the activities of the Islamic Party of East Turkestan, a militant and separatist Muslim organization in China’s western Xinjiang province. The Kyrgyz defense minister said at a press conference in 2003 that “the situation in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of China was affecting the situation in the region,”²⁶ where the extremist Islamic Party of East Turkestan adds to the complicated security situation.

Tajikistan is the only country in Central Asia that incorporated an Islamic party – the Islamic Renaissance Party – into the political system after the five-year old civil war, which ended in 1998. The IRP received 8% of votes in the February 2005 parliamentary elections. Reportedly, the IRP “has been co-opted into the regime, which significantly weakened its base.”²⁷ Tajikistan now sees a threat emanating mainly from HT as well as an underground Islamist radical group called Baiat (“covenant” in Arabic). According to the director of the Tajik Interior Ministry’s criminal investigation department, Kurbonali Nazarov, the group “Baiat began instructing young people in the mosques under its control in the village of Chorkukh in northern Tajikistan in 1991... and the organization also organized Sharia courts and tried to destabilize the situation in Tajikistan.”²⁸ Nazarov added that “three Baiat members were arrested by U.S. servicemen in

²¹ “Kazakh security chief outlines action on terrorism and drugs,” BBC Monitoring Service, April 12, 2005.

²² Marat Yermukanov, “Kazakhstan Faces Potent Mix of Extremism, Nationalism, and Terrorism,” Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor, Volume 1, Issue 130, November 18, 2004. URL: http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=401&issue_id=3146&article_id=2368880

²³ “Terror Networks Want Bases in Kazakhstan – Security Chief,” Interfax, August 17, 2005.

²⁴ “Kazakh Deputy Minister Acknowledges Threat from Islamic Party,” Komsomolskaya Pravda Kazakhstan (Almaty, Kazakhstan), March 18, 2005.

²⁵ “Kyrgyz Security Chief Urges Tougher Punishment for Religious Extremism,” Interfax-Kazakhstan News Agency (Almaty, Kazakhstan), June 21, 2004.

²⁶ “Situation in Central Asia Remains Complicated – Kyrgyz Defence Minister,” Kabar News Agency (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan), June 21, 2003.

²⁷ Martha Brill Olcott, “Central Asia’s Second Chance,” p. 281.

²⁸ “Tajikistan steps up crackdown on extremism,” Interfax, April 20, 2005.

Afghanistan and were held at the U.S. Guantanamo base.”²⁹ Baiat was suspected of vandalizing several mosques in the Isfara district of the Sughd region “their attendands were too close to the secular government.”³⁰ This group reportedly supports violent means of struggling with the secular regime and “the members take destabilization of social and political situation in the country as the main direction of their activity.”³¹ The Tajik authorities are convinced that this organization is financed by the Libyan movement “Al-Baiat” as well as by groups in Uzbekistan.³²

State Responses

The Central Asian governments have fared poorly in their assessment and response to terrorist and extremist groups. As noted, the threat of extremism has often been often purposely inflated because of fear of losing power and outside support. Dealing with international terrorism unified these countries with powerful neighbors such as China and Russia and the more distant USA. Cooperation with these countries attracted material and technical rewards and fighting terrorism became a self-serving excuse for authoritarianism. Across the region, state policies have been ineffective in either dampening support to radical groups such as HT or promoting a tolerant form of Islam. As the 2003 ICG report notes, forcing the state-controlled clergy to vilify HT while commending President Islam Karimov, “advantageously positions HT in opposition to a much disliked regime.”³³ Moderate Muslims, who could teach tolerance and deflect distorted and reactionary interpretations of Islam, were lumped together with militant Muslims and silenced in countries such as Uzbekistan.

Although Muslims in other Central Asian countries are not persecuted and repressed to the level seen in Uzbekistan, general intolerance of religion in the region is common. The IRP members in Tajikistan are routinely harassed and arrested on allegedly fabricated charges. Suspected HT members are regularly arrested and given extensive prison sentences in almost all Central Asian countries³⁴ and there has been no attempt to engage in dialogue. The terms “terrorist” and “extremist” have often been used cavalierly and deliberately to denigrate moderate Muslims, political opponents,³⁵ and even journalists.³⁶ Such intentional misrepresentation and continual state repression,

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Martha Brill Olcott, “Central Asia’s Second Chance,” p. 283.

³¹ Tatjana Zvonnikova, “Khujand. Religious parties start struggle for authority in society,” Fergana.org, May 27, 2004. URL: <http://eng.fergana.org/archives/analitics/ptir>

³² Martha Brill Olcott, “Central Asia’s Second Chance,” p. 283.

³³ “Radical Islam in Central Asia? Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir,” ICG Asia Report, #58, Osh/Brussels, June 30, 2003, p. 35.

³⁴ Assessing the situation in Turkmenistan is complicated by the closed nature of the regime and lack of accurate information.

³⁵ Prior to the March 2005 revolution, the Kyrgyz President Akaev’s administration used these terms loosely as useful tools to misrepresent the opposition. For example, prior to the February 27th, 2005, parliamentary elections, President falsely linked the opposition, including Roza Otunbaeva, a prominent figure in Kyrgyz politics, who was banned from running to the parliament, to radical Islam. See “Roza Otunbaeva: Moskva radikaldyk islam menen bailanyshybyz joguna ishenet [Moscow believes we have no ties to radical Islam],” *Gazeta.kg*, February 2, 2005.

³⁶ Galima Bukharbaeva, “Uzbekistan: Where journalism is branded terrorism,” *International Herald Tribune*, September 21, 2005. URL: <http://www.iht.com/articles/2005/09/20/news/edgalima.php>

as well as neglected socio-economic problems, may create an arena for religious extremists in the longer term.

Policy Recommendations

Inadequate and improper state policies towards Islamic groups should be rectified sooner than later to avert their further radicalization and to avoid domestic polarization and destabilization. First, the states must allow freedom of expression for moderate Muslims to teach Islam. There is a general lack of understanding of Islam and its tolerant and positive message in the region due to the suppression of religion during and after the Soviet Union as well as due to the shortage of well-trained moderate clergy. Primitive policies against religion seen in Uzbekistan will give an upper hand to religious radicals as opposed to moderates in winning supporters. Second, Central Asian states should avoid naming HT a terrorist organization. Despite some suspicions of HT's involvement in terrorist acts, there is no proof to base its designation as a terrorist group and doing so will further radicalize the group and encourage foreign support.

Third, the states must change repressive measures and abide by the international commitments to respect human rights. The May 2005 massacres in Andijan and the aftermath illustrate that the state is heavily dependent on coercive measures to stay in power. The West has been weak in seeking accountability from President Karimov in the wake of the Andijan events. The European Union has only recently imposed sanctions on arms sale to Uzbekistan and barred entry to "those individuals directly responsible for the indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force in Andijan."³⁷ The U.S. reliance on President Karimov as an ally in the war on international terrorism not only blinds it from seeing the regime's excesses but also prevents it from seeing that the intelligence produced from Uzbek torture chambers for the U.S. consumption is essentially useless. The U.S. pressure on the Uzbek regime should be strengthened and further international aid should be stipulated on tangible improvements of the human rights situation and the ignored socio-economic conditions, including lifting trade barriers with neighboring countries. Concurrently, the authority of the police and security forces need to be limited and the judiciary's independence must be assured.

Fourth, comprehensive socio-economic reforms, including education, employment and governance, must be intensified. *Bona fide* implementation of such reforms will help the youth change their lives for better and deflect the influence of radicalism. Finally, the Central Asian states need to improve information sharing on extremist groups. Inter-state cooperation has been a big problem due to various political and economic disagreements between the Central Asian countries. Tense relations and the simmering mutual distrust between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in the aftermath of the Andijan events foster conditions for regional instability and give advantage to radical elements.

³⁷ "EU imposes arms embargo on Uzbekistan," AFX News Limited, October 4, 2005.