

Central Asia: Islamists in Prison

I. OVERVIEW

The number of Islamists in Kyrgyz and Kazakh prisons is small but growing, in both size and political significance. Well-organised Islamist proselytisers, mostly imprisoned on charges of religious extremism, are consolidating their position within the informal structures of power behind prison walls. Incarcerating determined activists is providing them with the opportunity to extend their influence among convicts, at first inside prison and then on their release. Problems within jails in Central Asia have been known to seep outside the prison walls; the expansion of radical Islamist thought within prisons is likely to have serious consequences. The paradox of the situation is that, in private at least, political leaders in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are intensely aware that the best way to defeat extremism is to address woeful social and economic conditions, fight the systemic top-to-bottom corruption that besets all the region's regimes, and in the words of one regional leader, "give people a future".

Faced with the risk of renewed Islamic insurgency in Central Asia as a result of conflict in Afghanistan and their own policy failures, governments are hitting out at radical Islamists, sending more of them to prison for longer. In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan the main target is Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), a clandestine political party which aims to create a caliphate in the Muslim world. If in the first part of this decade, Kazakh courts handed down sentences averaging one to three years to members of HT and similar groups, now the sentences are likely to be five to seven years and often longer. In November 2008, a Kyrgyz court sentenced a large group of Islamists to terms of up to twenty years for their part in a demonstration in the south of the country.

Such tough steps give the appearance of an effective policy, but probably advance the Islamist cause. Many Islamists, notably members of HT, view prisons as an important theatre of political struggle. They have targeted, apparently successfully, the *obshchak*, the organisation created by senior criminal prisoners that has traditionally been the main focus of power in Central Asian prisons. HT and other groups like Tablighi Jamaat have exploited the weakness of underfunded, demoralised and corrupt prison systems to extend their own networks and recruit within the prison population. They are helped by a program of prison mosque building, allegedly funded

in part by a major organised crime figure, where their own imams usually preach their brand of radical Islam. Prison directors, meanwhile, are often reduced to mere observers of the power struggle taking place within their own establishments.

In some places Islamists have established a modus vivendi with the *obshchak*; in others, as they grow in strength, they are competing with it for influence. Some veteran prison officials feel the time is rapidly approaching when Islamists will wield more power than criminal structures in prisons. This development is all the more striking – and ironic – as just a few years ago prison authorities were successfully using criminal prisoners to bring Islamists to heel.

It is easier to establish a picture of the penal system in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, the region's more liberal states, where at least some access is allowed both to prison officials and, in the case of Kyrgyzstan, prisoners. This attitude contrasts markedly with Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, where conditions are believed to be even worse, and numbers of jailed Islamists much higher, but where there is no access and little information about life behind prison walls. It is highly likely, however, that the developments discussed in this briefing reflect the general picture in the penitentiary systems of the other three countries.

The Islamists' prison struggle is just one dimension of a political strategy aimed at establishing an Islamic state across the whole region. The security agencies' failure to differentiate between non-violent religious movements and those openly committed to the armed struggle will deepen the divide between the observant Muslim population and central governments – a particularly dangerous development at a time when the risk of armed Islamic insurgency is growing.

Kyrgyzstan has announced plans for sweeping political and economic reforms, but previous declarations of root-and-branch change did not make the transition from promise to reality. Kazakhstan will preside over the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) next year, but there is little sign that it is interested in addressing its own human rights and governance problems. For over a decade in fact, muddle-through has been the strategy of choice for Central Asia's rulers. With the increasing armed threats coming from Afghanistan,

however, and deepening economic problems, time may no longer be on their side.

II. PRISONS IN CENTRAL ASIA

The structure of the penitentiary system in both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan has remained largely unchanged since Soviet times.¹ The Kyrgyz prison system is administered by the General Directorate for the Implementation of Punishments, GUIN.² Its Kazakh counterpart is KUIS, the Committee for the Criminal Correction System.³ In both countries newly arrested suspects are detained pending charges in a Temporary Remand Isolator (Russian acronym, IVS),⁴ usually located in a police building or compound. Once a case is under investigation, suspects move to Investigatory Isolators (Russian acronym, SIZO),⁵ until the completion of their trial. If convicted they are sent to prisons or, more often, correctional colonies,⁶ Soviet-era camp-style prisons where prisoners live in barracks each with 40 to 100 beds. There are in all six SIZOs and eleven correctional colonies in Kyrgyzstan; Kazakhstan has twenty SIZOs and 73 correctional colonies.⁷ Some prisoners, particularly those given exceptionally long prison sentences or life imprisonment, are held in SIZOs for lack of secure prison space. Conditions for such prisoners are said to be particularly harsh.

In 2009, Kyrgyzstan's prison population stood at 13,900,⁸ and Kazakhstan's at 59,141.⁹ Kyrgyzstan has an incarceration rate of roughly 133 per 100,000 population.

¹ For previous reports on related subjects see Crisis Group Asia Report N°176, *Women and Radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan*, 3 September 2009; Asia Report N°118, *Kyrgyzstan's Prison System Nightmare*, 16 August 2006; Asia Report N°58, *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir*, 30 June 2003; Asia Briefing N°11, *The IMU and the Hizb-ut-Tahrir: Implications of the Afghanistan Campaign*, 30 January 2002.

² In Russian ГУИН – Главное Управление Исполнения Наказаний. GUIN is the transliterated version of its Russian acronym. In October 2009 the GUIN became separate, autonomous body named Service for the Implementation of Punishments. As most of the events described in the report predate this change, the term GUIN has been retained.

³ In Russian: КУИС – Комитет Уголовно-Исполнительной системы.

⁴ In Russian Изолятор временного содержания.

⁵ In Russian Следственный Изолятор.

⁶ In Russian Исправительная колония (singular).

⁷ "Prison Brief for Kazakhstan", World Prison Brief, King's College London, www.kcl.ac.uk/depsta/law/research/icps/worldbrief/wpb_country.php?country=99.

⁸ Crisis Group interview, Taalaybek Nuraliyev, deputy head of GUIN, Bishkek, October 2009.

⁹ "Prison Brief for Kazakhstan", op. cit.

Kazakhstan has an incarceration rate of 382 per 100,000 population.¹⁰

Governments follow a two-track policy in their attempts to check the rise of Islamism. Civilian structures, notably the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims and the State Agency for Religions in the case of Kyrgyzstan, oversee clerical appointments and the content of their religious teachings. Security organisations monitor radical movements, try to dissuade them with so-called "prophylactic conversations" and, increasingly, imprison them. Neither track is working. The low quality of the civilian structures and the clergy they appoint has been the subject of considerable government debate recently.¹¹ Themselves secular in their world view, products of a Soviet system that embraced militant atheism as a core tenet, most senior officials have difficulty separating out the varying strands of resurgent Islam. In the absence of a viable opposition – a goal that Central Asian leaders have pursued with single-minded success – the ruling elites perceive, correctly, informal Islamist structures as a potentially vital focal point of opposition to their governments. They do not, however, make any distinction between political activism and armed resistance.

Prison, meanwhile, provides the Islamists with new opportunities for conversion. The gradual deterioration of the prison system has made it quite easy for them to continue their political activism and even communicate freely with the outside world. Following the withering of ambitious plans for penal reform at the beginning of the decade, the prisons of most Central Asian states have foundered into decay and ever deeper corruption.¹² Virtually everything is for sale in the prison, former and current penitentiary officials say. Large bribes will get prisoners transferred to the more comfortable conditions of prison hospitals, or to other prisons, or under exceptional circumstances to receive early release. Smaller bribes will ensure the safe passage of contraband, from drugs to banned political literature, into prisons. More junior personnel often rely on prisoners for loans, and run errands for them to supplement their meagre salaries. A former head of Kyrgyzstan's prison service remarked that junior staff "are at the criminals' beck and call,

¹⁰ In other Central Asia countries incarceration rates per 100,000 are 109 for Tajikistan; 122 for Uzbekistan; 224 for Turkmenistan. World Prison Brief, King's College London, www.kcl.ac.uk/depsta/law/research/icps/worldbrief/.

¹¹ For more details see Crisis Group Report, *Women and Radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan*, op. cit.

¹² See Crisis Group Report, *Kyrgyzstan's Prison System Nightmare*, op. cit.

because their pay is so small”.¹³ Islamists are copying the tactics of criminal prisoners, for their own ends.

Neither the prisons nor the state religious organisations receive much assistance from the non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector. One of the few NGO activists in the field, Kadyr Malikov, head of the Centre for Religion, Law and Politics in Bishkek, writes analytical material for the government, and gives lectures to the police “so that they won’t arrest everyone who wears a beard”.¹⁴ He believes Islamic libraries with moderate Islamic writings that could counter Hizb ut-Tahrir should be created in prisons. “The main problem is that prisoners only know about Islam in the interpretation of Hizb ut-Tahrir”.¹⁵

Behind prison walls the key administrative body is not the one run by the prison director and his staff. It is the *obshchak* – a many-layered self-help administrative and trading body set up by the prison’s criminal fraternity, with the blessing of major crime figures. A Western businessman incarcerated briefly in one country covered by this report recalls his first glimpse of the *obshchak*. On arrival in prison, his cell mates advised him not to eat the prison food, as it was foul, asked what he needed – phone, drugs or women – and offered their cooking and other support services, on credit if he did not have the money at hand.¹⁶ The *obshchak* controls virtually everything within the prison walls, including, according to prisoners and even some prison officials, the appointment of some of the prison administrators themselves.¹⁷

In the past the *obshchak* could be relied upon to impose their discipline on non-conformist prisoners – both as a favour to the prison administration and also to retain their power. This has changed in recent years, particularly in Kyrgyzstan. Common law criminals and Islamist¹⁸ detainees have established a *modus vivendi*, and in some

cases even an alliance. One hundred years ago, Tsarist prisons were widely described by communists and socialists as “universities of the revolution”. With the increased incarceration of Islamist radicals, Central Asian prisons risk becoming the universities of the Islamic revolution.

This update briefing concentrates on two countries, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Prisons in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan are closed to research and visits – even the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is refused access to Tajik prisons. While senior penitentiary and other officials in Kazakhstan agreed to talk, a researcher was not permitted to speak to either prisoners or prison warders.

III. ISLAMISTS AND THE STATE

A. MAIN ISLAMIST GROUPS

1. Hizb ut-Tahrir

Hizb ut-Tahrir is the largest and best-organised Islamist grouping in Central Asia, and the principal target of Kyrgyz and Kazakh security authorities. Clandestine and conspiratorial, it aims to restore the caliphate that once ruled the Muslim world. This will be done by gradual and peaceful means, the party claims, and will come to fruition when sufficient numbers understand the benefits of an Islamic state.¹⁹ According to one prominent specialist, “of all the banned Islamist groups in the former Soviet Union, Hizb ut-Tahrir is the only one that can be called a mass organisation. We are probably talking of tens of thousands of members, the majority in Uzbekistan, with thousands of members in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, hundreds (perhaps thousands) in Kazakhstan and Russia, as well as Azerbaijan and the Ukraine”.²⁰

HT has a sophisticated political structure; the quality of its leaders and organisers elicits grudging admiration even from their adversaries in the police and security organs. It concentrates on political agitation through the distribution of leaflets and video materials, community organising and – increasingly, some observers maintain – the infiltration of state structures. Outside observers feel there is no evidence linking the party directly to any

¹³ Crisis Group interview, Kapar Mukeyev, Bishkek, October 2008.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Kadyr Malikov, Bishkek, September 2009.

¹⁵ See Anton Lyman, “Kadyr Malikov: Kyrgyzstan has become the stage on which the interests of various countries, blocs and ideologies have clashed”, 24.kg News Service, 30 September 2009, www.24.kg/community/63453-kadyr-malikov-kyrgyzstan-stal-ploshhadkoj-na.html.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, December 2008. The businessman says he was the victim of an extortion attempt by senior government officials.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior government official, Bishkek, September 2008.

¹⁸ The term Islamist in this report is used to refer to political activists with an agenda of applying Islamic law, through peaceful democratic means, through missionary work, through non-violent advocacy or through violent jihad.

¹⁹ For the doctrine and organisation of Hizb ut-Tahrir, see Crisis Group Report, *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir*, op. cit.

²⁰ Ирина Бороган “ФСБ и движения Центральной Азии: анализ” [“The FSB and movements in Central Asia. An Analysis”], 18 April 2007, www.agentura.ru/experts/ponomarev/. Ponomarev believes that already in 1999, HT in Uzbekistan numbered around 15,000. Crisis Group correspondence with Vitaly Ponomarev, September 2009.

acts of violence, in the region or elsewhere.²¹ Regional governments, however, view HT as a menace to their very existence – a threat to Kazakhstan’s security and territorial integrity, according to a senior Kazakh official,²² or the most dangerous of the religious extremist organisations currently working in Kyrgyzstan, in the words of a senior Kyrgyz leader.²³

2. Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Islamic Jihad Union (IJU)

Although they have only a handful of prison inmates in either Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan, the two organisations,²⁴ both committed to the violent overthrow of Central Asian governments, probably represent the most serious near-term threat – to Tajikistan in the first place, Kyrgyzstan and other states later. Any increase in their activities is likely to trigger further repression of Islamists in general, regardless of their form of struggle, and quite possibly a hardening of state attitudes towards observant Muslims. Despite its name, IMU has over the years been transformed into a movement that draws in Islamists from most parts of the former Soviet Union – Central Asia, South and North Caucasus and other Muslim parts of Russia. There are no reliable estimates of the IMU’s fighting strength. Estimates by government analysts and regional journalists range from 1,000 to 5,000. After regrouping in Pakistan’s north-western tribal areas following the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, the group developed a reputation for ferocity, but has concentrated wholly on the struggle of its Pakistan fundamentalist hosts. It also allegedly developed close links to al-Qaeda.

IJU was formed in the early part of this century by dissident IMU activists who wanted to take the war back to Central Asia, and is thought to be considerably smaller. The distinction between the two groups may have been largely eroded by the death of IMU leader Tokhir Yuldashev, reportedly in a U.S. drone attack in August 2009. The new IMU leader, identified as Abdul Rahman, an ethnic Tatar, is thought to favour taking the fight back to Central Asia. Following recent Taliban gains in north-

ern Afghanistan, the IMU is reported to have concentrated significant numbers of fighters in Kunduz and other Afghan provinces on the border with Tajikistan. Others have reportedly returned to Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Arrests and armed clashes were reported in all three countries in late 2009, and both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan claimed to have rounded up a number of IMU militants in the latter part of 2009.²⁵

The growing perception that IMU/IJU armed militants are returning to wage jihad in Central Asia has already had serious political consequences. Indications that guerrillas are already in Tajikistan, and are using the country for small forays into neighbouring states, has deepened suspicions among some regional governments about Tajikistan’s long-term viability. It is no longer rare for government officials to move from expressions of general concern at the threat of Islamic militancy to very specific complaints that Tajikistan is incapable of countering guerrilla infiltration from Afghanistan.²⁶ Western officials express similar concerns about Tajikistan, and note that another potential IMU/IJU target, Kyrgyzstan, has the capacity to resist small-scale pressure; Uzbekistan, a tightly controlled police state, is generally viewed as more capable of resisting a major insurgency.²⁷

3. Tablighi Jamaat

Tablighi Jamaat is a South Asian-based missionary and revivalist organisation, founded in India in the late nineteenth century and influenced by Deobandi scholars. Pakistani missionaries brought it to Central Asia in the early 1990s. The majority of its estimated 10,000

²¹ Ibid. Ponomarev also said, “there is no reliable information of HT involvement in acts of terrorism either in the Russian federation or other countries”.

²² Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, www.mvd.kz/index.php?p=razdel_more&id5=145&id1=7.

²³ “‘Хизб ут-таһрир’ представляет угрозу безопасности Киргизии – Госагентство по делам религий” [“Hizb ut-Tahrir is a threat to Kirgizia’s security – the State Agency for Religious Affairs”], Regnum News Service, 20 October 2008, www.regnum.ru/news/1071976.html.

²⁴ Two IMU activists were reported to be held in Kyrgyzstan’s Committee for State Security SIZO as of November 2009.

²⁵ See for example: “Спецоперация на юге Кыргызстана по обезвреживанию группы террористов завершена” [“The special operation in southern Kyrgyzstan to disarm a group of terrorists ends”], 24.kg News Service, 23 June 2009; “Исламский джихад заявил об ответственности за теракты в Узбекистане” [“Islamic Jihad claims responsibility for terror acts in Uzbekistan”], Newsru website, 27 May 2009, www.newsru.com/arch/world/27may2009/jihad.html; “Four Tajiks jailed in first al-Qaeda trial”, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 31 August 2009, www.rferl.org/content/Four_Tajiks_Jailed_In_First_Al_Qaeda_Trial/1811133.html.

²⁶ These have become frequent themes in conversations with senior Central Asian officials. In late summer 2008, an adviser to the Kazakh president remarked that sooner or later Tajikistan will become an “Islamic state”. Later in the year a senior Kyrgyz expressed a total lack of confidence that Tajikistan would be able to resist any serious armed Islamist pressure. Crisis Group interviews, Almaty, September 2009; Bishkek, 7 November 2009.

²⁷ Some top regional leaders have their doubts about Uzbekistan’s real capacity to repel insurgents. “I just don’t believe that they are as strong as the West thinks”, said one. Crisis Group interview, late 2009.

followers are in Kyrgyzstan.²⁸ There are no figures available for the number of Tablighi Jamaat (TJ) activists in Kyrgyzstan's prisons. Visits to prison colonies, however, indicate there are at least several hundred behind bars, often for offences unrelated to their religious beliefs. They continue their missionary activities in prison, and claim plausibly to have converted hundreds of fellow inmates.²⁹ The prison authorities have until recently tended to look on TJ proselytisation more benevolently than activities of HT or so-called terrorist groups, and generally are doing little to limit their preaching.³⁰ There are considerably fewer TJ members in Kazakhstan, and a former senior official of the Kazakh penitentiary system says there were none imprisoned as of late 2008, when he retired.³¹

B. STATE SANCTIONS AGAINST ISLAMISTS – THE LINE HARDENS

Kyrgyzstan has traditionally been more liberal in its attitude towards Hizb ut-Tahrir than Tajikistan or Uzbekistan, where HT members have for years faced long prison terms. The country's previous president Askar Akayev, who was overthrown in 2005, at times suggested, albeit without any perceptible follow-up, that a dialogue with the movement was possible.³² Despite Uzbekistan's urgings – for example during a major crackdown on Uzbek HT activists following a spate of bombings in Tashkent in February 1999 – Kyrgyzstan did not follow its neighbour's hard line. For many years the only offences Islamists could be charged with were crimes such as incitement of inter-ethnic or inter-confessional enmity and calls to change the constitutional order. Despite ominous names they carried only light sanctions: fines, imprisonment of up to one year or a suspended sentence. Frequent amnesties ensured that even those who did receive custodial sentences were quickly released, while many avoided prosecution altogether by paying a bribe.³³

Over the last decade, the laws were tightened up, penalties were hardened, and new clauses added to the criminal code in both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Both countries introduced laws on extremism – Kazakhstan with amendments to the law on terrorism in 2004,³⁴ Kyrgyzstan in 2006, when its terrorism law was passed.³⁵ Eight Islamic organisations are currently banned in Kyrgyzstan, and fourteen in Kazakhstan.³⁶ These were followed by changes to the criminal code in both countries. In Kyrgyzstan, HT members can now be charged for being part of a criminal (or an organised) group, which carries a longer sentence. This allows heavier terms for related offences such as distribution of leaflets and other HT literature, which fall under extremism laws.³⁷ In Kazakhstan other new legislation included articles 233 and 235 of the Criminal Code, introduced between 2005 and 2009, which punished the creation of an organised criminal group by six to ten years' imprisonment.³⁸

A discussion over the wisdom of imprisoning HT activists continued for several years, with some senior security officials arguing that sending trained activists to prison was dangerously counterproductive.³⁹ The debate seemed to have been resolved when powerful figures close to Kyrgyzstan's president stated forcefully that HT represented a dangerous strain of obscurantism, and should be actively targeted by the policy and security services.⁴⁰ Large high-profile trials drove home the hard-line message. In 2007 a court in the Kazakh city of Karaganda sentenced 29 alleged HT members to sentences of up to seven years in prison on charges of forming and leading a criminal group, fomenting inter-ethnic and inter-confessional enmity and membership

²⁸ Бахтияр Бабаджанов: “‘Таблиг’ – политическая организация, цель которой - исламизация мира” [Bakhtiar Babajanov, “Tablig – a political organisation whose aim is the Islamisation of the world”], Ferghana.Ru website, 13 February 2009.

²⁹ Crisis Group visits to Kyrgyz prisons, Chuy oblast (province), October 2009.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, administrators of prisons in Chuy oblast, 2008-2009. This attitude may change following moves throughout the region to ban Tablighi Jamaat. See Section III.B below.

³¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, November 2009.

³² Crisis Group Briefing, *The IMU and the Hizb-ut-Tahrir: Implications of the Afghanistan Campaign*, op. cit., p. 11.

³³ Crisis Group research, Osh oblast, 2001-2005.

³⁴ Kazakhstan's Law “On the struggle against terrorism”, passed in 1999, was amplified and amended in December 2004. www.atcsng.ru/laws.cgi?id=226.

³⁵ Kyrgyzstan's law “On the counteraction of terrorism” was passed on 9 November 2006. www.atcsng.ru/laws.cgi?id=233.

³⁶ Crisis Group interview, head of the 9th Directorate of the Interior Ministry, Bishkek, October 2009. For the list of forbidden organisations in Kazakhstan, see www.procuror.kz/?iid=5&type=news&lang=ru&nid=2465.

³⁷ See Article 13, Point B, of Kyrgyzstan law “On the counteracting of terrorism”, passed 17 August 2005, www.atcsng.ru/laws.cgi?id=411.

³⁸ The Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan, www.agmp.kz/zakon/1/ug-kod.htm.

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Bishkek, late 2007. Many law enforcement and security officers in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan privately doubt the effectiveness of coercive methods. They argue that Kyrgyz and Kazakh societies are traditionally relaxed in their approach to Islam, and would be open to effective counter propaganda carried out by state-affiliated religious groups. The problem with this argument is the low quality of state-affiliated Muslim groups. See also Crisis Group Report, *Women and Radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan*, op. cit.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, June 2008.

in a proscribed extremist organisation.⁴¹ A Kyrgyz court in 2009 handed down even heavier terms – up to twenty years – against participants in demonstrations in the southern Kyrgyz town of Nookat. The demonstrators, who included some HT members, had each been charged with between five to eight offences.⁴²

A senior Kyrgyz interior ministry official summed up the rationale for the trials. “We brought them to their senses. They understood that there is a real power in this country”.⁴³ But he also admitted that the harsh sentences had another consequence. “It’s now harder to identify the leaders ... we are tougher with them, so they have gone underground”.⁴⁴ In the latter part of 2009 Kyrgyzstan’s Security Council declared its willingness to consider restoring the death penalty for serious crimes, among them offences connected to extremism. The head of the State Committee for National Security, Marat Sultalinov, proposed public executions: “then order would be restored in the country within two or three days”.⁴⁵

The crackdown on Tablighi Jamaat came much later. Tajikistan declared it illegal in March 2006.⁴⁶ Kyrgyzstan until recently took a mild approach to TJ. This has now changed, possibly under the influence of a Russian decision in May 2009 to declare it an extremist group.⁴⁷ Senior Kyrgyz law enforcement and security officials suspect TJ provides a fruitful recruiting ground for Hizb ut-Tahrir. Some claim the movement helps channel foreign funds to HT.⁴⁸ In September 2009 Kyrgyzstan’s Security Council called on the Supreme Court to declare TJ illegal.⁴⁹ Government restrictions on the movement, including a ban on its distinctive clothing, followed. Most Kyrgyz non-government specialists on the subject, on the other hand, feel that TJ could actually provide a barrier against HT’s further growth – a feeling shared by a number of rank-and-file law enforcement officers. In Kazakhstan, the group is not outlawed, but its preachers can be fined – or if they are not citizens expelled – as members of an unregistered organisation.⁵⁰

⁴¹ “В Караганде 1 августа начнется суд над лидерами и активистами ‘Хизб ут-Тахрира’, задержанными в конце прошлого года” [“The trial of leaders and activists who were arrested at the end of last year will start in Karaganda on August 1st”], Press Digest, 3 August 2007, www.knb.kz/page.php?page_id=12&lang=1&article_id=3015&fontsize=12&fontfamily=Times%20New%20Roman&page=9.

⁴² Muslims in Nookat, Osh *oblast*, protested against a local government ban of a Muslim festival on the town’s central square in October 2008. A crowd of protesters threw stones, breaking administrative building windows, and injured more than a dozen policemen. For further details see Crisis Group Report, *Women and Radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan*, op. cit.; and “Кыргызстан: нарушения прав человека в связи с делом о ‘Нокатских событиях’” [“Kyrgyzstan: human rights violations in connection with the ‘Nookat events’”], Memorial, 27 January 2009, www.memo.ru/2009/01/27/2701091.htm. Some sentences were thrown out and others reduced on appeal. Two underage prisoners had their terms reduced to five years each (from nine and ten), for example, while two women sentenced to sixteen and seventeen years had their terms cut to seven years each. “Верховный суд Кыргызстана оправдал 13 из 32-х ранее осужденных судами первых инстанций по ноокатским событиям” [“The Supreme Court of Kyrgyzstan dismissed charges against 13 of the 32 people convicted ... over the Nookat incident”], 24.kg News Service, 20 May 2009, 24.kg/investigation/50783-2009/05/20/113847.

⁴³ Crisis Group interview, senior interior ministry official, Bishkek, September 2008.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ “Секретарь Совбеза и глава ГКНБ высказываются за введение смертной казни” [“The secretary of the Security Council speaks out in favour of the introduction of the death penalty”], Aki-press News Service, 29 September 2009, <http://kg.akipress.org/print:123021/>.

⁴⁶ Центр антитеррористических программ, Аналитический доклад “Специфика проявлений терроризма и экстремизма в Центральной Азии: основные тенденции и итоги 2005-2006 гг” [“Anti-terror – a site on the problems of regional and national security”], 10 August 2006, www.antiterror.kz/?submenu=monitor.

⁴⁷ “ВС РФ признал экстремистской религиозную организацию ‘Таблиги Джамаат’” [“The Supreme Court of the Russian Federation declared ‘Tablighi Jamaat’ an extremist religious organisation”], Novosti News Service, 7 May 2007, www.rian.ru/defense_safety/20090507/170255843.html.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, senior interior ministry official, Bishkek, October 2009. The official suggested that TJ followers returning from studies abroad bring funds back for Hizb ut-Tahrir.

⁴⁹ “Совбез Кыргызстана рекомендовал Верховному суду рассмотреть вопрос о признании незаконными религиозные организации, несущие, по данным силовиков, угрозу нацбезопасности” [“The security council recommended that the Supreme Court consider the case of declaring illegal religious organisations that are according to security and police ministry data, a threat to national security”], 24.kg News Service, 23 September 2009, www.24.kg/community/63065-sovbez-kyrgyzstana-rekomendoval-verxovnomu-sudu.html.

⁵⁰ During hearings for one Guantanamo defendant, U.S. government documents described TJ as “a Pakistani-based-Islamic missionary organisation” that “is being used a cover to mask travel and activities of terrorists including members of Al Qaeda”. “Mohammed Ali Salem al Zarnuki”, The Guantanamo Docket, *The New York Times* (online), <http://projects.nytimes.com/guantanamo/detainees/691-mohammed-ali-salem-al-zarnuki>.

C. THE ISLAMIST RESPONSE – CHANGE OF TACTICS

With the introduction of harsher sentences, HT and other Islamists seemed to drop out of sight.⁵¹ The authorities declared victory. Kyrgyz and Kazakh law enforcement bodies both asserted that the crackdown had triggered a sharp drop in membership. Kazakhstan reported that 170 members left the party in 2007.⁵² A senior interior ministry official in Kyrgyzstan asserted that “hundreds” of activists had left after the Nookat trial.⁵³ The real impact was probably less than meets the eye. An expert suspects the defectors were probably supporters of the party, rather than full-fledged party members, who take an oath of allegiance and are reputed to be highly disciplined.⁵⁴

HT has not so much gone into retreat as changed tactics. If HT activists are less active in handing out leaflets on the street, this is probably because they have moved to the internet – a shift already adopted by party members in Uzbekistan.⁵⁵ The Kyrgyz HT in fact seems to have more resources after the Nookat incident. Following the trial, a number of sources say, its program of assistance to imprisoned members was regularised. Previously the party’s help was intermittent, with most of the burden falling on an imprisoned activist’s family or community. After Nookat, according to some sources, the movement’s top leadership in Kyrgyzstan decided to start actively supporting its prisoners. One prominent Kyrgyz specialist noted that the decision probably reflected an improvement in party funds after the demonstration and its aftermath: “they recruited more party members, membership contributions grew, so they started to help their

prisoners”.⁵⁶ HT in Kazakhstan has had a similar fund for several years.⁵⁷

IV. ISLAMISTS IN PRISON

A. A GROWING POPULATION

Some 54 Islamists are currently serving time in Kyrgyz prisons for terrorism or extremism.⁵⁸ Kazakhstan is holding between 200 and 250.⁵⁹ These include alleged members of the IMU and IJU, Hizb ut-Tahrir, various inmates classified loosely as “Wahhabis” and members of the Tablighi Jamaat. The longest-serving Islamists in Kyrgyzstan were sentenced for terror acts in the southern city of Osh in 1998 and the capital, Bishkek, in 2002.⁶⁰ Long-serving prisoners in Kazakhstan include members of the IMU and the IJU, the latter imprisoned in 2004 after a series of bombings in Uzbekistan.⁶¹

There is considerable circumstantial evidence, however, that the number of Islamists in prison is greater than this. Kyrgyz prison officials use a rough rule of thumb that equates Islamism with a commitment to praying five times a day – generally unusual in still relatively

⁵¹ The head of the Ninth Directorate of Kyrgyzstan’s interior ministry asserted that in the past two years party membership had not grown. The number of those registered by the police is 1,700. Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, September 2009. Similarly the former Deputy Justice Minister Sergey Zubov categorically stated in October 2008 that there had been no increase of HT cells inside prisons. Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, October 2008.

⁵² The Kazakh authorities suggested that arrested HT members called on their supporters to abandon the party in return for a guarantee they would not be prosecuted. “Суд над активистами ‘Хизб-ут-Тахрир’, 01.08.2007” [“Kazakh law enforcement bodies: The trial of Hizb ut-Tahrir activists, 1 August 2007”], National Security Committee of Kazakhstan, official website, 3 August 2007, www.knb.kz/page.php?page_id=12&lang=1&article_id=3015&fontsize=12&fontfamily=Times%20New%20Roman&page=8.

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, senior interior ministry official, Bishkek, September 2009.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group correspondence with expert, September 2009.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, expert, Bishkek, September 2009.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, September 2009.

⁵⁷ According to one source, in April 2006 the party received total funds of \$11,700, of which \$4,000 reportedly went to a prisoner support fund. Crisis Group interview, non-governmental researcher, Bishkek, October 2009.

⁵⁸ “Нурлан Турсункулов: В Кыргызстане в местах лишения свободы находятся 54 человека, осужденных за террористическую и экстремистскую деятельность” [“Nurlan Tursunkulov: There are 54 people sentence for terrorist or extremist activities in Kyrgyzstan’s prisons”], 24.kg News Service, 24 September 2009, <http://24.kg/parlament/63139-nurlan-tursunkulov-v-kyrgyzstane-v-mestax.html>. Tursunkulov was at the time Kyrgyzstan’s justice minister.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, expert, Almaty, October 2008.

⁶⁰ The best known incidents were the explosions in a minibus and in an apartment block in Osh in 1998; and in Bishkek in 2002, the murder of a leader of the Uighur diaspora, Nimat Bazakov, and explosions in large markets. Defence lawyers claimed that the accusations were supported by little in the way of evidence. Crisis Group interviews, lawyers, among them Nina Zotova and Sartpai Jaichibekov, Bishkek, 2006-2008.

⁶¹ On the IJU see, for example, “В Казахстане обезврежена террористическая группировка” [“A terror group is disarmed in Kazakhstan”], Factnews website, 11 November 2004, www.factnews.ru/article/11Nov2004_terra/. In closed trials the accused received long prison terms. “Члены террористической группы ‘Жамаат моджахедов Центральной Азии’ приговорены к длительным срокам заключения” [“Members of the Mujahid Jamaat of Central Asia sentenced to long prison terms”], Kazakhstan Today, 24 January 2006 www.kt.kz/index.php?act=arch&lang=rus&uin=1133168996&chapter=1138096891&n_date=2006-01-24.

secular Kyrgyz society. In most prison colonies, according to officials, between twenty and 40 pray five times a day.⁶² As there are six SIZOs and eleven colonies in Kyrgyzstan, this would indicate at the very least several hundred prisoners – many more than the official number of incarcerated Islamists. Officials were unable to say whether prisoners adopted this lifestyle before or after imprisonment, though it is widely thought that many Islamists have been recruited in prison. Interviews in prison made it clear that the prisoners did not only pray together five times a day, but lived together in compact groups, apart from other prisoners in their own section of the barracks or around the mosque. In some prisons, Islamists are allowed separate quarters, even the punishment cell block.⁶³

On Fridays many more prisoners attend the mosque, including in some cases the top representatives of the criminals' parallel administration. In some prisons the Islamist influence is extremely broad. In Colony Number 3 in the village of Pokrovka, Chuy province, Tablighi members have formed a cohesive group and keep in touch with the movement outside prison, the prison imam says. "In this prison, nearly all prisoners other than ethnic Russians support Tablighi Jamaat," he added.⁶⁴

B. THE STRUGGLE FOR DOMINATION

When Islamists started to arrive in Kyrgyz prisons, some ten years ago, neither they nor the prison administration knew what to expect. As a senior ministry of justice official put it, "the prison administration had hundreds of years of experience dealing with the criminal world. But these Islamists are a new challenge. It may take 50 years to work out how to handle them".⁶⁵ The Islamists themselves had a hard time, and a steep learning curve. In the early years they seemed to experiment – on one hand recruiting and trying to strengthen their position vis-à-vis the often hostile and suspicious criminal prisoners. On at least one occasion, however, they reportedly planned a mass jailbreak. In 2004, according to a former prison guard, Islamists in Prison No. 8 located in the village of Petrovka, some 45km from Bishkek, plotted to blow up a watch tower as a prelude to a mass escape. Explosives were acquired, but the plan was foiled.⁶⁶

Kyrgyz and Kazakh authorities used a variety of tactics as they struggled to control the newcomers. These included the classic response of confinement in punishment cells, attempts to infiltrate the Islamist groups, and investigations of illegal activities by Islamist prisoners, which could lead to additional sentences. Punishment cells are grim: usually small and without natural light, unheated in winter; the prisoner is denied visits and food parcels. Prisoners can be confined there for the most minor of infractions – not standing up in the presence of a prison official, for example.

Most Hizb ut-Tahrir members admitted that they had spent time in solitary confinement. One, asked whether the administration's harsh measures had any effect, answered, "we have a lot of time".⁶⁷ The tactic is still used, but it does not seem to have intimidated the activists. Corruption has also, to some degree at least, blunted the impact of the punishment cells. Even there, prisoners say, they still have access to forbidden items such as mobile phones. During a September 2008 visit to one prison, Crisis Group found eight Islamist prisoners sharing one large punishment cell. Other prisoners in the punishment wing were detained on their own or in groups of up to four. The prison director explained this by the fact that, as Muslims, they had their own prayer schedule and dietary needs. The director's decision may well have been determined more by the influence of Islamist prisoners than concern for their religious needs. (The visit coincided with the Muslim festival of Eid al-Fitr, at the end of Ramadan). The prisoners' only demand during the director's visit was that they not be served pork.⁶⁸

Infiltration has not proven particularly successful, either. Prison investigators⁶⁹ regularly try to plant informers among Islamists. Most claimed in interviews that they completely controlled the Islamists in their establishment. Senior prison officials view such claims with deep scepticism. An experienced prison director made no effort to hide the fact that investigators have a hard time. "Islamists work very secretly, they gather at night. You can't infiltrate them: they check very carefully. They don't take just anyone who goes to them".⁷⁰ A prison director recalled that he once tried to ascertain the number of HT party members in his prison. "First the investigators said ten, then 30, then 60, then 150.

⁶² Crisis Group interview, investigators and prison directors, Kyrgyzstan, 2008-2009.

⁶³ See below.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, imam of prison mosque, Chuy oblast, Kyrgyzstan, October 2009.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, September 2009.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, former prison investigator, Bishkek, February 2009.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, February 2009.

⁶⁸ In Kyrgyzstan pork plays a major role in the prison diet, even though the majority of prisoners are Muslims. Pork is raised on prison farms and is thus cheaper than beef.

⁶⁹ Оперативники in Russian. The term is sometimes simply transliterated, *operativniki*, in literature on the subject.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, prison director, Bishkek, January 2009.

Then I gave up counting. I confess: you just can't identify covert Islamists".⁷¹

A former head of Kyrgyzstan's prison system (GUIN) said that just one imprisoned Islamist quickly attracts followers; control, he says, is non-existent. "At first he wanders around quietly on his own. Then you look and there is a crowd round him. ... there's absolutely no way to control the Islamists". Any claims to the contrary are "garbage", he said.⁷² As another former GUIN chief put it, "we don't even know what goes on in prisons during day time. Or if we do, no more than 50 per cent. And as for the night ..."⁷³

Most of all, the prison authorities relied on the criminal inmates themselves to fight the Islamists. For a while in the middle part of the decade, this seemed to be working. The main weapon was the criminal prisoners' own organisation – the *obshchak*.

C. *OBSHCHAK*: A PARALLEL PRISON ADMINISTRATION

Organised crime in post-Soviet states has a clear and rigid hierarchy, at the top of which stand the "thieves in law".⁷⁴ This title and the complex code of underworld law and tradition that accompanies it both date back to the early years of the Soviet Union. A thief in law is usually the top crime figure in a major city, a large region, or even a country. His code of behaviour calls for complete non-cooperation with the state. A thief in law would not hold a legitimate job, even as cover for criminal activities; he would not register births or marriages, for example, or perform military service, even in time of war. Today a thief in law is roughly the equivalent of a senior mafia boss; after his "coronation" he also acts as adjudicator or arbitrator of conflict in the criminal world. Another major area of a thief in law's responsibility, whether or not he is himself behind bars at the time, is the control and organisation of prison inmates.

Professional criminals have long had their own parallel prison regime in Soviet and post-Soviet prisons. Key positions such as the administrator (положенец) and the supervisor (смотрящий) are approved by the thief in law. They in turn oversee the use of the prison kitty – *obshchak* (общак), from the word общий meaning general or common – to which the bulk of prisoners contribute. The term *obshchak* has now come to designate

not only the fund but the organised criminal structure within the prison, which is often more powerful than the official prison administration. The *obshchak* administrator and supervisor also usually handle liaison with the official prison administration.

Kyrgyzstan's criminal world adheres to the traditional system, with one or two major thieves in law. (The current incumbent, an ethnic Kyrgyz, is said to have quite recently assumed the position from a Chechen who is serving a long prison sentence).⁷⁵ Kazakhstan does not have a single leader, but its prisons are also organised along *obshchak* lines. The *obshchak* and the official prison authorities have long had a symbiotic relationship. On some key issues, such as whether or not prison personnel can search the barracks, the *obshchak* is likely to have the final word – until a prison director risks long-term relations with the *obshchak*⁷⁶ by calling in special forces to carry out searches by force. Prison guards and officials are often the source of valuable commodities, from drugs and cell phones to extra food parcels and conjugal visits. The *obshchak*, meanwhile trades in drugs, and consolidates its relationship with the prison authorities by doing deals with or favours for them.⁷⁷

The *obshchak* can often call on considerable financial resources. One former investigative officer in a Kazakh prison recalled one occasion when a prison director had allegedly misappropriated prison funds. To get himself out of the mess, he did a deal with the *obshchak*, the investigator said. The *obshchak* would repair the prison on its own funds, the director having purloined the money officially earmarked for this. "The director told the *obshchak* 'supervisor' 'you find the money and do the repairs and for the next four months you can do what you like in the prison'".⁷⁸ The prison criminal structures also wield power well beyond the prison walls. They raise "contributions" from businessmen, market traders and even, it has been claimed, school children in support of its incarcerated colleagues.⁷⁹

It was not surprising, therefore, that prison administrators made common cause with the *obshchak* against the Islamists. Both had an interest in taming the newcomers. The *obshchak* did not want to share power; the prison authorities wanted to bring the Islamists to heel.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, May 2009.

⁷² Crisis Group interview, former head of the Kyrgyz prison service, Bishkek, October 2009.

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, former head of the Kyrgyz prison service, Bishkek, January 2009.

⁷⁴ Singular: вор в законе.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, local expert, Bishkek, June 2009.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, former head of the Kyrgyz prison service, Bishkek, January 2009.

⁷⁷ Prison administrators estimate that in strict regime prisons and investigatory isolators up to 60 per cent of inmates are drug addicts. Drugs are one of the main sources of income for prisoners. Crisis Group interviews, prison investigators and directors, 2008-2009.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, former prisoner, Almaty, January 2009.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, local expert, Bishkek, June 2009.

“From the very start the criminal milieu did not accept them and tried to put them down. We were also interested in that happening. We wanted to neutralise the Islamists. And we supported the criminal prisoners – they can do the sort of thing that a warder cannot. They turned the Islamists into virtual outcasts”, said one former Kyrgyz prison official.⁸⁰ The *obshchak* saw in the Islamists serious competition. One former religious prisoner recalled: “Some criminals told us that we were opposed to the thieves’ code, and so they were against us”.⁸¹ The Islamists were caught off guard by the *obshchak* onslaught. HT activists even made overtures to an ethnic Chechen who was at the time reputed to be Kyrgyzstan’s premier thief in law, but were rebuffed.

For a while the tactic worked, and Islamists made their peace with the demands of both prison administrators and the *obshchak*.⁸² Prison authorities long cherished the illusion that the criminal prison inmate was the best instrument for repressing Islamists in prison. Times have changed, however, and the confrontation between criminals and Islamists has subsided. As one Kyrgyz prison director noted, “the *obshchak* does not touch the Islamists anymore. They have found a common language”.⁸³

None of the officials was able explain how this happened. “If you live in peace with the *obshchak*, you can always find a compromise”,⁸⁴ said a prison official, suggesting that adroit prison diplomacy was key. Another senior prison officer, however, asserts the new relationship is based on a formal agreement between Islamists and organised crime. “The Islamists have already bought the *obshchak*. The word came down from the (criminal) bosses: don’t touch the HT. This was done on the outside. There was an agreement”.⁸⁵ Several Kyrgyz organised crime figures in recent years have, in fact, been reported

to have become devout and observant Muslims. Asked how he saw the future of Islamists in prison, however, a former Kazakh prison director was categorical: “Islamists and criminals will definitely merge. The Hizb ut-Tahrir will take over the criminals: they are literate, good psychologists, and their moral qualities are higher”.⁸⁶

These days most Islamist prisoners are largely well behaved, calm and highly disciplined, prison officials say – they sit quietly, as warders put it in the own jargon. Silence does not mean submission, however. “They are never abusive, always are polite. They rarely give cause for disciplinary measures. But in their eyes you can read their thoughts: ‘your actions are not right’. They never denounce the regime, but I can see that if their leader ever gave them the order to go die tomorrow, they would do it. If they were ordered to take the White House [the seat of Kyrgyz government], they would line up and go. Maybe one or two would not obey, but the rest would go”.⁸⁷

D. ISLAMISTS IN PRISON: BETTER ORGANISERS THAN THE PROFESSIONALS

Islamists perceive incarceration differently to ordinary prisoners. “When they go to prison they do not suffer. They are national heroes. They can even become leaders”, says the former head of GUIN, the Kyrgyz prison service.⁸⁸ “The only HT who suffer in prison are those who joined by accident. For real HT activists prison is like an award”.⁸⁹ One experienced investigative officer recalled, “when the first HT activists appeared in prison, one told me that he had been deliberately sent out to distribute leaflets in order to be arrested and imprisoned. He said to me ‘in here sits the flower of the nation. They will follow us’”.⁹⁰ Some HT activists admit, however, that not every prisoner is prepared to follow them. Said one, “People often say ‘first I’ll get out of here, then I will pray’”.⁹¹ More often, though, HT activists feel they can successfully recruit.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, February 2009.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, February 2009.

⁸² The practice of using criminals to control Islamists is widespread in Central Asian prisons. For a different tactic, but again using criminal prisoners to maintain order and impose punishments within prisons, see Mukhammadsolih Abutov’s prison memoirs, “Гулаг имени Каримова. Воспоминания узбекского зэка” [“The Karimov Gulag, Memoirs of an Uzbek inmate”]. His account also claims successful proselytisation among criminal prisoners – including senior figures – in the late nineties. At the same time he describes a comprehensive program used by the Uzbek prison authorities to break the resistance of the top criminal “authorities” in prisons. “Гулаг имени Каримова. Воспоминания узбекского зэка” [“The Karimov Gulag, Memoirs of an Uzbek inmate”], Ferghana.ru website, 30 October 2007, www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=5439.

⁸³ Crisis Group interview, head of a prison, Kyrgyzstan, August 2009.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, September 2009.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior official, September 2009.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, Almaty, October 2008.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interview, head of a prison, Bishkek, September 2009.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, former head of GUIN, Bishkek, January 2009.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, September 2008. Other reports maintain that Hizb ut-Tahrir are expected to admit their party membership on arrest, thereby virtually guaranteeing a prison term. See Crisis Group Briefing, *The IMU and the Hizb-ut-Tahrir: Implications of the Afghanistan Campaign*, op. cit., p. 11.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, former detainee, Bishkek, February 2009.

There seem to be few obstacles in the way of their political activities in prison. HT can, according to one specialist on Islamic groups, bribe officials to have their activists transferred from one prison to another to carry out political work.⁹² Parcels are checked at prison entrances, but a small bribe usually ensures that forbidden items are allowed in.⁹³ One interior ministry official noted that guards often did not know exactly what materials are forbidden.⁹⁴ A former head of the Kyrgyz prison service is convinced that not all their proselytising is peaceful. “They ask an inmate if he is a Muslim. He says yes. They ask him why then he does not pray five times a day. He gets confused. They thump him in the kidneys. Then they say ‘you will go to the mosque and pray’. They need the donations that prisoners give in the mosque”.⁹⁵

There are, however, strong indications that HT uses an array of psychological tactics to draw people in. The former Kyrgyz prison service head says that Islamists work with drug addicts – either convincing them or forcing them to give up drugs, and turn them into their supporters.⁹⁶ In some prisons the Islamists have been able to re-educate the majority of inmates, and enforce their own order – squeezing out, naturally, both *obshchak* and prison administration. Islamists can, in other words, quickly become a threat to both the official and the unofficial prison bosses. Occasional alliances between the *obshchak* and the administration can create an illusion that power has swung away from the Islamists. But a prison director who has been watching the Islamists for several years rejects this idea: “The Islamists can turn round the *obshchak* administrator in five minutes, and bring the whole *obshchak* under their control. The criminal inmates are usually more numerous and influential. But the Islamists are richer in money and ideas”.⁹⁷

A former head of a south Kyrgyz prison recalled how Islamists worked at his prison. “It was a total mess.

Prisoners were beating each other up. When the Islamists were brought in they needed just two months – then everybody starting going to prayers. Even the *obshchak*. There were hardly any drug addicts any more. I had the Islamists urgently transferred to Bishkek, before the whole prison turned extremist”.⁹⁸ On other occasions they target prisoners who for various reasons want to avoid pressure from the *obshchak*. “People who do not want to submit to the *obshchak* have no protection”, says a prison investigative officer.⁹⁹

One former HT prisoner described his methods of prison work. “I start talking to someone, then abruptly break off the conversation and move away. He will seek me out two days later. One told me: ‘you led me into a dark room, and I can’t find the way out’. Then I said to him ‘I will show you the way’”.¹⁰⁰ If prison rehabilitation and educational staff worked as well as the Islamists, one official said, “we would have order here”.¹⁰¹ Prison administrators note another reason for the growing success of Islamists: their willingness to help prisoners after release. “We don’t even give them money for the trip back home”, a prison official said. “Once he is released a prisoner usually can’t find work. But the Islamists give him the address of a mosque where he will find shelter and support, where he will be welcomed and looked after. And many of these prisoners do not even have a family waiting for them”.¹⁰² The Islamists’ work with released prisoners stands in sharp contrast to lacklustre performance of the underfunded prisoner rehabilitation services in either Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan.¹⁰³

Prison officials and police are also targets of HT agitation. “I see that a policeman has problems at home, with his family. It’s easy then to start a conversation with him. I talk about family life, and he is happy to talk to someone. I then explain to him how these problems are resolved according to Sharia”.¹⁰⁴ Rank-and-file prison officers, who spend most of their working hours with inmates, sometimes go to prayers in the prison mosque.¹⁰⁵ It is, of course, often hard to discern their motives for doing so – whether this is a real shift towards the Islamist

⁹² Crisis Group interview, expert, Bishkek, September 2009.

⁹³ Crisis Group interview, police officer, Bishkek, September 2008.

⁹⁴ A special section of the prosecutor’s service works on crimes committed inside prisons. One special prosecutor told Crisis Group that “a few” criminal cases have been filed since 2004 after HT leaflets or cassettes were found during cell searches. But as it was subsequently impossible to determine who these had belonged to, even these cases were dropped. Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, January 2009.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, former head of the Kyrgyz prison service, October 2009.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, head of a prison, Bishkek, September 2009. Many observers would agree with the first part of the director’s assessment, but would challenge the claim that HT is richer than organised crime.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, former prison director, January 2009.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview, prison investigator, Bishkek, September 2009.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, religious activist, February 2009.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, prison investigator attached to the general directorate of prisons, Bishkek, September 2008.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interview, head of a prison, Bishkek, September 2009.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interview, numerous interviews in GUIN, Kyrgyzstan, 2008-2009.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, religious activist, Osh *oblast*, October 2008.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, former head of GUIN, Bishkek, October 2009.

form of faith, subtle pressure or the desire of prison staff, like some prisoners themselves, to ally themselves with Islamists to avoid pressure from the *obshchak*.

Religious festivals and fasts also help reinforce the Islamists' position. On such days they receive donations from people outside the prison, and then distribute them among the prisoners. Inmates and prison officials also make donations to the prison mosque on such occasions. Staff make it clear that they give money and food to the mosque because they too are Muslims. During religious holidays Islamists are allowed to wear special clothes, in violation of prison rules. These are usually white pants and jackets, and white round hats.¹⁰⁶ In some prisons, one can see such clothes even outside holidays. In many prisons inmates have grown beards, also in violation of prison regulations.

Both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have at various times attempted to isolate Islamists from the general prison population. In 2006 Kazakhstan decided to concentrate all Islamists in a prison in northern Kazakhstan, renowned for its harsh discipline and severe weather, and informally known as the Black Eagle. This resulted in overcrowding and a further deterioration in prison conditions, and the plan was quickly abandoned.¹⁰⁷ Kyrgyz officials have also considered such an option, but have so far been unable to find a location with enough free space. As the number of imprisoned Islamists grows, so does the concern of senior prison officials. As one Kyrgyz prison director put it, if the number of Islamists in prison increases much further "we will lose control".¹⁰⁸

E. THE PRISON MOSQUE – A NEW CENTRE OF INFLUENCE

In Soviet times all prisons contained prayer rooms for prisoners of various faiths. These were normally located in prisoners' barracks. Several years ago, however, an active program of mosque building began in Kyrgyz prisons, sanctioned and carried out, according to prisoners and prison imams, by the criminal leadership in each prison.¹⁰⁹ Today there are mosques in almost all prisons. Usually these are brick structures: the bricks are new, or come from dismantled Soviet-era factories. Some have a minaret, while the building itself is on occasion

surrounded by a fence.¹¹⁰ Prison directors say they helped in the construction, usually providing building materials or cement.¹¹¹

The prisons choose their own imams unlike in the outside world.¹¹² As a result the prison imam may well be a member of Hizb ut-Tahrir. HT prisoners moreover refuse to attend mosques whose imams criticise their beliefs. If this happens they ask the prison authorities or the *obshchak* to let them pray in a separate location. The prison administration does its best to pressure everyone to attend the official mosque, but these efforts do not seem very successful.¹¹³

The only way prison administrators can fully control a mosque – to check for narcotics, weapons or forbidden materials – is the way they check barracks in extreme circumstances: with the help of specially equipped riot police. (Under normal conditions the *obshchak* does not permit barrack searches). This happened for example at Kyrgyzstan's Prison No. 16 in August 2008. Riot police carrying out a sweep of the prison allegedly removed all property found in the mosque, including nine carpets.¹¹⁴ In another 2008 raid, in a Kyrgyz colony for adolescents, riot police allegedly stole money and sweets collected for the holiday of Eid al-Fitr.

The mosque is perhaps the most powerful symbol of the growing power of Islamists in prison. Prisoners make contributions to the mosque in the same way as other prisoners give to the *obshchak*. It is hard to envisage this happening without the *obshchak's* agreement. Without

¹⁰⁶ Based on Crisis Group observations of Muslim festivals in Kyrgyz prisons, September-October 2009.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interview, expert, Astana, November 2008.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, May 2009. The official's precise words in Russian were "они выйдут из-под контроля" ["they will go out of control"].

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, May 2009. The source maintained that a leading nationwide organised crime figure had issued special instructions on the subject.

¹¹⁰ It is difficult for many prison officials to gain access to the mosque or even the courtyard surrounding it. The former head of the Kyrgyz prison service, Kapar Mukeyev, said that his directorate was not even aware that Prison No. 3 had built a minaret on its mosque in 2005. When he entered the prison with special forces and saw the minaret, he wanted to have it dismantled. He did not do so, however, as "unrest might have broken out in the prison". Crisis Group interview, Kapar Mukeyev, Bishkek, September 2009.

¹¹¹ It is unclear how far these donations are voluntary. Building materials are in short supply in the Kyrgyz prison system, and it cannot be excluded that Islamists can now – as the prison *obshchak* has long been able to do – oblige the prison authorities to share some of their resources.

¹¹² Under Sharia, local communities choose their own imam. In post-Soviet states the appointment should be confirmed by the Muftiate, as the Spiritual Directorate is often known. In practice the situation is considerably more confused. The Muftiate itself can appoint local imams without conferring with the community, or on some occasions, a community takes the decision without referring to official religious bodies. Crisis Group interview, specialist on Islamic affairs, Bishkek, October 2009.

¹¹³ Crisis Group observations in Kyrgyz prisons, 2008-2009.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, inmates of Prison No. 16, Chuy oblast, September-October 2008.

what little official pressure there still is on their activities, one prisoner said, “we would have been in charge long ago, and the whole prison would be praying”.¹¹⁵

V. CONCLUSION

The struggle in the region’s prisons is a microcosm of the broader struggle throughout Central Asia, as often incompetent and usually corrupt political regimes scramble to respond to the declining economic, social and security conditions in their countries. Prison is only the first step for many Hizb ut-Tahrir members and other Islamists in their struggle to restore the caliphate, but has proved a valuable training ground. They are cleverly exploiting the flaws and weaknesses of prison services that are undermined by corruption, low-quality personnel and a lack of support from their respective governments. The leadership of prison systems in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan seems to be losing control inside the barbed wire. The resources of both criminals and Islamists are growing; prison administrators are running out of options. Even the use of force no longer works.

The growing numbers of Islamists in prison mean that more inmates, often with a record of violence, are drawn into the Islamist ideological orbit. In the future they may apply these skills, either in prison or outside, to the promotion of their new faith. Prisons need funding, advice, assistance and close attention – from foreign governments, concerned NGOs and international organisations. They are not receiving it, and are slipping further into crisis. As a blatantly corrupt part of a political system that is increasingly viewed by outside funders as among the most venal in the world, Central Asian prisons are unlikely to get any assistance from the international community.

There is a strong likelihood that Islamists are engaged in similar activities in the prisons of other Central Asian states. In Uzbekistan, the overwhelming majority of an estimated 4,400 political prisoners, out of a total population of about 34,000, are believed to be Islamists.¹¹⁶ Other than fragments of information describing barbaric conditions and a brutal prison administration, however, nothing seeps out. Even less is known about the prisons of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

There are broader lessons to be learned from the crisis in the prisons. Just as the tactics used in prisons show signs of backfiring, so too, in all likelihood, will those

used against Islamists on the outside. By arresting large numbers of Islamists who are waging a political, not military, struggle against the state, security officials in both countries can present a seemingly impressive list of their accomplishments to their superiors. Hizb ut-Tahrir and other Islamists who use political methods are relatively easy to track down and state security bodies in the region can claim quick easy victories. But such measures do nothing to address overall security in the region, which will be further threatened as Afghanistan’s shadow looms more darkly over the region. By concentrating on groups using political means of struggle, the security forces are doing little to combat the militant organisations whose fighters are now gradually returning to Central Asia and are committed to destroying the current regimes by force of arms.

The Central Asian crackdown on political Islam will not hinder them; it is likely in fact to create more recruits for their combat teams. This could make the difference between a low-level insurgency and something much more menacing. Most analytical debates on the risks of a spillover from Afghanistan identify one key imponderable: are the returning Central Asian armed militants strong enough seriously to challenge the regimes of countries like Tajikistan, Uzbekistan or Kyrgyzstan? At the moment there is no clear answer to this question. But ever longer sentences handed down to Islamic activists for relatively minor actions like political demonstrations – sentences passed with the aim, according to senior Kyrgyz officials, of showing them who is boss – risk polarising the Muslim community still further. It is not difficult to imagine members of one important HT constituency, for example – young unemployed males – opting to join a revived IMU rather than the HT, as the sentences for participation in either movement are now roughly the same.

Urgent steps need to be taken to stop the polarisation before it gets worse. An energetic and tangible effort is needed to improve living conditions, crack down on corruption and abuse of office, and launch a real dialogue with observant Muslims. At the moment the region’s leaders are only talking about the first two options and rejecting the third. In doing so, they are undermining their own position and their countries’ futures.

Bishkek/Brussels, 15 December 2009

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, February 2009.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, international official, Bishkek, November 2009.

APPENDIX A

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 130 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on the website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by the former European Commissioner for External Relations Christopher Patten and former U.S. Ambassador Thomas Pickering. Its President and Chief Executive since July 2009 has been Louise Arbour, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and Chief Prosecutor for the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda.

Crisis Group's international headquarters are in Brussels, with major advocacy offices in Washington DC (where it is based as a legal entity) and New York, a smaller one in London and liaison presences in Moscow and Beijing. The organisation currently operates nine regional offices (in Bishkek, Bogotá, Dakar, Islamabad, Istanbul, Jakarta, Nairobi, Pristina and Tbilisi) and has local field representation in eighteen additional locations (Abuja, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Cairo, Colombo, Damascus, Dili, Jerusalem, Kabul, Kathmandu, Kinshasa, Ouagadougou, Port-au-Prince, Pretoria, Sarajevo, Seoul and Tehran). Crisis Group currently covers some 60 areas of actual or potential conflict across four continents. In Africa, this includes Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone,

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