

# **Islamic Radicalism in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan: Implications for the Global War on Terrorism**

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## **Introduction**

The Central Asian governments and the wider international community had hopes that the campaign against terrorism launched by the United States in September 2001 would help eliminate Islamic militancy in the region. Four years later, the campaign claims success in destroying the terrorist base in Afghanistan. However, it has done little to do away with the sources of Islamic radicalism.

Radical Islam in Central Asia is in the midst of sweeping transformations. Despite the loss of their Afghan base, terror groups in the region are adapting and are mounting increasingly potent operations. This transformation has been in the making for some time. Over the past few years, Central Asia's terrorist groups have expanded their geographic reach and intensified their activities throughout much of the post-Soviet space. New alliances have sprouted up as well. According to July 2004 testimony of the head of Tajikistan's National Security Service, Tokon Mamytov, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Tajik and Kyrgyz fundamentalists and Uighurs from Western China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region have joined forces to create a new clandestine umbrella organization, the Islamic Movement of Central Asia. Its purported goal: the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate in Central Asia.<sup>1</sup>

While regional experts agree that more has to be done to conquer religious extremism in Central Asia, they vary in identifying the direction, substance and form of anti-extremist activity. Some sympathize with Uzbek President Islam Karimov's brutal handling of the Andijan insurgency/protest. Others prefer to engage the Islamists the Tajik way. There are those who see the main problem in an uncontrolled or a too controlled resurgence of Islam. And there are strong believers in social and economic progress as the one and only remedy. The recent series of "orange revolutions" in the post-Soviet space, including Kyrgyzstan, have led to yet another debate as to whether political liberalization

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of Central Asia presents opportunities or liabilities in fighting extremism and terrorism in Central Asia. Finally, the broad geopolitical scene of Central Asia remains complex and obscure. The great powers continue to compete more than cooperate in Central Asian affairs thus enhancing the chances of extremist groups to capitalize on domestic shortcomings, mistrust between Central Asian regimes and incessant geopolitical ambition of powerful outsiders.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of locating the main geographic areas of religious extremism, in the past Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have been traditionally named as the most problematic and explosive. Their high Islamization, along with a suppressive form of governance, were considered objectively conducive to extremist activity. At the same time, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were seen as less problematic due to their nomadic past, high secularization and better governance. Some experts consider Islamic radicalism in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to be an irritant rather a threat. According to Kazakh scholar Nurlan Alniyazov, however, strange as may sound, in areas where Islam has been traditionally present, and where religion has a profound impact on the cultural, spiritual and everyday life, there is a natural resistance to radical movements, which are perceived by the people as something alien to their culture and traditions and unsubstantiated by traditional teachings of Islam. In contrast, fundamentalist groups emerge in the areas where Islam has not deeply spread its roots.<sup>3</sup> As our analysis will demonstrate, Islamic radicalism is on the rise in both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan and, if not treated seriously and consistently, may develop into a serious threat to the region and beyond. Destabilization in these countries would seriously harm the US strategic interest in particular. After the eventual withdrawal of US troops from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan becomes America's closest military partner in Central Asia. Kazakhstan, on the other hand, remains the strongest economic partner of the United States in Central Asia and perhaps the most promising candidate for political liberalization.

### **Evolution of Islamic Radicalism in Central Asia**

Three successive waves of political Islam have swept over Central Asia during the 15-year period since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The first wave appeared in Tajikistan in 1992, seeking to make the country an Islamic state. The Tajik civil war involved factions, but they were ideological overlaps of secular democracy, nationalist reformism and Islamization. The Islamic rebels belonging to the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) were initially concentrated in the southern provinces of Kulyab and Kurgan Tyube, but incrementally linked up with elements in neighbouring Afghanistan. By 1996 they were operating from within Afghanistan. Alarmed by the ascendancy of the Taliban (leading to the capture of Kabul in 1996) and signs that the Tajik Islamists were increasingly coming under the influence of rival benefactors, Russia and Iran swiftly closed ranks to bring about a Tajik settlement, giving Tajik Islamists a role in the government in Dushanbe.<sup>4</sup>

No sooner than the Tajik settlement came about, the Uzbek militants who fought alongside the Tajik Islamists broke away and linked up with the Taliban. The period from 1996-2001 saw the IMU operating from Taliban-ruled areas

within Afghanistan and stepping up violent activities inside Central Asia, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in particular. The IMU was the second wave of political Islam to appear in Central Asia. IMU called for jihad against the established secular regimes, particularly the Uzbek regime of Islam Karimov. The IMU also closely collaborated with al-Qaeda and suffered as a result. In the American military intervention in Afghanistan in October 2001, the IMU's cadres sustained heavy losses and retreated to Pakistan's tribal agencies - along with the Taliban.

At any rate, in the void left by the IMU, a third wave of political Islam has appeared in Central Asia - Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT - Party of Islamic Liberation). Unlike the earlier manifestations of political Islam, HT claims to be a pan-Islamic movement. HT subscribes to the goal of establishing a Sharia-based caliphate in Central Asia and "dividing Russia along the line of the Volga" so as to liberate the "originally Muslim lands".

The three waves also represent three different types or forms of Islamic radical ambition and activity: power sharing with distinct regional and tribal characteristics (civil war in Tajikistan), anti-regime and nationalistic (Islamic insurgency in Uzbekistan) and externally sponsored and supranational (HT). While IMU and IRP are struggling to survive and remain relevant, their strength has been undercut either through efficient military suppression, like in the case of IMU, or through relatively successful integration into the mainstream political process like in the case of IRP. This gives HT an objective advantage in Central Asia. HT also gains from its broad international background and network, its solid experience of legal and illegal propaganda, as well as proclaimed non-violent methods which confuse authorities as to how to deal with it.<sup>5</sup> HT is exploiting the similarity of social and economic grievances in the region as well as the continuing lack of trust and efficient cooperation between the Central Asian regimes in dealing with extremist organizations.

In our opinion, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are the most vulnerable to the third wave of Islamic radicalism. Firstly, they largely avoided the first two waves and have not developed a resistance mechanism to extremist slogans. Secondly, their traditional Islamic structures are weak and least prepared to deal with external influences. Thirdly, they are relatively democratic and open as opposed to the other three Central Asian states but not genuinely pluralistic and liberal, yet which provides fertile ground for HT. Finally, the social instability in Kyrgyzstan after the "tulip revolution" in March 2005 and the possibility of similar social disturbances as a result of the forthcoming presidential elections in Kazakhstan offer HT new opportunities for spreading their ideology. Most analysts agree that the most vulnerable areas to HT are the South Kazakhstan oblast in Kazakhstan and Jelalabad, Osh and Batken regions in Kyrgyzstan.

## **Kyrgyzstan**

Kyrgyzstan has been a fertile ground for the growth of fundamentalist Islam. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, it was Kyrgyzstan among the five Central Asian republics that had adopted the most liberal approach toward Islamic

fundamentalist organizations, allowing for example HT to pursue its activities relatively freely. At the same time, Kyrgyzstan's social and economic situation has been deteriorating under the increasingly corrupt regime of Askar Akaev. Thirdly, Kyrgyzstan has common and poorly protected borders with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the two countries that have been experiencing serious Islamic radicalism. Finally, Kyrgyzstan has a significant Uighur population which has radical anti-Chinese and/or pro-independence aspirations.

Kyrgyzstan's most vulnerable region is its south. The Ferghana Valley faces serious social and economic challenges of overpopulation, unemployment and crime. The Kyrgyzstan territory became a transit area and training ground for militant Islamic groups. The IMU militants infiltrated the Kyrgyz state in the southern region of Batken in 1999, causing a lot of disturbances in the country. The 2002-2003 bombings in the Kyrgyz towns of Bishkek and Osh resulted in the conviction of Uzbek and Kyrgyz nationals who belonged to the IMU and who were trained in Afghanistan and Chechnya. In 2003, repeated attempts were made by the IMU to target the American Embassy in Kyrgyzstan. However, the IMU presence in Kyrgyzstan after September 11 has seriously declined.

Kyrgyzstan also faces a threat from Uighur separatists from the Xinjiang region in western China, who may seize this opportunity and strengthen themselves in Kyrgyz territory. China shares several hundreds of kilometers of border with Kyrgyzstan in the western province of Xinjiang. In November 2002 China conducted military exercises with Kyrgyzstan aimed at helping Kyrgyzstan to eliminate Uighur extremist groups.

It is however HT which has become the main source of concern for the Kyrgyz authorities. Southern Kyrgyz regions – including Osh and Jalalabad, which have large numbers of ethnic Uzbek residents – have traditionally been strongholds of Hizb support. Uzbeks make up 12.9% of the population of Kyrgyzstan and 40% of the population of the Osh region. According to official figures, 92 per cent of Hizb activists are Uzbek.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Hizb propaganda material has been heavily distributed in cities in northern Kyrgyzstan, including the capital. Hizb leaflets have also been found for the first time in villages in the Issyk-Kul region. Kyrgyz law-enforcement officials report a surge in Hizb leafleting. In addition to distributing materials by hand, Hizb activists are operating late at night, pasting leaflets to lampposts and in public places. The messages contained in the leaflets are confrontational in their tone. "Let's rebel against the faithless," urged one. Others contain strong anti-American messages. "The war that [US President George] Bush started is a colonial war aimed at achieving hegemony and control, imposing influence and reshaping the region according to the new American standards," another leaflet said.<sup>7</sup>

According to Sadykzhan Kamuluddin, President of the Islamic Centre of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan and former *mufti* and member of the Kyrgyzstan Supreme Council, Kyrgyzstan alone has about 2,000-3,000 members of HT, suggesting that the HT was numerically strongest in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>8</sup> Officials of a Kyrgyz state commission for religious affairs admit that HT poses a significant "threat to national security."<sup>9</sup> The state commission, which includes

representatives from the Spiritual Directorate of Kyrgyzstan's Muslims and the state commission for religious affairs, works with the staff of the Interior Ministry and National Security Service and routinely provides "analysis of Islamist" leaflets and materials for use in court proceedings against suspects detained for links to the Islamist group. Commission members said the group's activities are increasing, especially in the south of the country.

Apart from carrying out political agitation in the Kyrgyz state, HT has also been accused of terrorist activities, although it has a stated agenda of non-violence. In November 2003, Kyrgyz State Security announced the capture of three HT members planning to blow up the US airbase at Manas. A number of Kyrgyz nationals have been caught as members of the HT with explosives in Russia. Bishkek authorities have also reported from time to time about developing links between extremist organizations like the IMU, the Islamic Movement of Turkestan in Central Asia and HT and between the East Turkistan Islamic Movement and other Uighur separatist groups and the HT.

The government of Akaev had taken several measures to control the spread of radical ideas. One was the adoption of a strict licensing system regulating the publication of religious printed matter, by the Ulema Council, Kyrgyzstan's foremost spiritual body for Islamic affairs. A number of other regulations were also passed by the Kyrgyz State Commission for Religious Affairs to govern religious expression and counter radical elements. In November 2003, the Supreme Court of the Kyrgyz Republic issued a ban on four Islamic groups. Henceforth the activity of these groups, which the court officially labeled as terrorist and extremist, is considered illegal within the republic. HT was declared extremist, the Islamic Party of Turkestan, the East Turkestan Liberation Organization, and the East Turkestan Islamic Party were declared terrorist.<sup>10</sup>

The Kyrgyz law-enforcement authorities have responded with a series of raids on the houses of suspected HT members. In Osh, for example, authorities arrested nine local residents in early April 2004 for allegedly distributing Hizb material.<sup>11</sup> Several HT supporters have been arrested in Bishkek. All the detainees are being accused of violating either Article 297 or 299 of the country's criminal code, which forbid efforts to bring about "the forcible change of the constitutional system," and attempts to "foment national, racial and religious enmity". Kyrgyzstan's National Security Service (SNB) shut down an underground printing press in Jalalabad that produced materials for HT.<sup>12</sup> The two-month operation reportedly resulted in the confiscation of 300 leaflets, 400 magazines, and more than 1,000 brochures, most of them printed in Uzbek. The press was located in a private apartment.

In April 2004, the National Border Service opened an Interagency Training Centre, which will focus on training to fight illegal migration and terrorism.

The March 2005 parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan once again brought the Hizb ut- Tahrir under close scrutiny by the international community. The anti-government propaganda of HT had some contribution to the public uprising against the Akaev government. At the same time, the Hizb leadership did not

support the new government, as it does not differentiate between interim leaders and former president Askar Akaev's administration. Hizb members view the events of March 24 as a reshuffle of power, lacking any radical policy departure. "We will support people and the government representatives only when they defend the interests of Islam. Disputes between the people and President Askar Akaev's government were part of a democratic ideology which is alien to Hizb ut-Tahrir," according to Dilyor, a Hizb activist in Kara-Suu.<sup>13</sup>

Islamic radicals associated with HT, remain on the sidelines of Kyrgyzstan's revolution, preoccupied with internal squabbling over the underground group's strategy and tactics. Nevertheless, Hizb leaders remain hopeful that the Kyrgyz revolution will ultimately lead to the expansion of the movement's influence, especially in southern Kyrgyzstan.

New Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiev has been dismissive of Hizb's ability to influence Kyrgyzstan's political future. Meanwhile, his Prime Minister Feliks Kulov appears far more wary of Hizb's capabilities. In an interview with the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* in April 2005, Kulov warned that Hizb was prepared to take advantage of the "vacuum" created by Akaev's sudden departure from power. The dissonance between the two Kyrgyz leaders can be attributed to their regional allegiances. Bakiev comes from the south and does not want to emphasize the role of Islamic elements in projecting him to power. Kulov is a northerner and therefore freer in his evaluation.

Public support for HT has however slackened in recent months. One reason for the decline is an intensive government crackdown. Another, perhaps more important factor is the rise in political activism in the country associated with the parliamentary election, especially in southern Kyrgyzstan. People discovered that they could seek redress of economic, social and political grievances through political channels, rather than joining Hizb, which must operate underground. In addition, mainstream Muslim leaders succeeded in putting spiritual issues on the political agenda, enabling public debate on religion's role in society. This significantly reduced Hizb's appeal as an outlet for discussion of spiritual issues. It is precisely that democratic process that some say might have weakened the appeal of HT. Until recently, HT's popularity was partly based on its role as an outpost of dissent in the authoritarian countries of Central Asia. But the revolution gave many Kyrgyz an alternative channel for voicing their discontent. It also gave them a rare opportunity for legitimate political participation. Revolution has made it easier for Muslims in Kyrgyzstan to gather at state-controlled mosques to discuss political and economic problems -- something that was restricted during Akaev's rule and impossible in neighbouring Uzbekistan. With a loosening of such religious restrictions, according to some, the appeal of an underground outlaw group like HT is bound to fade.<sup>14</sup>

Analysts say Kyrgyzstan's March revolution, in addition to dampening HT's appeal, has also deepened an already existing internal split in the group. There have been suggestions that HT is no longer united in the goal of nonviolent methods to achieve its ends. One branch still advocates a peaceful, global Islamic revolution. But another is pressing for a shift to more forceful means

and focusing on revolution in a single country rather than regionwide. "Experts say this split started one to two years before the revolution, when opinions changed within Hizb ut-Tahrir," said Alisher Saipov, an independent journalist from the southern Kyrgyz town of Osh. "These groups emerged after internal squabbling. At present, some HT members say the debate over the method of fighting is ongoing -- as are the splits."<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, the continued tension between the regime and opposition in neighbouring Uzbekistan continues to pose dangers for the stability of Kyrgyzstan. In an interview with the *BBC's Kyrgyz Service* on 7 September 2005, Prime Minister Feliks Kulov partially supported recent charges by Uzbek officials that armed militants might have used Kyrgyz territory as a staging ground before the May violence in Andijan "As regards the accusations by the Uzbek chief prosecutor's office that some militants who took part in the Andijan events were Kyrgyz citizens, my answer is that, to some degree, this claim is justified because there have been cases when citizens of our country, as well as non-citizens, have acquired Kyrgyz passports by paying bribes," Kulov said. Kulov blamed Kyrgyzstan's weak border-protection and security services, but he noted that the government is taking steps to ameliorate the situation. "I think now, together with our partners in the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, with the help of Western nations, we will be able to resolve this problem, tighten border protection and strengthen our fight against drug trafficking," he said. Kulov's remarks contrast with recent statements by other Kyrgyz officials denying the Uzbek claims.

## **Kazakhstan**

The Kazakh leadership is starting to reluctantly admit the growth of religious extremist activity in the country. Earlier on, it was dismissing the danger and somewhat patronizingly suggesting that Islamism was present only in neighbouring Central Asian states. It was supposedly marginal in Kazakhstan and limited to Uzbek and other ethnic minorities, such as the Uighurs, Chechens and Azerbaijanis, but not the Kazakhs.

The Chimkent region of southern Kazakhstan, which borders Uzbekistan, is regarded by the Kazakh authorities as the main breeding-ground for religious extremism in the republic. Kazakh officials speak of the widespread presence of "Wahhabis", a term frequently deployed in Central Asia to describe both Islamic extremists and ordinary Muslims who simply worship outside state-controlled structures. The attention paid by the authorities to Chimkent region in particular is easily explained: the overwhelming majority of the republic's 330,000 ethnic Uzbeks are concentrated in Chimkent region, making up around 18 per cent of its population. Generally, the Uzbeks are far more devout than the Kazakhs, and consequently the number of Islamic radicals among them is much greater.<sup>16</sup>

Several foreign experts have echoed government concerns about the alleged activity of Islamic extremists in southern Kazakhstan. Speaking on 7 November 2001 at the Slavic University in Bishkek, Professor Aleksei Malashenko, a

scholar-in-residence at the Carnegie Moscow Centre, declared that the threat posed by Islamic extremists in Kazakhstan was greater than in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>17</sup>

The terrorist group "Jamaat of Central Asian Mujahideen," which is structurally affiliated with al-Qaeda, has been exposed and dismantled in Kazakhstan. According to Vladimir Bozhko, first deputy director of Kazakhstan's National Security Committee (KNB), the group included four female members, trained as suicide bombers, from the Southern Kazakhstan Oblast. Bozhko added that group members were found to have about 2,000 audio- and videocassettes featuring terrorist propaganda, including messages from Osama bin Laden. The group also had fake passports and equipment to produce counterfeit documents, as well as components for basic explosive devices, ammunition and weapons.<sup>18</sup>

According to Bozhko, KNB operatives identified and detained one citizen of Uzbekistan, Abos Usmonov, who "had received an assignment from abroad and, with his accomplices, he was preparing to organize terrorist acts in Uzbekistan against one of the high-ranking officials of that country". Bozhko also stated that the Jamaat was administered from abroad through appointed leaders - emirs. One of them, Akhmed Bekmurzayev, was killed during the counterterrorist operations in Tashkent in March 2004. The second emir is Zhakshybek Biimurzayev, an ethnic Kyrgyz from Kyrgyzstan; he also had citizenship papers from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Investigators say the latter organized the terrorist attacks in Tashkent in March-April and in July of 2004.<sup>19</sup>

East Turkestan (Uigur) radical groups connected to al-Qaeda and Iraqi insurgents are present in Kazakhstan too. The Uigur community in Kazakhstan is generally unhappy with President Nazarbaev's policy and accuses him of not caring about the plight of Uighurs in China. The government of Kazakhstan, hypersensitive to Chinese reaction, has always distanced itself from the East Turkestan problem and the plight of the Chinese Uighurs, despite the fact that the government's decision to ignore the reprisals against ethnic minorities in China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region drew sharp criticism from Uighurs living in the Almaty region. Demands for ethnic solidarity were clearly voiced at the founding Congress of the Interstate Committee of East Turkestan held in Almaty on January 11, 1992. Under pressure from the Muslim population, Kazakh authorities registered the East Turkestan Committee but simultaneously denied registration to the Organization for Liberation of Uighurstan.<sup>20</sup>

The largest group of Uighurs in Central Asia is in Kazakhstan. According to the census of 1999, Uighurs comprised 210, 3000 or 1.4 per cent of total population. 46,7333 Uighurs live in Kyrgyzstan, or about 1 per cent of the total population.<sup>21</sup> The emergence of newly independent states in Central Asia inspired Uighurs both in Central Asia and Xingiang to struggle for independence for Eastern Turkestan, while democratic changes in post-Soviet societies activated the Uighur political movement in Central Asia, especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. China has been using its economic and political power to pressure Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to halt external Uighur

influences from penetrating Xingiang. Under Chinese pressure the government of Kazakhstan stiffened its policy toward the Uighurs. As a result many Uighur cultural institutions established during the Soviet Union were closed down. In 1996, even the Institute of Uighur Studies of the Kazakh Academy of Sciences ceased to exist. The hours of Uighur television broadcasts have been limited.<sup>22</sup>

According to Kazakh experts, there are four separatist organizations in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan involved in anti-Chinese activities in Xingiang. They are: the Unified National Revolutionary Front of Eastern Turkestan, Organization of Liberation of Uighurstan, International Committee for Liberation of Eastern Turkestan and Yana Ayat. The four groups differ about the tactic of their struggle but basically prefer radical overthrow of government in Xingiang.<sup>23</sup> Konstantin Syroezhkin, however, believes that most of the Kazakh and Kyrgyz members of the radical groups are migrants from China of recent years. They lack education and do not belong to the Uighur elite. They are normally of older age, believe in the break up of China and count on Western support.<sup>24</sup> Further radicalization of the Uighur movement in Central Asia is however possible. There is a great degree of Uighurophobia in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Uighur intellectuals in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan complain that constant attempts are being undertaken to label Uighurs as unpatriotic. They are suspected of trying to create Great Uighurstan that would include parts of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

In October 2004, the Supreme Court of Kazakhstan recognized al-Qaeda, the East Turkestan Islamic Party, the Kurdish People's Congress, and the IMU as terrorist groups, a decision that prohibits them from any activity in the country. The ban on activities of the Islamic Party of East Turkestan and the Kurdish People's Congress was obviously aimed at demonstrating Kazakhstan's support for Chinese and Turkish anti-separatist efforts on the one hand, and the government's commitment to fighting international terrorism on the other.

Some experts, such as Nurlan Aliyazov suggest the presence in Kazakhstan of a little known group of Takfirshilar.<sup>25</sup> The essence of *takfir* (declaration of unbelief or departure from Islam) is a mandatory participation in *Jihad*. The first advocates of *takfir* appeared in Kazakhstan in the mid-1990s after the mass return of Kazakh citizens studying at religious educational institutions in Bashkortostan and Tatarstan. The advocates of the idea of *takfir* in Kazakhstan call themselves *takfirshilar* or Hizbu Takfir. The organization considers the official Board of Muslims of Kazakhstan as infidels. Takfirshilar is mainly composed of ethnic Kazakh citizens. As opposed to HT, *takfir* advocates consider military jihad to be the primary means of achieving their objective - the establishment of an Islamic state. The activities of the *takfirshilar* have not caused serious problems yet. The movement is small in numbers. But the mere presence of such a movement leads to a growing split in the Muslim community of Kazakhstan and the growth of antigovernment and other radical feelings among Muslims.

It is however HT that is becoming particularly worrisome for the Kazakh government as more and more cells are operating in the country. They are also spreading all over the country now and are not limited to the south. The

number of Kazakh members of HT is on the rise too. Most of the new members are attracted to HT for social and economic reasons. Kazakhstan's economic progress may be impressive but it is not even and has in fact led to greater polarization in Kazakh society. In 2004, Kazakhstan arrested and tried more than 60 individuals suspected of participation in HT activities.<sup>26</sup> They were prosecuted under the criminal code for "participating in activities of illegal organizations" and "inciting social, national, tribal, racial, or religious hatred". In March 2005, the Astana City Court ruled to recognize HT as an extremist organization and to ban it in Kazakhstan.<sup>27</sup> The ruling came in response to a request from the Prosecutor-General's Office.

The lower house of the Kazakh parliament voted in May 2005 to adopt stricter anti-terror legislation. The legislation, a set of amendments to 11 existing national security laws, imposes heavier penalties for "extremist and terrorist activities," including "terrorist financing," and introduces more restrictive measures governing the activities and formal registration of religious organizations and political parties.<sup>28</sup> One of the most significant amendments criminalizes the financing of political parties by foreign nationals. The move followed the adoption in February 2005 of a set of laws aimed at countering "extremism".

The new legislation has however alarmed the religious communities of Kazakhstan as well as the human rights groups. The law enforcement agencies have already been accused of expelling Christian and Muslim missionaries. The proposed amendments to Kazakhstan's law on religion would for the first time formally forbid the activities of unregistered religious organizations. A new article will be inserted in the Code of Administrative Offences to punish with heavy fines those leading, taking part in, or financially supporting unregistered or banned religious organizations. This will make it very difficult for small religious communities which are fewer than the number they would need to register. Muslims who want to practise outside the structures of the state-sanctioned Muslim Board would likely face penalties. Kazakhstan would thereby join neighbouring Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan in banning the activities of unregistered religious organizations. The new law would also make missionary activities more difficult. Missionary work without the appropriate registration would attract a fine, while foreigners would be expelled from Kazakhstan. Human rights groups have expressed concerns that the definition of "extremism" in the law is so vague that it could be applied to any religious association.

Kazakhstan has positioned itself as a staunch supporter of the war on terror. Kazakhstan is undoubtedly establishing itself as a state actively cooperating in the war on terror and keen to promote an image of itself as being at the heart of Eurasian efforts to create a more stable environment, clearly benefiting domestic economic investment. But at the micro level, experts within Kazakhstan are beginning to question the state's anti-terrorist agenda and demonstrate diverse views on defining its future contours. Dosym Satpayev, Director of the Kazakhstani Risk Assessment Group, has attacked the current domestic system aimed at combating terrorism, claiming it is inefficient. Speaking at a roundtable event in Almaty on October 26, 2004 under the rubric

"An Anti-Terror System in Kazakhstan: Illusions, Reality, and Prospects," he delineated the nature of the present counter-terrorist facade in Kazakhstan. In Satpayev's view, "maintaining the state monopoly over ensuring safety for the individual and society from terrorist threats" forms an impediment to reforming the present system. He continued: "Unfortunately, Kazakhstan lacks a full-fledged anti-terrorist system, which should consist of a whole set of mutually related initiatives both from the state and society."<sup>29</sup>

One challenge facing Kazakhstan, as it seeks to improve its counter-terrorist capabilities, is to formulate a system that engages the public, bridging the gap between the state agencies responsible for counter-terrorism and the general public; one that fosters the close cooperation of the individual in remaining vigilant and understanding the nature of the security environment. At present, security structures and their counter-terrorist work often seem remote from the public. Analytical structures must devote more time and resources to examining the background and emergence of terrorist threats, exploring practical ideas in meeting these threats with an emphasis placed upon preventing attacks and disrupting terrorist activities. Unfortunately, the force component of the anti-terrorist system often becomes absolute and is viewed as a panacea for political extremism, although the special services' forceful operations against extremist and terrorist organizations are only the ultimate measure showing that other resources have been exhausted.

The underlying conviction among Kazakhstan's own experts, therefore, is that the country suffers from an anti-terrorist system that is dated, slow to react to crisis, and often plagued by corruption. It urgently requires greater engagement with the public, more attention to analysis of the origins and evolving nature of terrorist threats, and more efficient information tools. These measures are only possible with the support and direction of the political authorities, which have proven committed to the war on terror at least on the international scene. It now has to internalize this appetite for action and modernize its dated structures and approaches to counter terrorism. What seems encouraging, though by no means conclusive, is the growing awareness of the challenges among Kazakhstan's own experts and analysts.

### **International and regional counterterrorist cooperation**

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have been actively involved in international and regional efforts to contain religious extremism and terrorism. Almaty and Bishkek have signed most of the international anti-terrorism agreements and participate in the work of the UN Security Council's Counterterrorism Committee. In January 2005, Kazakhstan hosted the meeting of the Counterterrorism Committee in Almaty. In his welcoming remarks to the participants, Kazakhstan's President Nazarbaev stated that the forceful methods of fighting terrorism were not sufficient. Instead he called to deal with the root causes of the problem, such as human rights violations, poverty and environmental degradation. He also noted the uneven process of globalization and the growing gap between the rich and poor nations as another source of insecurity and instability.<sup>30</sup> President Nazarbaev has been actively promoting

an international inter-religious dialogue. The first meeting of leaders of world and traditional religions was held in Kazakhstan in 2003.

Central Asian states have been trying to energize the counterterrorism agenda of the so far inert Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO), which comprises Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Representatives of the security services from the CACO member states met in Dushanbe on 21 January 2005 to discuss cooperation in combating threats to the region. In a written statement after the session, participants said that they discussed the need for a common list of terrorist and extremist organizations and their known members in the CACO region. According to Tajik Security Minister Khayriddin Abdurahimov, "this would enable the security services to fight terrorism and prevent the activities of terrorist organizations more effectively". The meeting also examined the issue of simplified extradition procedures for citizens of CACO member states involved in terrorist and extremist activities.<sup>31</sup>

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan consider Russia to be their closest partner in dealing with religious extremism and therefore treat the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) which also includes Armenia, Belarus, and Tajikistan as the key regional body in that sense. Kyrgyzstan hosts a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) counterterrorism centre in its capital, Bishkek, as well as a Russian air force base in Kant. The CSTO has set up rapid-deployment forces in the region. At the meeting of heads of CSTO member states in Moscow on 23 June 2005, future steps for strengthening of multilateral military cooperation within organization were discussed. The attending leaders allegedly discussed the possibility of opening a new CSTO military base in Kyrgyzstan -- which presumably would be operated by Russia - - and agreed to the creation of a centre to combat drug trafficking. Speaking at a news conference after the summit, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov said Russia was concerned by "the real terrorist threat in Central Asia".<sup>32</sup> In June 2004, the Kyrgyz, Tajik and Kazakh Border Services held joint exercises along their common borders to improve regional cooperation against terrorists. In July 2004, Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan held *Rubezh 2004* joint military counterterrorism exercises in Kyrgyzstan. *Rubezh 2005* military exercises were held in Tajikistan on 2-6 April 2005. The exercises, involving around 1,000 troops from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan, were originally to have been held in Kyrgyzstan on 29 March-2 April.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are also involved in the expanding anti-terrorist activities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) which also includes China, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. On 15 June 2001, the SCO adopted the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism. The Convention offered the following definitions of the "three evils":

- 1) "terrorism" means any act intended to cause death or serious bodily injury to a civilian, or any other person not taking an active part in the hostilities in a situation of armed conflict or to cause major damage to any material facility, as well as to organize, plan, aid and abet such act, when the purpose of such act, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population, violate public security or

to compel public authorities or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act, and prosecuted in accordance with the national laws of the Parties;

2) "separatism" means any act intended to violate territorial integrity of a State including by annexation of any part of its territory or to disintegrate a State, committed in a violent manner, as well as planning, preparing and abetting such act, and subject to criminal prosecuting in accordance with the national laws of the Parties;

3) "extremism" is an act aimed at seizing or keeping power through the use of violence or changing violently the constitutional regime of a State, as well as a violent encroachment upon public security, including organization, for the above purposes, of illegal armed formations and participation in them, criminally prosecuted in conformity with the national laws of the Parties.

At a summit in Astana on 5 July 2005, the heads of the SCO member states approved a plan for fighting terrorism, separatism and extremism. In the declaration, SCO members pledged not to give refuge to individuals accused or suspected of terrorist, separatist or extremist activities.<sup>33</sup> Tajik President Imomali Rakhmonov proposed at a meeting of the CIS Defence Ministers Council in Dushanbe on 24 June 2005 that the SCO should create rapid-deployment forces.<sup>34</sup> Rakhmonov said that the SCO needs "strong collective rapid-deployment forces to counter international terrorism and religious extremism".

The SCO's antiterrorist cooperation is however impeded by a number of factors. The Chinese formula of fighting all the three evils - terrorism, separatism and extremism, does not fully resonate with other SCO members' interests. Identification of separatists or extremists is particularly problematic. Russia does not want SCO to divert Central Asian states from a close military cooperation within CSTO. Kazakhstan is wary of joint military exercises in SCO and fears general transformation of the organization into a military grouping. The Kazakh officials emphasize the confidence-building nature of the organization. Kyrgyzstan apparently turned down a Chinese offer of a military base on its territory. Acting Deputy Prime Minister Madumarov told a press conference on 29 July 2005 in Almaty, Kazakhstan, where he was on an official visit, that Kyrgyzstan does not intend to host a Chinese military base.<sup>35</sup> According to Madumarov, "The question of deploying a Chinese military base on Kyrgyz territory was raised at a very high level, but Bishkek's position is unambiguous -- we are not prepared to turn the country into a military and political staging ground. We have enough strength and means to defend Kyrgyzstan's sovereignty."

In accordance with the SCO charter and the SCO Convention on Fighting Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism of June 15, 2001, the Executive Committee of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of Shanghai Organization Cooperation (RATS SCO) started functioning from 1 January 2004 in Tashkent. RATS spent most of 2004 and 2005 elaborating the legal and normative basis of the SCO's cooperation in fighting terrorism, separatism and extremism. It has compiled a list of organizations to be banned in the SCO states as well as a list of individuals sought for or suspected of terrorist, extremist and separatist

activities. It is creating a data base to collect and exchange relevant information. RATS has developed a plan of joint antiterrorist exercises of SCO member states. The Centre however encounters a number of difficulties too. Its location in Tashkent and the fact that an Uzbek General is in charge of it at the moment have coloured the activities of the Centre and led to some misunderstandings and problems. Kazakhstan denounced the statement of RATS Director Vyacheslav Kasimov who accused Kazakhstan of giving shelter to terrorists and even stated that “parts of Kazakh territory have been purchased by Osama bin Laden owned companies”.<sup>36</sup> RATS also rushed to support Islam Karimov’s crack down on protests in Andijan even if Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan did not fully share the one-sided Uzbek interpretation of Andijan events and under international pressure allowed the Uzbek refugees to flee from their territories to third countries. In a special statement on 26 May 2005 RATS fully sided with the Uzbek interpretation of disturbances and accused members of "Acromiya" - militant wing of HT, of coordinating the insurgency. It praised the “resolute actions” of the leadership of Uzbekistan.<sup>37</sup>

## **The US role**

The September 11 attacks led the US Administration to realize it was crucial to the national interests of the United States to greatly enhance relations with the five Central Asian countries to prevent them from becoming harbors for terrorism. According to Assistant Secretary of Defense Crouch in testimony in June 2002, “our military relationships with each Central Asian nation have matured on a scale not imaginable prior to September 11<sup>th</sup>.”<sup>38</sup>

Kyrgyzstan provided basing for combat and combat support units at Manas for US and coalition forces (in 2005, US troops reportedly number about 1,500). Uzbekistan provided a base for US operations at Karshi-Khanabad (in 2005, reportedly 900 US troops) and a base for German units at Termez. Kazakhstan provided overflight rights and expedited rail transshipment of supplies. Turkmenistan permitted blanket overflight and refuelling privileges for humanitarian flights. Tajikistan permitted use of its international airport in Dushanbe for refuelling and hosted a small French unit. The United States’ security assistance was boosted to the region in the aftermath of 9/11 but has lessened somewhat in 2003-2005. Security and law enforcement aid was \$187.55 million in 2002, \$101.5 million in 2003, and \$69.6 million in 2004.<sup>39</sup>

The US government has moved to classify several groups in the region as terrorist organizations, making them subject to various sanctions. In September 2000, the State Department designated the IMU as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, stating that the IMU resorts to terrorism, actively threatens US interests, and attacks American citizens. The designation made it illegal for US entities to provide funds or resources to the IMU; made it possible to deport IMU representatives from, or to forbid their admission to, the United States; and permitted the seizure of its US assets. It also permitted the United States to increase intelligence sharing and other security assistance to Uzbekistan.<sup>40</sup>

In August 2002, the United States announced that it was freezing any US assets of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), since the group had committed numerous terrorist acts in China and elsewhere and posed a threat to Americans and US interests. In September 2002, the United States, China and other nations asked the UN to add ETIM to its terrorism list.

On the other hand, the United States has not yet classified HT as a terrorist group. According to the State Department's *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001*, "despite regional governments' claims, the United States has not found clear links between HT and terrorist activities." Reflecting this view, US officials have criticized Central Asian governments for imprisoning HT members who are not proven to be actively engaged in terrorist activities, and for imprisoning other political and religious dissidents under false accusations that they are HT members. According to a November 2002 State Department fact sheet, HT has not advocated the violent overthrow of Central Asian governments, so the United States has not designated it a Foreign Terrorist Organization. The State Department is monitoring HT because it has "clearly incite[d] violence" since September 11, 2001, such as praising Palestinian suicide attacks against Israel, denouncing the basing of US-led coalition forces in Central Asia, and calling for jihad against the United States and the United Kingdom. Nonetheless, the State Department has urged the Central Asian governments to "prosecute their citizens for illegal acts, not for their beliefs". Reportedly, in late 2004 the US Administration was reassessing its stance on HT.<sup>41</sup>

The US Administration has officially rejected the idea of permanent military bases in Central Asia. According to a November 2002 State Department fact sheet, the United States does not intend to establish permanent military bases in Central Asia but does seek long-term security ties and access to military facilities in the region for the foreseeable future to deter or defeat terrorist threats. The fact sheet also emphasizes that the US military presence in the region will likely remain as long as operations continue in Afghanistan. More recently, the *Washington Post* reported on March 25, 2004, that the Administration may be considering asking Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan for long-term access to military facilities for emergency training and staging by rapid-reaction forces under a new US military basing strategy. The countries might serve as "forward operating sites" with only small US military support staffs or as "cooperative security locations" with no permanent US military presence. During a February 2004 visit to Uzbekistan, Secretary Rumsfeld stated that there were no plans for permanent US bases in the region but that issues of US basing strategy worldwide had been discussed with the Uzbek leadership, including possible "operating sites ... where the United States and coalition countries could periodically and intermittently have access and support."<sup>42</sup>

The US military cooperation with Central Asia is however facing serious challenges due to an angry Uzbek reaction to Western criticism of the Andijan events as well as China's and Russia's growing concern about the US's alleged role in sponsoring "orange revolutions" in Central Asia. In the SCO summit's final declaration on 5 July 2005, the Organization asked the forces in the US-led coalition in Afghanistan to clarify a timeframe for withdrawal from US bases

in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The declaration noted that several SCO countries have "provided their above-ground infrastructure for the temporary deployment of the military contingents of coalition member states." It continued, "Taking into account the conclusion of the active military phase of the antiterrorist operation in Afghanistan, the member states of the SCO consider it essential for the appropriate participants in the antiterrorist coalition to decide on the final timeframes for the temporary use of the above-mentioned infrastructure objects and the maintenance of military contingents on the territory of SCO member states."

Soon after, the Uzbek authorities asked the United States to pull all military forces out of the Karshi-Khanabad air base. The decision came only days after US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld visited neighbouring Kyrgyzstan and received assurances from Bishkek officials that the US air base can remain there as long as needed. In an interview with the Kyrgyz newspaper *Litsa* published on 21 July, Kyrgyz National Security Secretary Miroslav Niyazov said that the withdrawal of the US military base from Kyrgyzstan will be possible only when Afghanistan is completely stabilized. He continued, "In this, we must be guided by our national interests and the interests of Central Asia as a region. We will have to manoeuvre in this situation so that our country's security interests, as well as its national, territorial and economic interests are not harmed." While noting that Russia remains Kyrgyzstan's traditional strategic partner, Niyazov stressed, "It is difficult today to imagine our society without the presence of the West and the United States. It would be desirable for us to build equal, businesslike relations with everyone based on goal of developing our country." Despite this reassuring comment, some skeptics believe that the Kyrgyz government treats the United States more like a source of economic help though increased rental fees for the use of the Manas basing facility rather than a genuine partner in combating Islamic radicalism.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

It is quite clear that the US security cooperation with Central Asian states has reached a critical stage and needs to be seriously reassessed. It is impossible for the United States to continue balancing the counterterrorism and human rights agendas without seriously undermining one or the other cause. The Kyrgyz revolution and Uzbek counterrevolution suggest that a new strategy needs to be elaborated which would acknowledge the emerging extremist threats in Central Asia, the peculiarities of individual Central Asian states and the evolving trends in regional counterterrorism cooperation.

Some of those issues were identified and discussed at the October 29, 2003 *Hearing before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia of the Committee on International Relations of the US House of Representatives*. It was stated by the majority of the experts invited to the hearing that the secular regimes of Central Asia have little to no democratic legitimacy. Most of their rulers are Soviet-era communist party leaders. Almost no political space is left for secular opposition in these states. US objectives are thus jeopardized not only by the authoritarian parties of radical Islamic revolution such as Hizb, but

also by the authoritarian nature of these Central Asian regimes themselves—with their rampant corruption, declining living standards, poor delivery of public goods and services, and stagnant or declining economic growth rates. By governing so poorly and being intolerant and undemocratic, these regimes inadvertently breed religious extremism. The experts' recommendations remain valid today and included suggestions to expand intelligence collection on HT, condition security assistance to Central Asia on economic reform, encourage democracy and popular participation, discredit radicals and encourage moderates. The challenge remains how the US can support secular and moderate Islamic regimes and movements, foster tolerance, and promote freedom of expression and freedom of religion without being identified too closely with oppressive actions of Central Asian regimes. How can the US defeat radical Islamists in the realm of ideals, words, and symbols—not only on the battlefield?

Some, if not most, of these tasks can not be fulfilled in the Central Asian region alone, separate from a consistent and efficient global anti-terrorist campaign. At the same time, the global campaign has to be enhanced by adequate regional effort. There is no evidence of the United States seriously considering anti-terrorism cooperation with China and Russia in Central Asia. If the three nations can find a common language on nuclear developments in North Korea despite their differences of opinion on the North Korean regime, why is not an anti-terrorist forum possible in Central Asia? In Russia's case, it is necessary to separate Moscow's neoimperialist temptations from its genuine concern about radical Islam. China's separatist problem in Xingiang is more likely to be resolved through a gradual political dialogue rather than the activity of Uighur radicals. It is not possible for the United States to continue dismissing or denigrating the SCO which is becoming increasingly active in anti-terrorism. The United States needs to establish some sort of a dialogue with the SCO and recognize the constructive elements in its work. The promotion of the problematic GUAM grouping should be reconsidered as well.

The United States needs to clarify the role of its basing facilities in the Central Asian states. Linking their operation to the campaign in Afghanistan only and at the same time implying a certain broader geopolitical context for their existence discourages the Central Asian states from considering the United States as a key partner in dealing with their Islamic radicals. Parallel to the establishment of constructive relations with the SCO, the United States should make better use of the basing facilities for training regional antiterrorist forces.

Uzbekistan has discredited itself as a key strategic ally of the United States in Central Asia. The United States should therefore reorient itself to a more benign and predictable partner or partners in Central Asia. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan seem to be the best candidates for such a role. The US assistance to these countries would however have to vary. Kyrgyzstan is in a dire need of economic and financial assistance to retain the momentum of the antiauthoritarian revolution. Kazakhstan, on the other hand, needs to be diplomatically and politically assisted in preventing an "orange revolution" through a fair and open presidential election process in December 2005.

Finally, the United States has to review its attitude to the HT extremist organization. Currently, the experts are divided over whether banning it would do more good or harm to the anti-terrorist campaign in Central Asia. Since there seems to be a growing split within the HT ranks, the best option seems to be to designate and proscribe the militant wing of HT. Such a decision will be well received in Central Asia and would at the same time send a message to HT and the Central Asian regimes that the United States continues to distinguish between violent and non-violent political activism.

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