

**CENTRAL ASIA:  
ISLAMIST MOBILISATION  
AND REGIONAL SECURITY**

1 March 2001

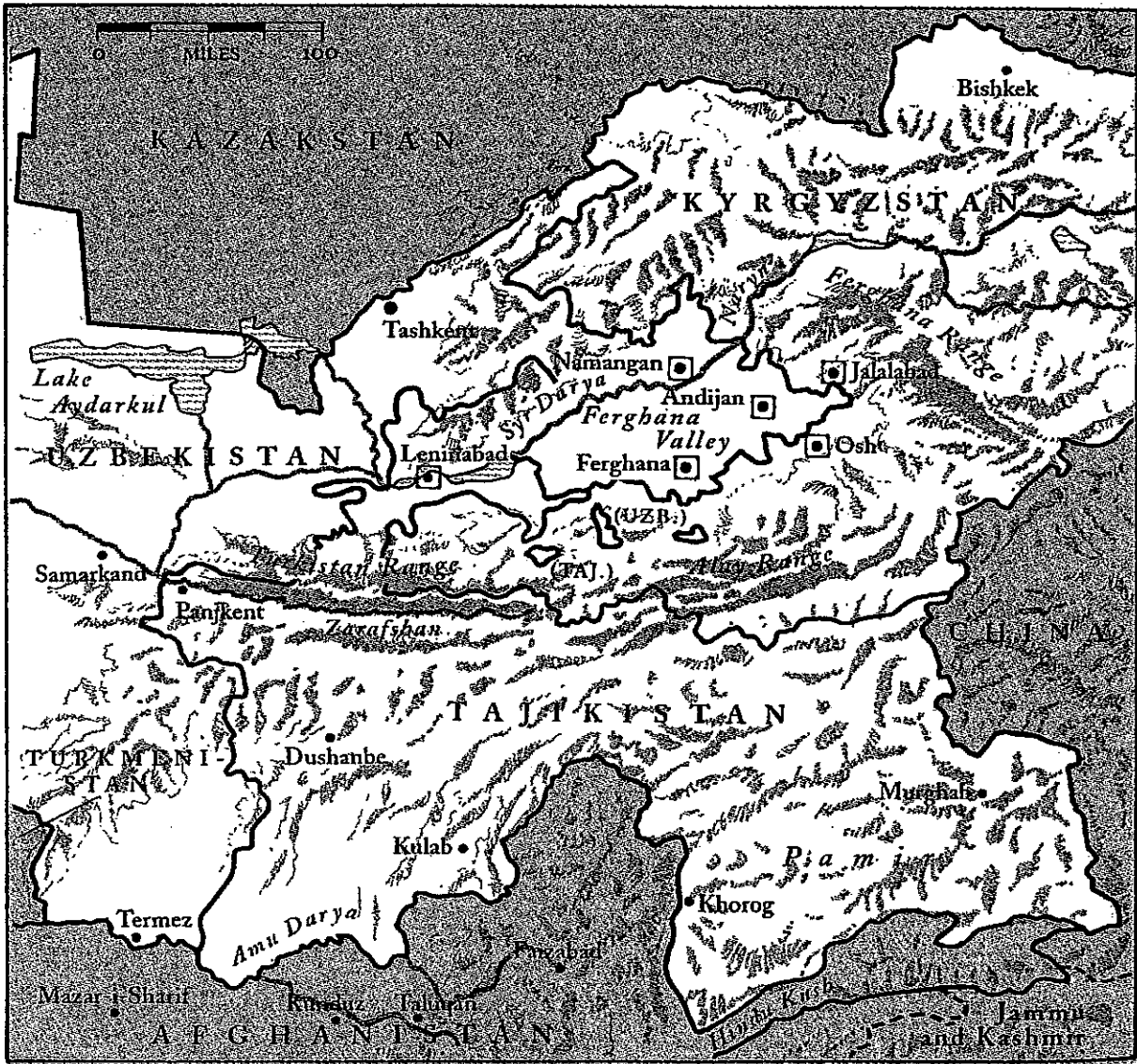
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## **CENTRAL ASIA:**

# **ISLAMIST MOBILISATION AND REGIONAL SECURITY**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The real but greatly exaggerated existence of militant Islamic movements is being cited to legitimate repressive measures by the governments of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and, especially, Uzbekistan. These governments, and also Russia, have used claims about those movements both to justify strong cooperative international security measures against the perceived common threat and to win the acquiescence and assistance of Western governments. Much of this activity is misconceived and indeed counterproductive – more likely to create the very threat it seeks to counter.

Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan each repress a range of Islamic religious practices and domestic religious groups. Their policies are exacerbating simmering social and political tensions and increasing the risk of new outbreaks of violence. Russia is the most actively engaged external actor due to its perception of an urgent need for a common security approach to Islamic radicalism on its southern boundary. However, China and to a lesser extent some Western powers including the U.S. are reinforcing the instincts of the three Central Asian governments about the need to crack down on even apolitical forms of religious observance or organisation.

In the nine years since they gained independence, the three Central Asian states studied by ICG have increasingly sought to control the exercise of faith and the social and political activities of faith-based organisations. Their motives are purely political — fear that such activities threaten the ruling elites' hold on power – but the repression has fuelled more social discontent.

All three countries now face a variety of security problems arising from the actions of a militant Islamist group opposed to the government of Uzbekistan. That group, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), operates in all three countries, but it is not strongly supported inside or outside the region and is not powerful enough to pose a major threat to any of the governments. Nevertheless, the reactions of the three countries to the low-level operations of the IMU in 1999 and 2000 have in themselves created tension and instability. The governments have cited need to counter the IMU as justification for further domestic repression of unofficial Islamic activity, which in turn is driving some sections of the community toward greater militancy. Uzbekistan has produced additional regional tensions by conducting cross-border operations against the IMU inside Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The southern borders of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were also affected by offensives in late 2000 in the Afghan civil war between the radical Islamist Taliban and its opponents.

These events have promoted greater interest in regional security cooperation not only among the Central Asian states but also between them, Russia and China. Western officials are now giving much more attention to Central Asian security. This is due in part to the IMU incursions, but even more to the presence of Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan (reputedly responsible for high-profile acts of international terrorism and support of anti-Western militants), as well as to the civil war and growing opium production in that country. Though some new regional security agreements have been concluded, there is little evidence yet of effective cooperation, and the efforts to achieve it are severely undermined by serious mistrust between the Central Asian governments.

Security problems of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan will continue to be aggravated by internal and external factors associated with the increased militancy of Islamist groups and their growing opposition to the Central Asian governments, particularly Uzbekistan. External factors include the possibility that militant Islamists will obtain refuge and training in Afghanistan and Tajikistan, the presence of civil war veterans in those two countries prepared to fight elsewhere for the Islamist cause, the drug trade, and contributions of the Taliban, bin Laden, or other governments and non-government entities to the militants.

The most powerful negative influences on the security of the three Central Asian states, however, are likely to be internal. Public support for the governments is still relatively strong but it is declining. The prospect is that wider segments of the population, especially in Uzbekistan, will resort to or at least support radical, even violent, opposition to the regime, if all political opposition and unofficial religious groups and activities continue to be targeted. The challenge for the friends of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, particularly in the West, is to separate real threats from spectres and to insist that the best security measure each of these governments can take to protect itself against a militant Islamic threat is to practice greater tolerance and more democracy.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **To Central Asian Governments**

1. Reorient internal security policies to emphasise the positive values of civil society institutions, including a vigorous free press, and of religious toleration.
2. Restore regime credibility by clearly articulating and demonstrating commitment to protecting the rights of all citizens, including practising Muslims.
3. Transfer control of policy toward Islam and Islamic institutions from KGB-successor agencies to agencies whose expertise is in social and cultural matters.
4. Issue and monitor observance of clear, well-reasoned regulations on what constitutes anti-state Islamic activity.
5. Exercise oversight of how policy directives are implemented to ensure that local law enforcement officials do not target innocent people to fill a 'quota'.

## **To External Powers and International Organisations**

6. Treat religious freedom as a security issue, not just a human rights issue, and advocate unequivocally that regional security can only be assured if religious freedom is guaranteed and legitimate activities of groups and individuals are not suppressed.
7. Ensure that donor assistance is not misused to strengthen or legitimate suppression of religious observance or non-violent religion-based groups.
8. Coordinate and integrate security assistance among donor nations according to a comprehensive approach and ensure that such assistance is not represented by Central Asian governments as endorsing views that unofficial religious activities and organisations are security threats.
9. Review policy toward Afghanistan, working towards a more comprehensive, less single issue driven (e.g., drugs, terrorism) view of the security problems that takes account of efforts by the regional governments to reach an accommodation with the Taliban.
10. (For Western states) Consult more often with China and, especially, Russia, which have important security interests in and special knowledge of the region, when offering support to Central Asian states for countering violent manifestations of radical Islamist politics.
11. (For China and Russia) Look more to economic and social than military measures to help Central Asian states reduce the appeal of radical Islamist groups.

**Osh/Brussels, 1 March 2001**



## CENTRAL ASIA:

# ISLAMIST<sup>1</sup> MOBILISATION AND REGIONAL SECURITY

## I. INTRODUCTION

Until 1999, the notion that Islamist politics and insurgency would be a serious destabilizing factor following the collapse of Soviet rule in Central Asia seemed an exaggerated fear. Earlier, prominent analysts had predicted that Islamic radicalism would be the cause of the demise of the Soviet Union. They subsequently supposed that underground Islamic activism, which had persisted through Soviet times, would emerge to challenge the successors to communist rule.<sup>2</sup> However, these expectations were disappointed, and until recently the most important role of Islam was in cultural revival rather than active opposition to post-Soviet governments. With the important exception Islamism's rise to prominence in Tajikistan following the civil war there (1992-97), Islam has played only a minor role in politics in the region. This is due in part to its suppression by the state, but also to lack of interest in political Islam on the part of the population.

The situation in Central Asia<sup>3</sup> regarding Islamist mobilisation is now undergoing radical change. With the Tashkent bombings of February 1999, followed by incursions into Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and into Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 2000, perceptions have been completely transformed. Now policy circles are preoccupied with concerns that militant Islamic radicalism could gain a beachhead in Central Asia. Will the Islamists be able to take and hold pieces of the territory of Uzbekistan or Kyrgyzstan? Can they lead a mass popular uprising? Could this

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'Islamist' is used in this report to refer to individuals and groups which use Islam as a mode of political — and sometimes also military — mobilisation. Radical Islamists are those who are uncompromising in seeking to remove existing regimes from power, usually in order to replace them with some form of Islamic government, whether based on strict adherence to Shari'ah law or simply giving a central role to Islamic religion and values. Militant Islamists are those who are prepared to resort to violent means in order to achieve these ends. This report avoids such terms as 'Fundamentalists,' 'Fundamentalist Muslims,' and 'radical Muslims,' as they lead to confusion with the basic meaning of 'fundamentalist' (referring to those who advocate a 'return' to original or fundamental forms of observing the religion), and erroneously suggest that Islam is a religion that is inherently anti-state or prone to violence. The term 'Wahhabi' is also avoided as it has been used misleadingly in Soviet and post-Soviet Central Asia to refer indiscriminately to all Muslims and Muslim groups which the government seeks to suppress, regardless of whether they advocate the doctrines or political interests of Wahhabism.

<sup>2</sup> Alexandre Bennigsen and Marie Broxup, *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), Hélène Carrière d'Encausse, *Decline of an Empire: The Soviet Socialist Republics in Revolt* (New York: Newsweek Books, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> In this report, and in the work of the ICG Central Asia Project generally, the focus is chiefly on the countries of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. In the present report, the greatest attention is given to Uzbekistan, as this is where the issue of Islamist mobilisation currently has the greatest significance.



lead to the overturning of Central Asian governments, perhaps the elimination of nation-states altogether and the establishment of a regional Islamic state — the revival of the 'Caliphate'?

In their efforts to foster stability and democratic development, as well as to promote the integration of the region into the world community of nations and norms of good governance, how should states and international organisations respond to this 'Islamic threat'? What measures can be adopted to avoid the proliferation of 'Afghanistans' — states characterised by an anti-Western orientation, imposing a conservative, anti-pluralistic vision of an Islamic social order on the population, and serving as a source for regional instability and even international terrorism? Are there viable alternatives to the authoritarian approach to countering Islamic activism that Uzbekistan has championed in recent years and seems increasingly favoured by other governments?

In this report, ICG examines just what is transpiring on the borders of Central Asia and what the implications are for short- and medium-term stability in the region. The report concludes that, while the recent incursions are a very limited phenomenon, we are at a critical juncture. If the right steps are not taken, the situation could drastically worsen. Some of the approaches being taken both by international actors and by regional governments threaten to exacerbate the risk of growing Islamist radicalisation and insurgency.

## II. BACKGROUND: FROM ISLAMIC REVIVALISM TO MILITANT ISLAMIST MOBILISATION

When the Central Asian states acquired independence in 1991, they inherited not only a decades-long tradition of authoritarianism and a highly intrusive state, but also the legacy of the Gorbachev period of openness and freedom of speech, which, however short-lived, saw the burgeoning of alternative parties, including Islamic revivalist parties. The Gorbachev period also brought greater freedom of religion, which led to broad popular participation in a revival of Islam in cultural practices and social institutions. Yet after the Central Asia states became independent, their governments all moved away from the liberalism of perestroika to varying degrees. Most moved aggressively to prevent Islam from assuming a political role. Even the most liberal of the Central Asian states, Kyrgyzstan, did not permit parties to be formed on the basis of Islam.

In the last years of Soviet rule and the first years of independence, there had been considerable latitude for the activities of non-official religious organisations. These included both groups that had operated in the underground and new groups which emerged, partly under the influence of ties that were built with other parts of the Islamic world. While they were not initially suppressed or persecuted, they were generally not accorded any official recognition. That was reserved for the official religious hierarchy established to control religion during Soviet times, which remained virtually a branch of the governments.<sup>4</sup> However, by 1992-93, the governments — especially in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan — began to crack down on religious groups and institutions not under the control of

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<sup>4</sup> 'Islam and fundamentalism in independent Central Asia,' in Y. Ro'i, ed.: *Muslim Eurasia: Conflicting Legacies*, London: Frank Cass, 1995), p. 23-24.

the official, semi-state institutions.<sup>5</sup> This crackdown was most marked in Uzbekistan, but there were raids on Islamic groups in Kazakstan as well. In Kyrgyzstan, the authorities allowed Uzbekistan security police to extend their operations into Kyrgyz territory.<sup>6</sup> There was no Islamic uprising — in fact, quite to the contrary, the scope of activity of Islamic organisations was limited and became increasingly so. A few incidents, such as the killing of police officers in Namangan city in Uzbekistan, were attributed to Islamic extremists. They served as the rationale for the crackdown in that country, though some have argued that the killings were corruption related and had nothing to do with Islam.<sup>7</sup>

#### A. Antecedents to the Current Islamist Movements

Thus, on the whole, the 1990s were a period when Islamist activity was almost absent from Central Asia, with two significant exceptions. The most prominent was in Tajikistan during 1991-92, when a coalition of Islamic, democratic and nationalist/cultural revivalist groups conducted a series of demonstrations against the communist government which eventually led to polarisation within the country, the formation of a short-lived coalition government, and the civil war, which lasted from 1992 until 1997.<sup>8</sup> In the course of these events, what was initially a quite moderate Islamic movement became radicalised, primarily after many had been forced into exile in northern Afghanistan where they came heavily under the influence of Afghan *Mujaheddin* fighters. Subsequently, the Tajik peace process led to the return of the refugees from Afghanistan and elsewhere and the formation of a coalition government which included figures from the militant Islamist leadership (as well as from the more secular opposition).

At present, Tajikistan has officially completed its peace process, but military commanders from both sides continue to control territory independently of the government into which they are supposed to be integrated. Consequently, it has been possible for Islamists from elsewhere in Central Asia to find refuge in Tajikistan and to use it as a base of operations, as they have also done in Afghanistan. Since the peace settlement was agreed in 1997, and especially since the presidential and parliamentary elections (November 1999 and February 2000 respectively), which were meant to complete the peace process, the government of Tajikistan, led by President Emomali Rahmonov, has sought to marginalise the Islamic, former-opposition leadership and its following. Consequently, part of the Islamic militant movement in Tajikistan has become more oriented toward involvement in insurgency elsewhere in the region.

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Mehrdad Haghayeghi, *Islam and Politics in Central Asia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), p. 208.

<sup>6</sup> Igor Rotar, 'Bishkek neither oppresses nor protects its Wahhabites,' Jamestown Foundation's *Prism*, 16 July 1999, vol. V, no. 14, Part 6.

<sup>7</sup> Abdumannob Polat, 'Can Uzbekistan build democracy and civil society?' in M. Holt Ruffin and Daniel Waugh, eds., *Civil Society in Central Asia* (Seattle and London: Center for Civil Society, International, 1999), p. 141.

<sup>8</sup> Muriel Atkin, 'Thwarted democratisation in Tajikistan,' in Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott, eds., *Conflict, Cleavage, and Change in Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 287-290.

The second significant manifestation of Islamist mobilisation in the 1990s was the formation of groups which led eventually to the establishment of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)<sup>9</sup> — the main organisation behind a number of armed incursions into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in 1999 and 2000.<sup>10</sup> These groups have their roots in the Islamic underground of the Soviet era.<sup>11</sup> The first significant public manifestation was a movement called *Adolat* ('Justice'), which arose in the city of Namangan in the Ferghana Valley around the time of the break-up of the Soviet Union. For a number of months beginning in November 1991, it organised demonstrations, besieged the city administration buildings, and formed its own police force, which administered summary justice on the streets.<sup>12</sup> *Adolat* put itself forth as a response to moral and social degradation (hence the name 'Justice'), and it enjoyed some popular support as a vigilante response to petty crime and official corruption. However, after a period of restraint, the government of Uzbekistan cracked down, not only on this group, but also on others engaged in much less political activity, which had become active during the liberal perestroika era.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, by 1992, Uzbekistan had already begun to drive its Islamic opposition underground and into exile, especially into Tajikistan and Afghanistan. People who belonged to unofficial mosques or who simply dressed in a manner that indicated devotion to Islam were subjected by the police to forced shaving of their beards, harassment, arrests and beatings.<sup>14</sup> Some religious figures simply disappeared. For example, one of the most widely known imams in Central Asia, Abduvali Qori Mirzoev of Andijan, was repeatedly arrested before finally disappearing in 1995 together with an assistant. He was abducted while on his way to a conference in Moscow, and most observers believe that he was either killed by or remains in the custody of Uzbekistan's security police.<sup>15</sup>

The government distinguished sharply between those who belonged to mosques and schools subordinate to the semi-official religious administration established during Soviet times, and virtually all others. The latter were treated as enemies of the state regardless of how moderate or apolitical their beliefs and activities might be. By 1997, this crackdown took on the dimensions of a massive campaign resulting in thousands of arrests, which could lead to long terms of

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<sup>9</sup> *Uzbekiston Islom Harakati* in Uzbek; *Islamskoe dvizhenie Uzbekistana* in Russian.

<sup>10</sup> See ICG Briefing, 'Recent Violence in Central Asia: Causes and Consequences', 18 October 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Mikhail Fal'kov, 'Islamskoe dvizhenie Uzbekistana (IDU),' *Nezavisimaia gazeta* - Internet, 24 August 2000 via Tsentral'noaziatskie novosti <[www.ferghana.ru/news](http://www.ferghana.ru/news)>. For a balanced overview of Islam and the activities of underground Islamic opposition groups in Tajikistan during Soviet times, see Muriel Atkin, *The Subtlest Battle: Islam in Soviet Tajikistan* (Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> For more on the *Adolat* movement, see William Fierman, 'Political development in Uzbekistan: Democratisation?' in Dawisha and Parrott, eds., *Conflict, Cleavage, and Change in Central Asia...*, p. 382.

<sup>13</sup> Nancy Lubin and Barnett Rubin, *Calming the Ferghana Valley: Development and Dialogue in the Heart of Central Asia* (New York: The Century Foundation Press, 1999), pp. 48-49.

<sup>14</sup> See the section entitled 'An alarming new trend: The crackdown against "independent Muslims,"' in Human Rights Watch/Helsinki's report, 'Uzbekistan: Persistent human rights violations and prospects for improvement' (New York, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> *1999 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Uzbekistan*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State, 25 February 2000 (<http://www.usis.uz/wwwright.htm>).

imprisonment for nothing more than possession of unofficial Islamic literature.<sup>16</sup> The flight of activists to Tajikistan and Afghanistan to avoid arrest increased. Conducting their religious and political affairs underground or in exile, Islamic activists became more hostile to the state and fell increasingly under the influence of militant Islamist movements antagonistic to the post-Communist regimes in Central Asia.<sup>17</sup>

Through most of the period, the government of President Islam Karimov enjoyed the overwhelming support of Uzbekistan's population.<sup>18</sup> The regime argued that without a degree of authoritarianism and the rule of a strong hand, Uzbekistan could expect to fall into civil war and chaos as in Tajikistan, where — the Uzbek authorities contended — too much latitude had been given to democracy. In Uzbekistan and indeed in neighbouring countries Karimov was admired for maintaining order, resisting market reforms which had impoverished other former Soviet states, and building strong symbols of a sovereign state such as modern buildings, new national monuments and a network of 'presidential' roads in the capital city of Tashkent. Even some Western observers have evaluated Karimov's strong hand positively, as a key to regional stability by limiting Russian influence in the region.<sup>19</sup>

It was precisely these symbols of the strong state and the image of unassailable order that came under attack with the February 1999 bombings in Tashkent.<sup>20</sup> Over roughly one and a half hours, six bombs exploded, targeting symbolically important buildings, killing at least 16 people and injuring over 100. One of the main explosions happened at the building of the Cabinet of Ministers as President Karimov's motorcade was about to arrive. In an astonishing breach of security, a car packed with explosives drove on to the premises despite the strong security that always surrounds the President and government buildings. Reputedly, only a delay in arrival saved the president. The men who left the car and opened fire on building guards with automatic weapons escaped from the centre of the most heavily protected area in the country. None of those who detonated any of the bombs were apprehended. This, combined with the precise timing, the high degree of co-ordination and security penetration, and the coincidence with other political developments led to immediate speculation that the attack was co-ordinated or carried out from within the security apparatus.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> 'Crackdown in the Farghana Valley: Arbitrary arrests and religious discrimination,' *Human Rights Watch Report*, vol. 10, no. 4 (May 1998).

<sup>17</sup> Lubin and Rubin, *Calming the Ferghana Valley...*, pp. 101-105.

<sup>18</sup> Nancy Lubin's survey conducted with a broad sample in Uzbekistan demonstrated the popularity of the regime, even among those who considered themselves to be democratic in orientation; see: *Central Asians take Stock: Reform, Corruption, and Identity* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> S. Fredrick Starr, 'Making Eurasia stable', *Foreign Affairs*, 75 (1): 80-92 (1996).

<sup>20</sup> These events have become the focus of considerable interest in governmental and journalistic circles in Russia and Uzbekistan where they are portrayed as the work of a broad international Islamic conspiracy. The events have been recounted in meticulous detail in Soviet-style works of propaganda, such as a three-hour television 'exposé' broadcast repeatedly in Uzbekistan, and also, in abbreviated form, in Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and other neighbouring countries, as well as in Oleg Yakubov's *The pack of wolves: The blood trail of terror: A political detective story* (Moscow: Veche Publishers, 2000, published in Russian in 1999).

<sup>21</sup> Abdummanob Polat and Nikolai Butkevich, 'Unravelling the mystery of the Tashkent bombings: Theories and implications,' *Demokratizatsiya*, vol. 8, no. 4 (2000).

The official response was to attribute the bombings to Islamist extremists. The day after the attack, the Karimov government declared that it knew who was responsible, and a series of arrests followed, some of which were carried out in other former Soviet countries at the request of the Uzbek authorities. A wide range of theories as to who was responsible have been put forward, including the Russian security apparatus retaliating for Uzbekistan's resistance to Russian domination, Karimov's rivals within the Uzbekistan government, and Karimov himself in order to justify a political crackdown.<sup>22</sup> The government of Uzbekistan has attributed the attacks to an international conspiracy of Islamist extremists, operating out of Afghanistan, Turkey, Tajikistan and other neighbouring countries, and the Ferghana Valley region of Uzbekistan itself. Many arrests for complicity were made in Tashkent and in the Ferghana Valley. The reputed conspirators abroad included most prominently Tohir Yuldosh, onetime leader of Adolat in Namangan (see above) and now the political leader of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), as well as Muhammad Solih, the leader of the banned Uzbek opposition party, Erk, who had been allowed to oppose Karimov in the presidential election of 1991 but has since been driven into exile.<sup>23</sup> Though Solih has denied any connection with the IMU, and the IMU itself has denied any responsibility for the bombings, Yuldosh has threatened that more bombings are in store if the Karimov regime does not step aside.<sup>24</sup>

While it is probably too Machiavellian to surmise that Karimov engineered this attack in order to justify a crackdown on potential opponents, that is certainly what the outcome has been. The rate of detentions and arrests of persons suspected of association with unofficial Islamic organisations increased dramatically in 1999. Parents were called upon to turn in their children, and the flow of those fleeing Uzbekistan to Tajikistan and Afghanistan to avoid arrest increased sharply.<sup>25</sup> An all-out campaign was declared in particular against the *Hizb-ut-Tahrir-al-Islamii* (Islamic Freedom Party), which officials accused of complicity with Tohir Yuldosh's IMU. Hizb-ut-Tahrir is an international movement active in various parts of the Islamic world, with the declared goal of re-establishing the Caliphate and Islamic, Shari'ah-based rule.<sup>26</sup> It has been able to operate in Uzbekistan only as an underground movement, but its leaders have denied any connection with the Tashkent bombings. It is noteworthy that while the Uzbek government officially insists that Hizb-ut-Tahrir and the IMU are working hand-in-hand, and indeed, this was the basis of criminal proceedings against those convicted for the bombings, their relationship is certainly much more problematic. A highly placed Uzbek government official acknowledged to ICG that Uzbek intelligence sources have information that though IMU leaders sought a rapprochement with Hizb-ut-Tahrir, the proposed collaboration was rejected.

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<sup>22</sup> See Polat and Butkevich, 'Unravelling the mystery....'

<sup>23</sup> Polat and Butkevich, 'Unravelling the mystery...'

<sup>24</sup> 'Uzbek Islamic Movement: Government must go or be removed by force,' *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 19 March 1999 via BBC Worldwide Monitoring (Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe).

<sup>25</sup> 'Uzbeks to Pardon 'Those Who Have Gone Astray' If They Repent,' *Uzbek Television First Channel*, 4 April 1999 via BBC Worldwide Monitoring (Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe).

<sup>26</sup> The Hizb-ut-Tahrir organisation maintains a website (<http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/>) with extensive material on its ideology, goals, methods, etc.

Only following the crackdown and mass arrests of those the authorities accuse of association with this movement, have Hizb-ut-Tahrir leaders moved from avowing peaceful means for achieving their goals to suggesting that the only effective way to oppose the Karimov regime is through violence. Hizb-ut-Tahrir has claimed that 50,000 or 100,000 Muslims have been arrested for supporting it and are held in concentration camps in western Uzbekistan.<sup>27</sup> Western and local human rights groups affirm that there have been arrests in the thousands (possibly in the tens of thousands). Recently, the Uzbek government has acknowledged that detention camps exist, though it has denied access to them by international observers. Though it is impossible to provide definite figures,<sup>28</sup> ICG fieldwork in the affected communities shows that the scale of arrests is massive. In virtually every community — indeed, in virtually every family — one can find people who know someone who has been harassed, detained, arrested or convicted on grounds related to alleged association with non-sanctioned Islamic groups.

This crackdown forms an important part of the background to the Islamist incursions into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in 1999 and 2000. Following the Tashkent bombings, Islamists have increasingly distributed leaflets, particularly in the Uzbekistan territories of the Ferghana Valley, declaring that Karimov is a Jew, a Kafir, an enemy of Islam and a servant of the West, and that his government must be replaced by an Islamic state, or Caliphate, encompassing at least initially the Ferghana Valley (which includes territories in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan).<sup>29</sup> The same goal was declared by those conducting the incursions.

## B. Armed Incursions Led by the IMU, 1999-2000

On 6 August 1999, an armed group, which had entered the Batken District of southern Kyrgyzstan through high-mountain passes from Tajikistan, took several Kyrgyz officials hostage, releasing them a week later after a ransom of U.S.\$ 50,000 had been paid. The Kyrgyz military proceeded with an effort to expel the armed group from Kyrgyzstan, but on 22-23 August, a new group of several dozen hostages was taken, including a Kyrgyz general and four Japanese geologists. The confrontation continued for two months, during which Kyrgyz troops appeared powerless to expel the insurgents from several villages. Uzbekistan offered military support, and, without a go-ahead from either country, its air force bombed the territory of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, provoking sharp protests, especially from the latter. The insurgents withdrew after Japan reportedly paid a ransom of U.S.\$ 6 million.

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<sup>27</sup> 'Head of Uzbek Islamic opposition wants present regime to quit -- Full interview,' *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 28 April 1999 via BBC Worldwide Monitoring (Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe).

<sup>28</sup> No accurate figures are available for those arrested for their association with unofficial Islam in Uzbekistan. The Chief Justice of Uzbekistan's Supreme Court, Ubaidulla Mingboyev, acknowledged in September that some 2,000 people had been convicted on political grounds since 1991 (UPI, Sept. 5, 2000). Meanwhile, the capacity of the internment camps is thought to be about 70,000. Human rights groups in Uzbekistan have sought to compile information on those arrested (see, example, Memorial's *Spisok lits arestovannykh i osuzhdennykh po politicheskim motivam v Uzbekistan, ianvar' 1999 g.-aprel' 2000 g.* [List of individuals arrested and tried on political grounds in Uzbekistan, January 1999-April 2000]), which suggest a figure of no less than several thousand, but given the fact that many if not most cases are not publicised, it is probably reasonable to extrapolate that the number is considerably higher.

<sup>29</sup> 'Uzbek Islamic Movement: Government must go...,' *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 19 March 1999 via BBC Worldwide Monitoring (Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe).

Aside from the vague intention of bringing down the Uzbek government, and the specific demand for ransom, the insurgents also insisted that the Kyrgyz government give them leave to pass freely through Kyrgyz territory to Uzbekistan, which was their actual target. Though the total number of fighters was reportedly nearly 1,000, they could not realistically have expected that they would be able to take and hold any territory in Uzbekistan, which has a relatively strong army and has been fortifying border regions in recent years, especially in the Ferghana Valley.

As a result of these events, tensions grew sharply between the three states. Uzbekistan criticised Kyrgyzstan for military weakness and inability to control its territory and Tajikistan for harbouring Uzbekistan's enemies. Tajikistan protested the unsanctioned over-flight and bombing of its territory (which Uzbekistan first denied, but later admitted). Eventually, however, the incursion prompted security agreements between these states (and with Russia), as they braced for new incursions the following summer, once snows melted on the mountain passes between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

The incursions began anew in August 2000, this time initially in Uzbekistan's southern province of Surkhan-Darya, in a high-mountain area on the border with Tajikistan. Within a week, separate incursions had begun in several places in southern Kyrgyzstan (chiefly in Chong-Alay and Lyalyak Districts), as well as in the Uzbekistan mountains just to the east of the capital, Tashkent. The initial success of these incursions, though they had been anticipated, showed the limitations of what had been assumed to be Uzbekistan's much stronger border controls.

The Kyrgyz military was undoubtedly better prepared this time but the certain expectation of new hostilities did not prevent foolhardy American mountain climbers from entering the area even after the incursions had begun. Insurgents took these climbers hostage, but they escaped by overpowering and killing an armed guard.<sup>30</sup> Though this fortuitous escape avoided the possibility of direct U.S. involvement in the hostilities, the capture of the Americans prompted the U.S. State Department to include the IMU in its official list of terrorist organisations. This means anyone who supports the IMU is liable for sanctions from the U.S. government. While the reasons for the action are undoubtedly connected with the strategic relationship between the U.S. and Uzbekistan as well as with concerns about the proliferation of terrorism, the official declaration of the IMU as a terrorist organisation appeared to have an element of haphazardness to it. It was not supported by evidence that the IMU had deliberately sought out U.S. or other international hostages or otherwise had international targets.<sup>31</sup>

Uzbekistan frequently declared that the insurgents were nearly defeated, and President Karimov said a few days after the start of the conflict and shortly before the appearance of fighters near the capital that 'the situation is under complete

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<sup>30</sup> Michael Vig, 'The great escape: Utah climber recalls six frightful days in Kyrgyzstan,' *The Salt Lake Tribune*, 26 August 2000.

<sup>31</sup> Only 28 groups worldwide have been assigned this designation. The activities attributed to the IMU are actually generally more in line with many more numerous militant opposition groups that have not been placed on this select list. For the text of the U.S. State Department announcement, see <http://www.usembassy.org.uk/terror121.html>.

control and there are no apprehensions about a possible escalation of the conflict.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless over a month passed before the military drove the fighters from Uzbekistan's territory. Two months after the start of the incursions, efforts continued to expel a relatively small number of remaining insurgents from Kyrgyz territory. The total of insurgents involved in the campaigns in 2000 was apparently somewhat less than in 1999, and all in all the insurgency must be assessed as very small. Though militant activities even on this scale are a serious threat to the well being of the population in affected regions and undermine the regimes' image as being capable of controlling their borders, they do not threaten to bring down governments in the near term. The more significant threat they represent is the possibility of a more widely popular uprising that would both feed on and exacerbate serious tensions within the countries.

### C. International Support for the Incursions

The importance of these incursions and their implications for the future tranquillity of Central Asia hinge on the question of who is behind them. Official government sources in Uzbekistan (also sometimes in Kyrgyzstan) give a relatively simple scenario which denies any real local causes of the insurgency or local support. The insurgency stems, according to these accounts, from an international conspiracy inspired and financed by criminals and foreign radicals, such as Osama bin Laden, the Saudi millionaire believed to have organised the bombings of US embassies in East Africa in August 1998. This view holds that the insurgency represents these external actors, in concert with a few evil and power-hungry Uzbek exiles such as Tohir Yuldosh and Muhammad Solih. Their will is said to be implemented by the IMU and Hizb-ut-Tahrir, whose mercenary armies and movements include fighters from such homelands of Islamic extremism as Chechnya and Algeria. They prey on Uzbeks led astray ideologically by religious fanatics and beguiled by rich financial rewards.

The Islamist movement, by this account, is not driven by ideological convictions, but by the self-interest of evil men, who use a pretence of Islamic devotion as a cover for trade in narcotics, which finances their activities and provides an underground network for the spread of the influence by which they entrap youth. The insurgents and their supporters are purported to have no ideological or political legitimacy, to be purely criminal, and therefore to be neither truly 'Islamic' nor deserving to be called a political 'opposition'. It is important to note that this argument has a variety of political proponents, including not only governments of the region, but also most prominently Russia, which plays up the connections with its enemies in Chechnya, and even some representatives of Western governments. At a recent conference in Tashkent on drugs, organised crime and terrorism, for example, the representative of Interpol declared flatly that the insurgents' Islamist ideology was merely a smokescreen for drug-trafficking.<sup>33</sup> Proponents of this position do not explain how the remote mountain regions which have been the focus of the insurgencies in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan play a role in the drug trade, given their extreme inaccessibility (the mountain passes being passable only about two months of the year) and the

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<sup>32</sup> Interfax, 9 August 2000.

<sup>33</sup> 'International Conference on Enhancing Security and Stability in Central Asia: An Integrated Approach to Counter Drugs, Organised Crime and Terrorism,' co-sponsored by the UN Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 19-20 October 2000.



evident ease with which drug-traffickers operate on other readily available routes. Furthermore, there can be no serious doubt about the important role that Islamist ideology plays in motivating both the leaders and followers of the militant movements. Observers who contend otherwise either base their statements on insufficient information or wish to support regional governments' efforts to discredit their opponents.

Others put the emphasis, not on criminal causes, but rather on political conspiracies by one or another outside actor. Such conspiracies are usually supposed to be led by either Pakistan, which is considered interested in fomenting insurrection in Central Asia to strengthen its regional position through a proliferation of Taliban-style client regimes, or by such conservative Islamic states as Saudi Arabia, which are supposed to be pursuing an anti-Western agenda. A variation on this theme was articulated by the Ambassador of the Kyrgyz Republic to Tashkent, who declared that the incursions were the work of Western powers seeking to divide and weaken the Central Asian states.<sup>34</sup> While such a position is usually not officially articulated by Central Asian governments, it reflects a widespread suspicion of the West and of the U.S. in particular. This stems in part from ingrained Cold War attitudes and in part from knowledge that the U.S. supported militant Islamist movements in Afghanistan against the pro-Soviet regime, either directly or via Pakistan, as well as suspicion that U.S. support to Pakistan is still a major impetus behind the Taliban movement.

Another theory argues that the insurgencies are the work of Russia, which is supposed to be asserting pressure on Central Asian governments to submit to its regional dominance. Though concrete evidence is not given, it is supported by the contention that Russia could and would have prevented the incursions if it did not support them.<sup>35</sup>

Ultimately, there is very little substantive evidence to support any of the theories positing a broad international conspiracy to systematically support the IMU incursions. Indeed, there is unlikely ever to be clear evidence, for example, of the scale and sources of weapons and financial support for the IMU. Meanwhile, such claims are usually argued on the basis of plausible supposition at best, and bald, unsubstantiated assertion at worst. Often the theories are not even internally coherent. For example, those who argue that the IMU is the protégé of the Taliban generally do not attempt to explain a) how the IMU move freely between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, given that this border area in Afghanistan has been the under the control of the Northern Alliance, the mortal enemies of

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<sup>34</sup> Ambassador Batyrally Sydykov made this argument in a speech at the UNESCO-sponsored 'International Conference on Interreligious Dialogue,' Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 14-16 September 2000, citing Samuel Huntington's theory of the 'clash of civilisations' as a call for the West to conspire to bring down Islamic countries.

<sup>35</sup> For example, one analysis asserts, 'Russian forces in Tajikistan could easily have wiped out those camps from the air, and Russian border troops on the Tajik-Afghan border could have interdicted their access. Instead, Russian troops and the Dushanbe government have tolerated the sanctuaries on Tajik territory and allowed IMU forces repeatedly to cross the Tajik-Afghan, Tajik-Kyrgyz and Tajik-Uzbek borders' (Jamestown Foundation's *Monitor*, 9 November 2000). However, this view may greatly exaggerate the capacity and preparedness of Russian troops to exert their influence in loosely controlled parts of Tajikistan. The contention that Russia gives at least passive support to the IMU would seem seriously at odds with the widespread view that the IMU, the Taliban and Osama bin Laden are united in conspiracy, given Russia's adamant position in opposition to the Taliban and bin Laden.

the Taliban; b) how the apparent tolerance of the IMU by elements among those governing Tajikistan can be reconciled with those elements' clear alignment with the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan; and, c) how the ethnic antagonism between the Pashtun-dominated Taliban and the Tajik- and Uzbek-dominated Northern Alliance can be reconciled with the ethnic composition of the IMU.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, it is clear that the IMU does receive at least some support from the Taliban, as it has offices in Kabul and military training camps in other Taliban-controlled territory of Afghanistan.

#### D. Support from Within the Region

Meanwhile, closer analyses of these developments suggest that local developments and conditions are most important in accounting for the rise of Islamist militancy. They explain the insurgency as a reflection of the economic hardship and discontent affecting a part of the population and a reaction to the severe crackdown on Islamic activities which has pitted observant but otherwise moderate Muslims against their state. While accusations of international conspiracy are rife in public discussion and official information, political analysts who observe these developments most closely — whether affiliated with the Government of Uzbekistan, the US State Department, international NGOs or independent scholarship — concur that the economic and political developments within the region are decisive. Even the Western press, which in the past often found it compelling to speak of the Islamic threat, has recently focused increasingly on the repressive nature of Central Asian regimes and the economic crisis as the cause of instability in the region.<sup>37</sup>

The existence of outside forces interested in exploiting discontent and fomenting unrest in Central Asia is indisputable. Hizb-ut-Tahrir, for example, is an international movement coordinated from outside Uzbekistan, which is quite explicit in public pronouncements of its antipathy toward the current governments of Central Asia. Similarly, the Taliban movement in Afghanistan has been at odds with the former communist regimes, not least because the latter have provided essential support to the Northern Alliance, which controls a shrinking piece of territory on Afghanistan's border with the Central Asian states. The Taliban go so far as to allege that the Uzbek air force has bombed sites in northern Afghanistan. There is declared solidarity between the Chechen rebels fighting Russia, the Uzbek insurgents, and the so-called 'Afghani' Arabs, who came from various parts of the Arab world to help repel the Soviet invasion in the 1980s.

Official Uzbek accounts of the insurgencies, while failing to give definite proof of involvement by non-indigenous fighters, make much of reports that some insurgents were heard to speak foreign languages, as well as interception of radio communications between the fighters and bases in Afghanistan. Russian and Uzbek press accounts and official government information on the insurgents refer extensively to training camps in Afghanistan and even in Chechnya, though

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<sup>36</sup> Not only is it probable that IMU fighters, who are primarily Uzbek and Tajik would naturally align with their co-ethnics – the Northern Alliance -- in Afghanistan, but they have trained and fought together during the IMU's and United Tajik Opposition's years of exile in that country.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, David Filipov, 'Uzbek government cracks down on Islamic rebel groups: Officials fear Muslim uprising,' *Boston globe*, 14 January 2001, and Cyrill Stieger, 'Central Asia and the Islamist Threat,' *Neue Zuercher Zeitung*, 28 February 2001.

reliable sources are generally not given.<sup>38</sup> It is clear that Russia and Uzbekistan have found common cause in propaganda campaigns aimed at the West and at their own populations. These play up the notion of a well-financed and ideologically fanatical international conspiracy violating their sovereignty and imply that this justifies severe measures to neutralise their opponents.

Official accounts also refer to extensive financing from outside sources and suggest that the Islamists are engaged in trade of opiates produced in Afghanistan and in transit through this region on their way to Russia and eventually Western Europe. It is frequently suggested that the primary motivation of fighters joining this insurgency is the high level of pay they can receive. Even those who distribute leaflets are supposed to be doing so on behalf of well-paying agents.<sup>39</sup>

The overall implication of the official accounts is that the sources of the insurgency are from outside Uzbekistan and the motivations are quite cynical. They deny or downplay the possibility that people join because of sincere convictions regarding how to build a more prosperous, more just or simply more Islamic society, or because they feel aggrieved by difficult economic conditions or political and religious oppression.

## **E. Growing Popular Support for the Islamist Movements**

The true situation is certainly much more complex than these accounts suggest. It is highly improbable that the insurgents could attract supporters without being able to argue convincingly that their cause is righteous. The total number of fighters in the IMU is miniscule compared to the overall population of Uzbekistan or even some sub-region of the country. These fighters undoubtedly include people who come from a variety of backgrounds and who join for a variety of reasons. It is certainly the case that a significant contingent of this movement are people who joined the Islamic movement in Uzbekistan as early as the beginning of the 1990s, and who fled the country as the crackdown on unofficial Islam intensified over the course of the 1990s. There is no reason to suppose that anything other than religious convictions and social networks are primarily responsible for drawing these people into the movement.

The official contention that the Islamist movement receives substantial support from those who come to it on a casual, short-term basis in order to earn quick cash is not credible. It is out of the question that any significant number of youth in Uzbekistan would take such a step, because to do so would entail a severe violation of the authority that parents have over sons. The sanctions imposed on

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<sup>38</sup> '17 Kyrgyz troops killed in clashes with gunmen,' Interfax, 15 August 2000 (Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe); and Amir Shah, 'Afghanistan's neighbors to discuss security concerns,' United Press International, 30 September 2000 (Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe); and Andrei Antonov, 'Taliban: Reconnaissance in force,' Interfax, 6 September 2000.

<sup>39</sup> For example, the Uzbek Foreign Minister, Abdulaziz Kamilov, stated, 'This operation was prepared thoroughly and long ago. We have grounds to believe that the bandit formations are backed by the United Tajik Opposition, Afghan extremists and other countries.' The same extremist forces are behind the events in Dagestan and Kyrgyzstan, he said. 'According to unconfirmed reports, flyers urging volunteers to go to the Caucasus were distributed in Dushanbe and eastern Tajikistan. The volunteers were promised U.S.\$ 2,000 for travel expenses and U.S.\$ 800 for each week in combat,' he said (Cited by Interfax as transcribed by FBIS, 17 September 1999).

families of those suspected of supporting the Islamist movement are so severe — often including arrest and imprisonment of family members — that a son's decision to join would require at least the tacit support of his father.

Meanwhile, very substantial pressures are undoubtedly driving entire communities toward supporting the Islamist movement. These include the very poor conditions in many rural areas, which are still subjected to the centrally planned command economy that requires collectives to grow crops (cotton and wheat) which they must sell to the government at well-below-market prices. Even these low prices may be paid late and in kind. As a result, in many rural areas, the population has serious problems maintaining basic sustenance.<sup>40</sup>

In addition, the government's treatment of those whom it identifies as enemies of the state on the basis of their affiliation with unofficial Islamic organisations is so severe that it is polarizing a segment of the population in hard opposition to the state. In Uzbekistan and Central Asia as a whole, the general population is politically quite passive and inclined to accept established political authority and to support the status quo. However, since the government of Uzbekistan has resorted to putting pressure on entire families of its perceived opponents, it has succeeded in turning many against the state. When siblings or parents are detained or harassed for the alleged ideological crimes of their family members, the strength of extended-family relationships and the close-knit quality of communities results in an ever-widening circle of individuals identifying themselves against the state. It is not always clear on what basis individuals are targeted for prosecution for ideological crimes, but it appears likely that local law enforcement officials are given quotas or plans to fill and rewards for bringing in more people. Consequently, the polarisation process now affects a very wide segment of the population.

Examples of the kinds of state pressure that ordinary Muslims experience in Uzbekistan include the following. Anyone who exhibits any sign of devotion to Islam is the object of official suspicion. This applies both to those who attend officially sanctioned mosques and those whose mosques are not integrated into the government's Islamic administration, though association with the latter is increasingly a serious liability. It should be emphasised that unofficial mosques sprang up all over Uzbekistan in the early 1990s. Initially the state did not oppose this and even seemed to favour it. However, an increasing number of mosques — sometimes associated with particular Islamic orientations — have become the targets of official disapproval and designated 'illegal'. Those who were previously associated with mosques later designated as illegal are particularly at risk. They may be called to account for their earlier association with an *imam* (prayer leader) who has since been arrested. Given that in most parts of Uzbekistan, association with a particular mosque reflects more one's place of residence than ideological orientation, to brand those who attended a particular mosque as subversives is in many cases highly arbitrary.

Virtually any young man in Uzbekistan who regularly attends mosque or who dresses in a manner which the police perceive as Islamic can recount repeated incidents of having been detained or brought in for questioning about his Islamic

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<sup>40</sup> Abdumannob Polat, 'The Islamic revival in Uzbekistan: A threat to stability?' in *Islam and Central Asia: An Enduring Legacy or an Evolving Threat?*, edited by Roald Sagdeev and Susan Eisenhower (Washington, D.C.: Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 2000), pp. 53-54.

activities. Some have even been forcibly shaved of their beards, which are perceived as demonstrating an anti-government, Islamic orientation. Young women are likewise under pressure not to dress in an Islamic manner. Female students in high schools and universities are forbidden to wear *hijab* (a headscarf that covers the hair and neck). Officials are generally perceived as having the capacity to act in an arbitrary and dominating manner in all spheres of life. However, this campaign against Islam, with sanction from the central government, has given license for local police to harass the population in a manner considered particularly intrusive and in conflict with moral and traditional values. The effect is an increasingly sharp polarisation of the population against the government.

The state has also increasingly attempted to exert direct control over religious institutions and the content of public prayer meetings in its official network of mosques and beyond. The government distributes instructions via the local *hakims* (the term for the head of municipal, district and provincial governments since independence) regarding what should be said in prayer meetings. These instructions advise imams to criticise opposition figures and praise the president and the government during *hutba* (the imam's explanation of Islamic teachings, which traditionally have been based on the Quran and Hadith, but now should contain specific government positions). Imams with whom ICG analysts have spoken and who were also active during Soviet times compare the government's methods with those employed by the Soviet KGB. They perceive the level of observation by security agents attending the mosques to be greater than before the post-independence government embraced Islam as a part of national culture. The agents of the National Security Service inform the imams directly that any disagreement with the government line could result in immediate arrest.

Such efforts at controlling Islamic activity are most characteristic of Uzbekistan, but similar measures are increasingly employed in the neighbouring states as well. Uzbekistan is clearly putting pressure on its neighbours to join in the crackdown on the potential for Islamic groups to organise. On various occasions since independence, the Uzbek authorities have opted for direct repression of opposition in violation of their neighbours' territorial sovereignty — with or without acquiescence or tacit approval. The most widely publicised of such actions have prompted public protests — for example, when Uzbek security agents abducted Abdummanob Pólat, Chairman of the Uzbekistan Human Rights Society, after attending a conference in Bishkek in 1992.<sup>41</sup> Despite some international reaction to such events, Kyrgyzstan has been unable to resist continued such violations of its sovereignty, especially in the border areas in the southern Ferghana Valley, where Muslim groups and individuals have close ties across the borders, and some Uzbeks persecuted in Uzbekistan have sought refuge. Residents of Osh Province in southern Kyrgyzstan assert that many ethnic Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan, 'suspected of religious extremism and terrorism' have been arrested by Uzbek intelligence on the territory of Kyrgyzstan.

At the same time, Kyrgyzstan's own policies toward potential Islamic activists have become more restrictive. Beginning in 1999, the incursions by Islamic militants to southern Kyrgyzstan have prompted closer cooperation between the Kyrgyz Ministry for National Security (MNS) and the Uzbek National Security Service. Relations are more strained between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

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<sup>41</sup> Patricia M. Carley, 'Conference in Bishkek on human rights,' *Central Asia Monitor*, 1993, no. 1.

Nevertheless, there have also been some efforts in Northern Tajikistan to crack down on such groups as Hizb-ut-Tahrir, in spite of the inclusion of Islamists in the Dushanbe government and the general atmosphere of reconciliation between the Islamists and former communists who fought the Civil War.<sup>42</sup> In May 2000, ICG analysts met with the chief cleric in the official Islamic hierarchy in Leninabad Province (renamed Söghd Province in June), who said his chief concern was the negative role played by unofficial Islamic groups and the need for the government to oppose their influence.

Electoral politics and ethnic divisions have complicated the situation in southern Kyrgyzstan.<sup>43</sup> On the one hand, President Akaev sought re-election (in November) with a promise to fight effectively the influence of Islamism on his southern frontier. On the other hand, he was very dependent on the electoral support of the Uzbek community, which constitutes approximately half the population of southern districts and is generally more strongly oriented toward Islam. In the run-up to the election, there was some easing of the anti-Islamist campaign, which had evoked a negative reaction for many — not only Uzbeks — and was perceived by some as pandering by Akaev to Karimov and his anti-Islamic policies. During campaigning, Akaev made a point of appearing to be a friend of Islam, though as in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyz officialdom increasingly distinguishes between officially sanctioned Islamic institutions and those independently formed mosques and schools which are seen as more difficult to control. Imam Alauddin Mansur, a prominent Islamic scholar from Kara-Su in southern Kyrgyzstan, who has translated the Quran from Arabic into Uzbek, called a *Kurultay* (council) of the Uzbek diaspora in Osh to support Akaev, which was broadcast throughout the region. Those approaching mosques during the campaign were given small calendars with photos of President Akaev standing beside famous Uzbek imams, and calls to support Akaev were heard in the mosques. Meanwhile, local imams told ICG that a covert campaign against potentially 'disloyal' Muslims is being stepped up, and they suspect security agents are among those Uzbeks from Uzbekistan who attend their mosques. One imam told how many of his former fellow students at the Madrasa Bukhara in Uzbekistan<sup>44</sup>, from which he graduated almost 30 years ago, and who became practising clergy in Uzbekistan have now been imprisoned or disappeared. The fear of detention and interrogation by the police and MNS in Kyrgyzstan also is spreading among local clergy. One imam told ICG: 'You need not fear if you cooperate with the government but if you refuse or stand neutral, you will be watched day and night. Several years ago no one could imagine that Karimov's grip on Islam will reach Osh.'

The government's attempt to draw the clergy into efforts to control Islam, meanwhile, can have the effect of worsening the situation, by developing a rift between the 'loyal' clergy, who are increasingly discredited in the eyes of the population, and the 'popular' clergy, who resist the government's control. Thus, the above-mentioned Imam Alauddin Mansur regularly preaches that supporters of Hizb-ut-Tahrir are 'even more dangerous than atheists or communists... They

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<sup>42</sup> See, for example, 'Seven members of 'Hizb ut-Tahrir' sentenced to different periods of imprisonment,' in *Asia-Plus Blitz*, no. 156, 17 August 2000.

<sup>43</sup> K. N. Burkhanov, for example, highlight the potential for ethnic tensions and separatism in southern Kyrgyzstan in *Ekstremizm v Srednei Azii* [Extremism in Central Asia] (Almaty: Institut Rossii i Kitaia, 2000), p. 67.

<sup>44</sup> It was then one of only two institutions of higher Islamic education operating in Soviet Central Asia.

are not Muslims, the members of this party are like virus, and people should distance from them.<sup>45</sup> Many local Muslims, whether or not they are supporters of Hizb-ut-Tahrir, consider Imam Mansur to be following directives of the Mufti of Uzbekistan when he does not allow Hizb-ut-Tahrir members to pray in his mosque. Two Hizb-ut-Tahrir party members interviewed in Kara-Su, who did not want to be identified, stated that many locals in Kara-Su believe he has links with Uzbek and Kyrgyz secret services, saying, 'He is losing respect among people, and fewer and fewer people come to his mosque.' As the government seeks to co-opt a segment of the clergy, it drives the population away from those who might otherwise be identified simply as moderates, and toward those groups strongly opposed to the government.

Economic hardship and loss of faith in the governments' efforts to improve the lot of ordinary rural citizens are also very important factors in mobilizing support for the Islamist movement. Uzbekistan as a whole has maintained a degree of economic prosperity while its Central Asian neighbours' economies have suffered a collapse of many sectors. Yet there has been an increasing gap between those who have benefited from market reforms and the general population, especially in rural areas. While the government does invest in symbols of the country's strength and independence, especially in the capital, it has not given the same priority to addressing unemployment in rural areas, which is very high and rising. The impact of propaganda which dominates the state-controlled media and proclaims Uzbekistan's great future and prosperity is diminishing as the expectations from independence go unfulfilled. This year's drought will undoubtedly intensify discontent. Since in Uzbekistan — and increasingly in other Central Asian states — there is little possibility for ordinary people to influence the country's political direction in a legally sanctioned manner, the Islamist movement, with its claims of answers for economic problems, is gaining credibility among the poorer population.<sup>46</sup>

In assessing the level of commitment to Islam and its potential as an organizing factor for opposition to existing regimes, it is important not to extrapolate from such indicators as depth of knowledge about the religion or the degree to which a particular group is thought of historically as being 'very Islamic'. The Kyrgyz population, for example, is commonly considered to be 'less Islamic.' However, the Uzbek-led insurgents received some support among the local Kyrgyz population in the Batken District of southern Kyrgyzstan. This was related to the fact that Kyrgyz in this area have been disgruntled over the lack of investment and resources which the central government devotes to a region which is remote from the capital and weakly engaged in the networks of central power. Likewise, there are many Muslims who have little knowledge of the faith, thanks to the breakdown of tradition during Soviet times. Yet this in itself can serve as an impetus toward greater compensatory devotion (the zeal of the 'convert'). It is precisely among youth that the Islamic groups less subservient to the state are finding support. Many local observers, including journalists and human rights workers, affirm that while the population generally is politically rather passive, it does stand up against the governments when faced with dire poverty, and this is the situation that increasing numbers now face.

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<sup>45</sup> These quotes derive from Imam Mansur's teachings on Islam, which are distributed for free to the population on audio tape.

<sup>46</sup> Sam Nunn, et al., 'Social and economic tensions and reforms,' pp. 59-78 in *Calming the Ferghana Valley: Development and Dialogue in the Heart of Central Asia* (New York: The Century Foundation Press, 1999), p. 59-78.

In combination with the pressure of poverty, the second major motivation of support for the radical opposition is the question of justice. Many who would otherwise be politically passive in Central Asia can be moved to action when they perceive infringements of justice, and this issue dominates the rhetoric of the Islamists. As the government is perceived as corrupt and abusive of its authority, and especially as people are persecuted for moral and religious convictions, the argument grows increasingly compelling that only a change of government will achieve justice. One former supporter of Hizb-ut-Tahrir told an ICG Central Asia team member that he would still support the IMU if the fighters came to Tashkent, because he believes that the regime of President Karimov has become so repressive and anti-Islamic that only a radical change can address the frustration. This source said that his former fellow students in the Hizb-ut-Tahrir movement feel that the situation is so bad for those who actively practice Islam that they fear the police could arrest them at any time. They believe that many people would support an Islamist movement, but fear to initiate action because they believe that their *mahallas* (neighbourhoods) are closely watched by secret police informants.

Much as during Soviet times, the presence of the security police is felt to be ubiquitous, and indeed they work to maximise this feeling, as the impression of being observed is itself a method of control. Many people may have been accustomed to this during Soviet times, but the relative freedom during perestroika and the first years of independence changed expectations and led them to feel consider such control unjust — particularly as the government itself contends that it embraces Islam. In spite of these fears, a significant number of people were prepared to admit to ICG researchers their readiness to support radical movements, should such support seem potentially effective. It is noteworthy as well that fear among the activists is diminishing and being replaced by more open hatred of the regime. Human rights observers have noted that, whereas in the mid-1990s those on trial proclaimed their innocence and their loyalty to the President, they now more commonly address the court with criticisms of the 'Kafir' regime. Following convictions, some relatives call out 'Death to the President! Allahu Akbar!'<sup>47</sup>

Most people are still not prepared to support any form of radicalism and consider peace to be the highest priority. In conversations with ICG in Andijan, for example, some locals explained that the current problems in Uzbekistan are not due to any incorrect policies of President Karimov, but rather to corrupt bureaucrats who surround him. Acceptance of the Karimov government is bolstered by traditional submissiveness to authority and the government's mass media propaganda against Islamists. The situation is somewhat different in Kyrgyzstan, for though officials are perceived as corrupt and dominated by certain political groups in the capital (from which both Uzbeks and Kyrgyz from the south are excluded), the government is also considered considerably less repressive and arbitrary than in neighbouring Uzbekistan. While there are many open opponents of the government in the political arena, among a number of ethnic Kyrgyz in Osh who were asked by ICG researchers whom they saw as likely contenders against President Akaev, none cited the Islamists.

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<sup>47</sup> Vitalii Ponomaev 'Griazet li islamskaia revoliutsiia v Uzbekistane?' *Kontinent*, 2000, no. 8 ([www.continent.kz/2000/08/16.html](http://www.continent.kz/2000/08/16.html)).



The group that appears to be most actively joining the Islamist cause appears to be the disgruntled middle class, including a large number of people whose high expectations for their lives have been dashed by unemployment in Uzbekistan's stagnant economy. A compilation, based on court records, of those who have been arrested and convicted for political reasons reveals that more than 80 per cent of Islamists had secondary and vocational education, and the rest had higher education.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, a significant part of the educated middle class is firmly opposed to Islamism. While it may be concerned about human rights violations and would tend to favour secularist democratic movements, were they available, it holds firmly to the belief propagated during Soviet times that Islam is dangerous, backward, and repressive.

The conditions currently leading to support for the Islamist movement are greatest in Uzbekistan but other Central Asian countries are also affected. In northern Tajikistan, for example, where the Civil War did not prove conducive to Islamist mobilisation (unlike in the south), more than a decade of economic collapse and political problems have created dire conditions, especially in rural areas, which are prompting greater support for the Islamists. Similarly, Kyrgyzstan's rural economy in many regions — especially the areas where the incursions have occurred over the past two years — has undergone a severe collapse causing desperate conditions and flight of the population to regional urban centres. As the incursions took place, there was at least passive support and some active involvement by the rural population in these hard-hit areas.<sup>49</sup>

A variety of Islamist groups have attracted support. In addition to the Hizb-ut-Tahrir, mentioned above, other organisations have been identified, most of which are not restricted to one country, but have a regional character. For example, according to the Osh Provincial Department of the Ministry of the Interior, in addition to Hizb-ut-Tahrir, about ten small but mobile terrorist groups operate across the Ferghana Valley. Among those are: *Tabligh* (Mission), *Uzun sokol* (Long Beard), *Adolat uyushmasi* (Justice Society), *Islam lashkarlari* (Warriors of Islam), *Tovba* (Repentance), and *Nur* (Ray of Light).<sup>50</sup> Most of these are more similar to the IMU than to Hizb-ut-Tahrir in that they are composed of people who are actively prepared to take up arms against the state. Such groups are small by comparison with the much wider social base for the members of which Islamism is increasingly an ideology but not yet a battle cry.

## F. Who is Behind the Militant Actions

There is no reliable information on who actually makes up the rank-and-file of the IMU, nor on what IMU's relationship is with other groups. Indeed, it may be mistaken to suppose the incursions have been carried out exclusively by IMU fighters. It is well known that the IMU is supported ideologically, if not also materially and militarily, by parts of the former United Tajik Opposition (UTO) in

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<sup>48</sup> Vitalii Ponomarev, 'Spisok lits, arestovannykh i osuzhdennykh po politicheskim i religioznym motivam v Uzbekistane, ianvar' 1999 g.-aprel' 2000 g. (Moskva: Memorial, 2000). This source also reveals that the largest numbers of arrests were in Tashkent, Andijan, Namangan and Khorezm Provinces — regions where there are relatively large and urban populations and where the political elites themselves have shown some tendency to oppose the Karimov government.

<sup>49</sup> Angela Charlton, 'Religious strife, drug trade, unravel fragile Central Asian stability,' *Associated Press*, 29 October 2000 (Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe).

<sup>50</sup> *Vecherniy Bishkek* [newspaper], 28 May 1999.

Tajikistan who are not compliant with the policies of the central government, and who are very antagonistic toward the Karimov regime in Uzbekistan.<sup>51</sup> This antagonism goes back to Uzbekistan's intervention in the Civil War on behalf of the anti-Islamist forces, as well as subsequent actions that were perceived as attacking Tajikistan in general, and the Islamists in particular. While it is not clear what the precise relationship is between the figures formerly in the opposition leadership, such as Said Abdullo Nuri (former head of the UTO) and insurgents operating out of Tajikistan, there are clearly ideological affinities and probably more direct support.<sup>52</sup>

Most likely, Tajiks from the UTO in Tajikistan have been involved in the actual fighting in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The motivations of such Tajiks can include furthering the cause of Islamism in the region, retaliating against the former communists in Uzbekistan for the perceived wrongs that Tajiks suffered under Uzbek domination during the Soviet era, and even the prospect of receiving compensation, given the lack of other opportunities in that war-ravished country. Uzbeks from Tajikistan and Afghanistan may be involved, as well — both countries having substantial Uzbek populations whose youth have grown up in an environment characterised by both an orientation toward Islam and a culture of warfare. The coherence of the motivations and even of the military structure of the insurgents, thus, is subject to doubt.

One important fact which emerged from this year's insurgency in Kyrgyzstan is that, strictly speaking, neither it nor the previous year's was an 'incursion'.<sup>53</sup> Rather, those involved in the insurgency inhabit this border region, moving back and forth, building arms caches, and establishing relations with the local villagers and even drawing recruits from among them.<sup>54</sup> It is possible that some of the same network of local cooperation was previously developed and used by drug-traffickers, who may be closely aligned with the insurgents as government officials allege, though there are paths for drug-trafficking which are much more suitable than these remote and inaccessible areas. It is also possible that much more extensive networks of potential support for the insurgency are developing more widely across the region which could enable insurgents to 'appear out of nowhere' in the heart of more populated regions as they appeared in these border regions when the hostilities began. Some anticipated such a tactic this year, and the fact that it did not happen suggests that these networks are weak if they are available at all. A network somewhat along these lines, however, certainly exists and is effective in distributing the ideological leaflets of the Hizb-ut-Tahrir movement, which appear under the doors of people all across the region on a regular basis.

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<sup>51</sup> Jamestown Foundation's *Monitor*, 8 September 2000, vol. VI, no. 166.

<sup>52</sup> The official Uzbek newspaper, *Pravda vostoka*, asserted already in June 1999 that Uzbek opposition leaders such as Tohir Yuldosh and Juma Namangani were coordinating with Nuri (see *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, June 3, 1999, citing Interfax). Nuri has consistently denied supporting the Uzbek opposition forces and blames Russian border guards for failing to prevent them from entering Tajikistan (see Institute for War and Peace Reporting, *Reporting Central Asia*, no. 37, January 2001). However, he has also offered to play a mediating role in the conflict.

<sup>53</sup> Sources close to the security operations in southern Kyrgyzstan told ICG that local Kyrgyz and Tajiks played an important role in supporting the insurgency.

<sup>54</sup> Angela Charlton, 'Religious strife, drug trade, unravel fragile Central Asian stability,' *Associated Press*, 29 October 2000 (Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe).

The available information on the financing of the Islamist movement is highly unreliable. There have been public statements by outside supporters of the IMU, such as representatives of Osama bin Laden, declaring sums of money which have been promised or given to the IMU. It is reasonable to suppose also that drug-traffickers, who certainly have massive resources, might find common cause with the insurgents and give them material support. However, such declarations and suppositions do not provide a reliable picture of the financial resources of the insurgents, and the Uzbek government's claims that fighters are paid U.S.\$ 100 a day are more propaganda than well-documented information.<sup>55</sup> One approach to an assessment of the insurgents' resources is to look at the effectiveness of their campaigns, and by this measure, they are limited at best. They would probably like very much actually to have the international network attributed to them.

Another very important factor in the development of the Islamist movement is the support it can receive from those who hold official power on various levels. There is the potential for alliance formation, as the Islamist movement can be used by political figures to put pressure on the central authorities or on neighbouring countries. The fact that the Islamists mobilizing against Uzbekistan have been able to use Tajikistan so effectively as a base of operations reflects this. The relatively autonomous regional leaders in Tajikistan can promote their position, and in some cases, their Islamist affinities, by giving refuge and support to the IMU. The central authorities themselves in Tajikistan, who have often been at odds with Uzbekistan, have some interest in harbouring Uzbekistan's opponents (just as some opponents of the Tajikistan government are harboured in Uzbekistan and have periodically conducted interventions from Uzbekistan's territory). Similarly, within Uzbekistan there are members of the political elite who could be interested in forming alliances with the Islamists to further their own position (such a scenario is one of the most widely-credited explanations of the Tashkent bombings of February 1999).<sup>56</sup>

Thus, the image of a coherent international conspiracy implemented by foot soldiers beguiled by ideology and promises of material rewards is doubtless a dim shadow of the reality. There is a great diversity of interests and participants involved in the insurgency at the level of both leadership and rank-and-file.

### III. IMPACT ON POLITICS AND SECURITY IN THE REGION

The rise of Islamist insurgency in Central Asia has prompted or intensified important new developments in the politics of the region. One of the most significant changes is in perceptions. The Karimov regime in Uzbekistan, which long enjoyed an image of unassailable strength which itself formed part of the basis of its legitimacy and credibility, was shown to be seriously vulnerable by its

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<sup>55</sup> Vicken Cheterian, 'Where is Juma Namangani?' *Eurasia insight*, 27 February 2001 (<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav071700.shtml>).

<sup>56</sup> K. N. Burkhanov in *Ekstremizm v Srednei Azii* argues that since the political elite in the Ferghana Valley provinces of Uzbekistan have been sidelined, they have explored the possibility of building an alliance with Islamist extremists in order to assert their position in national politics. While this assertion may be unsubstantiated, there is no doubt that the existence of an effective insurgency constitutes a political opportunity, which discontented elements within the ruling Uzbek elite can exploit.

failure to prevent the Tashkent bombings and rebel incursions within striking distance of the capital. This change of perceptions prompted an immediate change in Uzbekistan's willingness to enter into cooperative security arrangements with its neighbours. The period following the first incursions saw a series of high-level meetings and agreements between the regional leaders. Yet Uzbekistan has not rejoined the CIS Agreement on Collective Security, from which it withdrew just prior to the Tashkent bombings. Even with the repetition of the incursions in 2000, the cooperative agreements did not lead to substantial actions. Mutual suspicions and differences of interests and approach still make cooperation difficult to achieve.

Another important change is in the role that security policy plays in the overall configuration of the national policy making apparatus in Uzbekistan and to some extent in Kyrgyzstan. For example, whereas economic interests would dictate more open borders, there has been a substantial fortification and restriction of movement on Uzbekistan's borders, to the extent that trade routes which were once very active are now nearly closed. Although Tajikistan's access to the outside world is almost exclusively through Uzbekistan for practical purposes, it has become all but impossible for most Tajiks to travel into Uzbekistan. It is questionable whether such restrictions limit movement of those who represent a real security threat to Uzbekistan because there are many ways to cross the border for those who are determined to do so illegally, via unpatrolled sections, or with bribes. The flourishing of bribery on the borders itself amounts to an incentive for the security apparatus to push for greater restrictions on cross-border movement, while the extraction of bribes adds an additional cost to trade, whether of legal goods or contraband. All this contributes to the influence of the security apparatus among the institutions of the central government. Since these ministries have an interest in confrontation with neighbouring countries, we can expect the trend toward greater tensions and less successful cooperation to continue.

Though tighter border regulation is ostensibly aimed at increasing security, in fact it is leading to heightened tensions which seriously undermine regional security. There is some degree of increased cooperation between security services, for example, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, but this has the effect of increasing tensions with the population. As Alisher Sobirov, Deputy in the Jogorku Kenesh (Parliament of Kyrgyzstan), informed ICG analysts, new inter-governmental agreements allow the Uzbek security service to arrest on Kyrgyz territory ethnic Uzbeks from Kyrgyzstan who are suspected of membership in Islamist organisations and take them to Uzbekistan. When Uzbeks of Kyrgyz citizenship thus are arrested for distributing Hizb-ut-Tahrir leaflets, the antipathy toward the government not only of Uzbekistan but also of Kyrgyzstan is greatly increased in affected communities. One local human rights worker related to ICG of how the Russian human rights investigator Vitaly Ponomarev narrowly escaped arrest by Uzbek officials when he was visiting Kara-Su in Kyrgyzstan, not far from Uzbekistan where he is wanted for publishing criticisms of the Uzbek government.

The implementation of measures to control border security have also recently led to a sharp escalation of tensions between Uzbekistan and both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. An independent Kyrgyz newspaper reported that the Kyrgyz Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defence and Parliament expressed concern over Uzbekistan's demarcation of a fortified border in disputed boundary areas and the

mining of the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border surrounding the enclave of Sokh (an island of Uzbekistan territory within Kyrgyzstan). The Kyrgyz Foreign Ministry stated that similar problems existed on the Uzbek-Tajik border, where twenty-seven Tajik people, mainly women and children, have been killed by landmines.<sup>57</sup> These tensions have led to a tit-for-tat escalation, which has produced an open letter from the Governor of one southern Kyrgyz province declaring, among other things, the intention to 'take back' one enclave of Uzbek territory within Kyrgyzstan.<sup>58</sup>

The increased focus on security threats has also drawn additional international attention. Undoubtedly as a direct consequence of these threats, for example, the spring of 2000 saw visits to the region by the NATO Secretary-General and the U.S. Secretaries of Defence and State and Directors of the FBI and CIA. The message that Central Asian governments give to these visitors is that they need more assistance in improving their military response to the insurgents. U.S. Secretary of State Albright's visit brought promises of small but significant assistance along these lines. This bolstered the credibility of the Central Asian governments position that the problem is primarily one of external security threats rather than of internally driven political mobilisation. Policy-makers in Uzbekistan hope that the common threat of Osama bin Laden will encourage U.S. officials to strengthen the Karimov and Akaev regimes rather than press issues of human rights, democracy, and even market reforms and corruption. The leaders of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, meanwhile, recognise that they will never receive significant security support from the U.S. and other Western governments — as demonstrated by the failure to provide substantial assistance for repelling the insurgents — and they instead look to Russia, whose commitment to the region is assured, although limited in substance.

Russia has sought to benefit from the situation in two ways. It seeks allies who will support it against the rebels in Chechnya (called Islamic fundamentalists) in a battle portrayed as being fought between civilisation and fanaticism. The security challenge for Central Asian states has also provided Russia an opportunity to become more closely involved in the region, as exemplified by its threat in the summer of 2000 to bomb Afghanistan if the Taliban provided support to Karimov's opponents. However, some Central Asian leaders view Russian involvement with great scepticism. For example, Karimov recently sharply criticised Russia for seeking to exploit the situation in order to dominate the region.

#### IV. PROSPECTS FOR FURTHER INSURGENCY

In a sense, the impact of the insurgencies of the past two years has been much more symbolic than directly threatening. The territories occupied have been very small and in remote, sparsely populated regions, and casualties have been limited. Most importantly, the rebels seem to represent as yet the interests of only an extremely small part of the general population of these countries and, therefore, have little prospect of expanding their activity in the immediate term.

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<sup>57</sup> *Delo No...*, 29 November 2000, p. 3.

<sup>58</sup> Open letter of by Governor Aibalayev, Governor of Batken Province, addressed to his counterpart, Hakim Atabayev, in the neighbouring Uzbek province of Ferghana, in the 10 January 2001 issue of *Batken Tangy* (a weekly provincial paper).

Concern articulated by some Western officials that these insurgencies might allow the Islamists to establish a beachhead in Central Asia is off the mark. In fact, the Islamists already have such a beachhead, as is evident from the fact that they operate freely, to all intents and purposes, from the territory of Tajikistan. The high-mountain border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, though now the only non-Russian border still patrolled by Russian troops, is quite porous to the flow of arms, drugs and fighters. It is impossible to know whether this flow is largely unimpeded because of the impossibility of controlling it or because there are those who are interested in allowing it.<sup>59</sup>

The most critical question is not whether such insurgencies will succeed in penetrating more territory, but rather whether they will be transformed into something rather different. Insurgencies of this type are a tremendous headache for the security forces and for the population of the affected regions, as well as a serious blow to the credibility of leaders who validate themselves in terms of their ability to impose order. They also contribute to an atmosphere of insecurity, which inhibits foreign investment and international involvement. This in turn interferes with social and economic development, strengthens undemocratic tendencies and fosters conditions for drug-trafficking and corruption. These insurgencies aggravate tensions between the states, and raise fears that one state — Uzbekistan — will take unilateral action which violates the interests or sovereignty of its neighbours. However, in their current form they do not threaten to overturn regimes or establish an Islamic state in the region.

The greatest risk represented by the insurgencies is that they can become identified with wide popular aspirations for better economic conditions, a more Islamic society or a quest for justice for those persecuted or oppressed by the current regimes. At present, the insurgencies are not widely seen in these terms. Most of the population fears instability. They may be unhappy with their economic lot under the current regimes and sympathetic to a move away from the atheism and secularism of the Soviet period toward Islamic traditions, but they do not look to the IMU and its allies in Tajikistan to address these issues on their behalf.

What can change this — indeed what is now changing this in Uzbekistan in particular — is the growing despair regarding economic conditions and the increasing polarisation of official policy against popular manifestations of Islamic devotion and participation. The worst-case scenario for stability is that the Islamists can find wide support for their cause. It is not the existence of some hundreds of militants ready to fight nor the availability of financial support from the outside which can constitute a force to be reckoned with, but rather the wide popular support that extremists can enjoy when their cause is seen as righteous. The most worrisome development in Central Asia now is that such support for the Islamists is on the rise.

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<sup>59</sup> Lubin and Rubin, in *Calming the Ferghana Valley...* describe the Russian military transport aviation as the main transit route for Afghan opium and refer to 'the reportedly frequent and astronomical disparity between what Russian border troops claim to confiscate from criminals and what they submit for inspection' (p. 72).

The Uzbek Minister of Defence recently conceded that he cannot rule out new incursions,<sup>60</sup> and in so doing, he voices the anticipation of most in the region. General Bolot Dzhanzakov, Secretary of the National Security Council of Kyrgyzstan, was even more forthright in a meeting with ICG analysts. He stated that the Kyrgyz Ministry of National Security has information that IMU plans new incursions into Kyrgyzstan, on a more serious scale than those of 1999 and 2000: 'Military aggression by militants next year will require from us greater resources.' General Dzhanzakov made similar remarks at a conference on regional security held in Kazakhstan in November 2000, adding, 'We are talking not just about local conflict but international terrorism.'<sup>61</sup> While the Central Asian governments may indeed have such intelligence reports, it must also be noted that such statements are made to gain international support for security operations

Measures have been taken to limit cross-border movement, including the blasting of mountain passes and the mining of the border between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The government of Uzbekistan has reportedly forced the evacuation and destruction of villages in the border area.<sup>62</sup> There is intensified surveillance of the borders and of those segments of the population which the government suspects of sympathizing with the insurgents. This polarisation of the population has the potential to intensify, as it can take on an inter-ethnic character. In Uzbekistan, large numbers of representatives of non-Uzbek groups, such as Kazaks, Tajiks, Uyghurs, have been under pressure to assimilate. This is particularly true in some critical border regions affected by tensions and incursions. These include the area between Tashkent and the Kazakhstan border (inhabited by many partially assimilated Kazaks), the Surkhan-Darya area of last summer's incursions (with many Tajik communities) and the Ferghana Valley, which is a rich mosaic of Tajiks, Uyghurs, Kyrgyzes and others.<sup>63</sup>

However, none of the security measures which have been implemented provide much assurance that new attacks can be prevented, especially as their impact will undoubtedly include strengthening the resolve of those who are conducting the incursions or who might support them. For example, as a result of the Uzbek military's mining of borders, there have been numerous casualties among the Tajik civilian population of the region, in part, because mines were erroneously laid inside Tajik territory.<sup>64</sup> There was already considerable resentment among many in Tajikistan toward Uzbekistan, and such developments will further exacerbate this and enhance the support for Uzbekistan's enemies among some in Tajikistan. Thus, the likelihood of effective security cooperation between these countries is limited. With growing tensions between the three countries over

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<sup>60</sup> RFE/RL *newslines*, vol. 4, no. 220, 13 November 2000.

<sup>61</sup> From a conference sponsored by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, as quoted by Anthony Borden in 'Central Asia conflict fears', *The Times of Central Asia* (newspaper), vol. 2, no. 46, 16 November 2000, p. 4.

<sup>62</sup> During the incursions early on, the Uzbek government announced that it had moved the population out of several villages in the border region, ostensibly for the safety of the villagers but quite possibly to prevent them from providing support to the insurgents or as punishment for their being suspected of having already done so. That the villages have subsequently been destroyed and their inhabitants permanently relocated was reported by anonymous individuals who visited the affected area.

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, 'Vtorzhenie islamskikh ekstremistov: budet li prodolzhenie? (Incursions of Islamic extremists into Uzbekistan: will they continue?),' *Tsentrāl'naia Aziia*, 2000, no. 1 (Almaty: Tsentrāl'no-Aziatskoe agentstvo politicheskikh issledovaniĭ, 2000), p. 13.

<sup>64</sup> RFE/RL *Newsline*, vol. 4, no. 219, 10 November 2000.

border issues despite cooperative agreements, the overall result of intensified security measures is reduction of regional security.

New incursions, meanwhile, are likely to take on different forms and become less focused on border regions. With the Islamist movement within Uzbekistan growing increasingly impatient and hostile toward the regime, it may be anticipated that militants will be more effective in mobilizing an underground support network across broad regions of the country. The growing tensions within Uzbekistan which stem from regional inequities of political power and economic investment and sharply increasing tensions with neighbouring countries over border issues, together create an environment where chance events and opportunistic actions can throw the region into serious crisis.

## **V. ROLE OF EXTERNAL POWERS AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS**

### **A. China**

China is the only great power that borders any of the three countries studied in this report. It faces a revolt amongst its Muslim community in the southwestern portion of the Xinjiang Autonomous region. This revolt has been characterised by frequent terrorist attacks from armed Uyghur separatists, followed by harsh retaliation by the authorities through execution and imprisonment of large numbers of activists or alleged activists. China also wages a strong propaganda and internal security campaign against unofficial Islamic activities. Like the former USSR, it does not tolerate any religious activity that it does not control. The countries covered by this report with which China shares a border, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, are the weakest in security capacity but China looks to them to seal the common border against infiltration not only of Islamist political organisations but also of the most benign Islamic practices and ideas.

China has a very low estimation of the capacity of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to help prevent infiltration across their borders with China and to prevent anti-Chinese groups from organising inside their territory. China's government has formed a number of new task forces to deal with the problem, which it now regards as the most serious at any time since the 1949 establishment of the communist state. According to some sources, China believes it is losing the battle with the Muslim revolt in Xinjiang because of the lack of effective border policing, the net outflow of Han Chinese from Xinjiang,<sup>65</sup> and the lack of appeal of the atheistic Han Chinese state for most of the country's Muslims. The wave of executions in Xinjiang in recent years and the continued suppression by China of unofficial Muslim activities exacerbates the hostility to the Chinese state, even if it does not send all Muslims into the arms of terrorist or secessionist groups.

In this atmosphere, China's security relations with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan can only serve to reinforce the instincts of those governments to repress unofficial

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<sup>65</sup> For most of the time since 1949, China had a policy of forced migration to Xinjiang to shift the ethnic balance in favour of Han Chinese. The effect this forced migration policy had is now being reversed because of the lifting of residency controls, the establishment of a free labour market, the appeal of the 'get-rich quick' eastern zones of the country, and the return of migrants to their homes and relatives in the east.



Islamic activity. Little is known in detail about the day-to-day conduct of China's security relations with these countries,<sup>66</sup> but China has been heavily engaged through the Shanghai Five mechanism and in bilateral contacts with the aim of containing and defeating what it sees as transnational and militant Islamic fundamentalism. On the basis of its domestic policy toward Islam, it is a fairly safe assumption that China's assessment of the threat Islamist groups pose in Central Asia is quite extreme and un-nuanced.

## B. Russia

Russia, like China, identifies radical Islamist mobilisation in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan as a threat to national security interests. Russia's tolerance for any form of Islamist politics is quite low, though it is much higher than China's. Indeed, Russian domestic policy toward Islam in no way resembles that of China or the Central Asian states. There has been a blossoming of Islamic religious practice and organisation in parts of Russia since 1991. But Russian security agencies and the Russian mass media have contributed to a fairly unsophisticated campaign against militant Islamists, portraying them as a threat to Russian security interests. This stereotyped and inflammatory reporting has been fuelled in part by the wars in Chechnya.

Much Western media reporting on Islamist mobilisation in Central Asia actually replays some of the more virulent and ill-informed media lines that originate in Russia. Individual members of Russian intelligence agencies seem to be playing a big part in feeding the media some of the more detailed information about Islamist activities in Central Asia. On a day-to-day basis, the attitudes and suspicions of many Russian officials who deal with security cooperation in Central Asia appear to reinforce the dispositions of those governments to repress unofficial Islamic activity.

Nevertheless, Russia, with its long involvement in the region and the substantial intelligence assets it retains has the greatest capacity of all the external players to understand Central Asian developments, including those related to Islamic mobilisation. This includes considerable sophistication at the highest official level. It is well placed to deliver the most effective responses to radical Islamist groups intent on using violence. It appears to have scored some success in contacting and dealing with the IMU. As it did in contacts with *Mujaheddin* in Afghanistan during its occupation, it may be looking to broker a deal between the IMU and the Uzbekistan government.<sup>67</sup>

Consultation and co-operation with Russia can thus pay dividends for Western governments seeking effective strategies for dealing with security problems in Central Asia, including terrorism and drugs. The challenge, however, is to separate the wheat from the chaff in what the Russians say about the region and distinguish between Russian expertise, which is considerable, and Russian paranoia and self-serving claims, which are also considerable.

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<sup>66</sup> This will be the subject of a subsequent ICG Report.

<sup>67</sup> There have been a number of indirect sources of evidence for this. For example, in early February 2001, Russia is reported to have been involved in the airlifting of up to 250 IMU members out of Tajikistan into Afghanistan.

## **C. Western Governments and International Organisations**

The issue of Islamist mobilisation in Central Asia comes to the attention of policy-makers in Western capitals and international organisations only rarely and faintly. There are several reasons for this: the remoteness of the region, the short time over which study of the new states has developed, and the associated lack of analytical expertise on the region.

In Western governments, and to a considerable extent in international organisations as well, there is a strong tendency to view Islamic movements in negative terms as antithetical to a liberal civil society and Western values and to gloss over the differences between groups with different goals and different methods. This has led to a failure to analyse adequately the role that Islamic political and social mobilisation will inevitably play in Central Asia. It has also engendered a certain sympathy with the Central Asian governments which resort to authoritarian means in limiting any Islamic organisation not under their direct control. There is a general consensus among Western governments that such rights as the right to religious observance, the right to free association and free expression, and the right to full political participation by interest groups within a society are essential to ensure civil harmony and ultimately state security. However, a negative view of Islam among some Western policy-makers may be fostering support for policies which see the curtailment of these rights as justified in the interest of support for the security of Central Asian states. Some government agencies in Central Asia claim tacit or explicit Western support for policies of exclusion and suppression of Islamic elements that are likely to lead to intensified political polarisation and ultimately to a severe danger of political and military clashes.

## **VI. CONCLUSIONS**

### **A. Central Asian Governments**

From the point of view of preventing further social tensions and escalation of violence, one of the main security problems arising from Islamist mobilisation in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has been caused by the governments themselves. While there was a period in which they publicly espoused a strong commitment to the revival of Islam and tolerated a range of unofficial Islamic activities, this positive approach has been reversed. The worst situation is in Uzbekistan. The view that most Islamic activity not sanctioned by the state must be anti-state has led to the unjustified arrest and harassment of thousands of Muslims who otherwise would stand as loyal citizens. Consequently, these people, their relatives and sympathisers have been driven toward a more radical stance. Repressive religious policies promote polarisation of the society and discredit its political institutions, including Islamic organisations that are in any way associated with the state. The governments should restore their credibility as protectors of the legitimate rights of all individuals, including the most observant Muslims, by clearly articulating and demonstrating their commitment to protecting these rights.

The main cause of the repressive religious practices lies in the authoritarian instincts of government leaders, who have been dubbed 'neo-Soviets' by many commentators. Until Gorbachev, the Soviet regime viewed any kind of organised Islamic activity not under the direct control of the KGB as anti-social at best, treasonous at worst. The crackdown on unofficial religious activities or particular streams of religious observance is just one plank of a more general tendency by governments of the region to curtail civil and political freedoms. This tendency has been most notable in the area of political dissent and freedom of the press.

A secondary factor that may have transformed a generalised insecurity about unofficial religion among the leaders into a much harsher set of policies in practice is the institutional framework the leaders have relied on for addressing their fears. There are three aspects to this: first, the role of the internal security agencies; second, the lack of proper supervision of police operations; and third, the poorly developed security policy communities in each country.

Increasingly, the internal security agencies of the Central Asian governments, all of which grew out of Republic-level KGB offices, are taking the lead in implementing state policy toward Islam. The approach to Islam by these agencies corresponds closely in all its essentials to that of the KGB in the Soviet era. The response to all manner of unofficial Islamic activities – whether they be benign observance, vehement ideological antagonism, moderate political aspirations, or violent military and terrorist acts – has been suppression. Policy toward Islam as a whole must not be led by KGB-successor agencies, given their practice of treating all forms of Islamic observance (often even those associated with the state-sanctioned directorates of Muslims) as potentially anti-state and therefore appropriate for suppression or control. Instead, overall policy toward Islam should be led by policy-makers whose expertise is in social and cultural policy as opposed to law enforcement.

The central governments should elaborate clear and well-reasoned regulations on what constitutes anti-state Islamic activity. Local law enforcement officials should be made to understand that it is improper (and often unlawful) to persecute and arrest individuals for activities such as attending mosque, wearing Islamic attire, possessing or distributing non-sanctioned literature which does not advocate violence, or having associated with religious figures who were later designated subversive. Policy directives from the central government must insist that local law enforcement officials not target innocent people in order to fill a 'quota'. Local law enforcement officials should be put on notice that those who fail to support this policy will be subject to tangible sanctions. The public should be shown that officials who violate this national policy will be punished.

The underdevelopment of the security policy communities in Central Asia has also had a negative effect on how governments have responded to unofficial religious activities. Within government departments, even in best cases, a strong analytical capacity is only just beginning to develop. Outside government, there is no strong voice to offer alternative security policies and few institutional homes for such voices. The university sector is struggling, and security studies are a low priority. Media offers alternative views but is increasingly restrained and has little strong following in government circles anyway. The parliaments offer no effective alternative voice and little counterweight on security policies.

## **B. External Powers and International Organisations**

Foreign governments and international organisations must support unwaveringly and unequivocally the position that regional security can only be assured if religious freedom is guaranteed and the legitimate activities of groups and individuals are not suppressed. This is not just because human rights are important in themselves, but because their suppression inevitably leads to militant responses. Central Asia can be compared with pre-Revolutionary Iran, where foreign support for an unpopular leader fostered worse leadership and antagonism toward both the leader and the external supporter.

Any support provided to the region's governments with the goal of enhancing security will be futile if the factors leading to polarisation of the population against the governments are not reduced or eliminated. Donors should be very careful to ensure that their activities do not strengthen or legitimate the suppression of Islamic groups. Failing this, their well-meant interventions can increase the chances for conflict in the region.

External support to Central Asian states in countering violent manifestations of radical Islamist politics should take due account of the important positions occupied by both China and Russia on this issue. Each of those states should rely less on military support and more on economic and social support to Central Asia to reduce the appeal of radical Islamist groups. Russia has the potential to lead the international community in assistance to Central Asian states, even though its own material capacities remain weak. If it is to do so effectively, however, it must make better use of its own resources for properly assessing the motivations and implications of Islamic activities.

Currently, there is a widespread tendency for representatives of foreign governments and international organisations to give mixed and contradictory messages to their Central Asian counterparts. Those with formal responsibility for democracy and human rights speak of the need to improve laws and institutions, while those responsible for security focus on the need to act more effectively against the regime's opponents. It is essential that any security assistance be closely integrated into the comprehensive approach to security which is advocated by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, of which the Central Asian states are members. Security assistance should not be provided if there is insufficient assurance that it will not be used in a manner consistent with this comprehensive approach. Those who implement security assistance programs should be prepared to assist not only in technical implementation, but also in ensuring that the same standards and mechanisms are applied to guarantee observance of citizens' rights in Central Asia as elsewhere.

Guaranteeing the rights of Muslims should be regarded equally as a human rights and a security issue. The message that treatment of Muslim groups and individuals must adhere to international norms should be carried precisely by those who provide security assistance. To date, however, some of those engaged in providing security assistance have been poorly briefed and fail to realise the diversity among those pursuing Islamic agendas. Consequently, they accept the government's position that suppression of Islamic groups is necessary. The readiness demonstrated by governments such as that of the U.S. to provide

security assistance has led some in Central Asian governments to conclude that their commitment to fight drugs and radical Islam is more important for Western capitals than promoting a just and tolerant political system.

To the extent that foreign governments are associated with or fail to condemn repressive tendencies of Central Asian regimes, it will strengthen the inclination among victims of the suppression of legitimate Islamic activity to adopt a hostile stance to those governments. This tendency has become notably stronger over the past several years, for precisely the reasons mentioned. Without a significant change in the trend, we can expect this to present a serious security threat for Western individuals and interests in the region over the medium term.

Foreign governments and regional powers should review their policies toward Afghanistan. There should not be a tendency to let a single issue, such as Osama bin Laden's presence, drive all aspects of policy toward the country. Since further prolongation of the Afghan civil war is a serious detriment to security in the region, outside support to the Northern Alliance should be reviewed. At the same time, governments must continue to pressure the Taliban and its supporters in Pakistan to reach a peaceful accommodation with the Northern Alliance. As Central Asian governments have taken steps toward eventual recognition of the Taliban government, reassessment of the implications of these steps for the interests of major external powers will be important. Efforts must undertaken to move those who govern Afghanistan away from a belligerent stance toward Central Asian governments and Western involvement in the region.

Western governments must be careful not to allow the low level of attention given to Central Asian issues to result in a poor quality of attention. Central Asia will inevitably not receive great notice as long as it does not cause major problems for the West. Policy should, nevertheless, be well considered and not driven by narrow interests or single issues. The listing by the US of the IMU as a terrorist organisation (given that many other organisations which present much more serious terrorist threats have not been so designated) may be an example of fleeting attention driving policy.<sup>68</sup> Many Western government appear to have no policy whatsoever regarding many of the critical issues which determine the security of this region.

Central Asia is at a critical juncture. Support for radical Islamism is sufficiently low that the prospects for an early more generalised, violent Islamist revolt are quite remote. But to curtail growing support for such an outcome requires a radical revision of the policies pursued by the Central Asian governments. Other governments and international organisations can and must play a significant role in bringing about this reorientation of policy by Central Asian governments if increased Islamist radicalisation and insurgency are to be avoided.

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<sup>68</sup> According to one source, the US government placed the IMU on the terrorist list at the request of the government of Uzbekistan.

## Glossary

***Caliphate.*** The state established under successors to the Prophet Muhammed which, in the early Islamic period, united all Muslim lands under a single Caliph (or *Khalifa*, literally, 'successor' to the Prophet).

***Hadith.*** The body of traditions about the sayings and acts of Muhammed which express proper Muslim behaviour and which form, along with the Quran (Koran), the basis for Islamic, or Shari`a Law (see below).

***Imam.*** A prayer leader, who in the Sunni Islamic tradition (which overwhelmingly predominates in Central Asia) may be the leader associated with a neighbourhood mosque or a figure of wider regional significance.

***Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).*** A militant group formed in the mid-1990s, mainly consisting of Islamists in exile from Uzbekistan in Tajikistan and Afghanistan and led by Tohir Yuldosh and Juma Namangani. It has the declared goal of overthrowing Islam Karimov's government in Uzbekistan and establishing an Islamic regime in its place.

***Northern Alliance.*** In Afghanistan, an alliance of Mujaheddin forces which were generally united against the Soviet invasion through the mid-1980s but which struggled against one another after the Soviet withdrawal until again uniting in response to the Taliban. The Northern Alliance supports the internationally recognised government of Afghanistan led by President Burhanuddin Rabanni. It is composed primarily of Tajiks, Uzbeks and some other smaller groups, and has had support in one form or another from the Central Asia governments, Russia, the U.S. and Iran.

***Shari'a.*** The Islamic legal system according to which many aspects of social and personal behaviour are regulated, based on the Quran and the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammed (see above).

***Taliban.*** The name translates as 'the students,' in reference to the fact that this political and military movement began among Afghan refugees in Islamic schools in Pakistan. The movement is strongly identified with the Pashtun ethnic group, which predominates in southern Afghanistan. It quickly won over the southern part of the country but encountered much stronger resistance from northern *Mujaheddin* groups, which saw it as seeking to exclude from power the Tajiks and others. The Taliban have been strongly criticised by the U.S. government for harbouring Osama bin Laden, the Saudi millionaire considered to be a major supporter of international terrorism.

***United Tajik Opposition (UTO).*** This coalition was formed during the Civil War in Tajikistan (1992-1997) by three main groups — the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, the Democratic Party of Tajikistan and the Rastokhez national revival movement — that opposed the communist government of Tajikistan. Though largely driven from Tajikistan by the beginning of 1993, the UTO continued fighting from bases in Afghanistan and in areas in the southeast of the country until 1997, when it entered into a peace accord with the government forces that provided for their inclusion in the government and participation in subsequent elections. Since then, the government of President Rahmonov has been largely successful in marginalising the UTO politically, though certain figures such as Said Abdullo Nuri and forces loyal to the UTO continue to play a significant role.

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The International Crisis Group (ICG) is a private, multinational organisation committed to strengthening the capacity of the international community to anticipate, understand and act to prevent and contain conflict.

ICG's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts based on the ground in countries at risk of crisis, gather information from a wide range of sources, assess local conditions and produce regular analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers.

ICG's reports are distributed widely to officials in foreign ministries and international organisations and made available to the general public via the organisation's internet site, located at [www.crisisweb.org](http://www.crisisweb.org). (which drew more than a million visitors during 1999). The organisation works closely with governments and the press to highlight key issues identified in the field and to generate support for its policy prescriptions. The ICG Board - which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media - is also involved in helping to bring ICG reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. The ICG Board is chaired by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari; Gareth Evans, for nearly eight years Australia's Foreign Minister, took over in January 2000 as ICG's President and Chief Executive.

ICG is headquartered in Brussels, with advocacy offices in Washington D.C., New York and Paris. The organisation currently operates field projects in thirteen crisis-affected countries and regions worldwide: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Macedonia, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Algeria, Burundi, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe, the Ferghana Valley of Central Asia, Burma and Indonesia.

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