

Islamic Radicalism in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Implications for the EU

Zeyno Baran
S. Frederick Starr
Svante E. Cornell

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Johns Hopkins University-SAIS, 1619 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20036

Uppsala University, Box 514, 75120 Uppsala, Sweden

www.silkroadstudies.org

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Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies
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E-mail: caciz@jhuedig.admin.jhu.edu

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The Silk Road Studies Program
Uppsala University
Box 514, SE-75120 Uppsala
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Tel. +46-18-471-2217; Fax. +46-18-106397
E-mail: info@silkroadstudies.org

Editorial correspondence should be addressed to Svante E. Cornell, Research and Publications Director, at either of the addresses above. (preferably by e-mail)

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Preface

This *Silk Road Paper* was written by Zeyno Baran, S. Frederick Starr, and Svante E. Cornell at the request of the Policy Planning Unit of the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was commissioned after a joint seminar conducted in Helsinki in January 2006, focusing on priorities toward the Caucasus and Central Asia for the Finnish EU Presidency in the second half of 2006.

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S. Frederick Starr
Chairman

Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program

Summary and Recommendations

Islamic Radicalism has become a serious problem in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Though these areas are bastions of moderate and traditional Islam and among the most secularized areas of the Muslim world, radicalism has made a forceful comeback in the past two decades. Beginning in the late 1980s, alien Islamic proselytizing has gathered speed across the Muslim regions of the former Soviet Union, and has resulted in the spread of radical ideologies, militancy, and even terrorism. Worst hit have been the Russian North Caucasus and some parts of Central Asia, especially the Ferghana valley shared by Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Patterns of radicalism differ among the regions. In the North Caucasus, a *Salafi* revival in Dagestan coincided with the brutal war in Chechnya, and contributed to the radicalization of the Chechen resistance and its spread to adjoining republics. Coupled with backfiring Russian centralization efforts, the entire North Caucasus is now on the brink of long-term destabilization. Central Asia, on the other hand, has seen stronger external link, as foreign radical groups such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir and Al Qaeda have established a presence directly, as in the former, or through local allies, as in the latter. Adding to the problem, these groups in Central Asia have splintered into smaller entities difficult to identify let alone counteract. In Azerbaijan, long spared a significant radical presence, an increase in both Shi'a and Salafi Sunni radicalism can be observed.

The causes of this radicalization are hotly debated. In the west, radicalization is often blamed on the socio-economic crisis, or political repression radicalizing oppositional forces. These explanations are only of limited validity, at best interacting with complex post-Soviet identity crises, personal vendettas, regional rivalries, relative deprivation, and most importantly foreign proselytizing, a factor widely underestimated in the West. To this should be added the criminalization of many of the most notorious militant

armed groups, whose involvement in drug trafficking and other organized crime has been well-documented.

In the past few years, radical and militant Islamic groups have adapted to the pressure states and the international community have put on them. In the North Caucasus, this has led to the conscious decision to spread the insurgency and activate indigenous sleeper cells across the North Caucasus, and not only as previously limited to Chechnya. The West, without a presence in the North Caucasus, has remained a bystander to these events. The western reaction has been one the one hand understanding for the challenges faced by the Russian government in the region and support for its policies; and on the other mild criticism for its counter-productive centralization policies and repressive rule in the region. Criticism of the brutal conduct of the war in Chechnya and of the poor management of Russia's counter-terrorism efforts that have put hundreds of civilians in harm's way has been relatively muted.

In Central Asia, where the West has had a considerable presence, the reaction has been different. In fact, the West has shown little understanding, let alone support, for the seriousness of the radical and militant challenge faced by Central Asian states. Instead, the west has focused on the governments' mismanagement of the situation, while refraining from responding to calls for assistance. This culminated in 2005 following the insurgency and crackdown in Andijan in Uzbekistan, which left several hundred people, mainly civilians, dead. The result of the episode and the mismanagement of the crisis by both the Uzbek and western governments was the loss of western influence and presence in Uzbekistan. It is apparent that radical groups now seek to emulate the 'color revolutions' in Georgia and Ukraine, aware of the fact that popular rebellion against authoritarian governments attracts support and not condemnation from the West. Hence, several groups appear to have adapted to this environment and benefited from the breakdown in Uzbekistan's relations with the West.

In this environment, there are several important implications for the West and the European Union in particular, explored in further detail in this paper:

1. Develop skills, especially in the intelligence community, in understanding the ideological framework of the radical and terrorist groups.

2. The radical and externally sponsored Islamic movements and organizations existing in the region offer little hope for a meaningful dialogue. Instead, it is the moderate majority and the secular parts of the population, that should be engaged in dialogue.
3. The West needs to support reform-minded officials within governments, not just anti-government forces. The West needs to find points for collaboration within the governments, to support progressive groups and work toward evolutionary change.
4. The link between drug trafficking and religious extremism is proven beyond doubt, and the majority of demand for drugs arises from EU countries. Lending major financial support to counter-narcotics would hence be a major effort in fighting militancy and terrorism.
5. The EU should promote continental trade across Central Asia and the Caucasus, which would bring new economic opportunities to these populations and reduce the appeal of radicalism.
6. EU educational exchanges should increase, and extended to the provinces, including those experiencing Islamic radical movements.
7. The EU should focus assistance on the delivery of governmental services to deprived areas, and in general, on greater degrees of decentralization and self-government.
8. Further, the EU should treat the issue of support for extremism in Central Asia, including Afghanistan, and the Caucasus as a subject for bilateral discussion with relevant Arab states and Iran.
9. The EU may find it useful to look at the Turkish example, which is relevant to understanding the tension between trying to create a modern and open democratic system and dealing with the threat of fundamentalist and militant Islamic political ideology. To this end, the EU should engage Turkey as it addresses issues of Islamic radicalism in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

The Muslim Mainstream and Secularism

Islamic radicalism in Central Asia and the Caucasus cannot be divorced from the region's larger religious context or its overall cultural environment. Thus, any measures to combat or limit Islamic radicalism must be evaluated not only in terms of their impact on the Islamists themselves but also on the larger society in which the extremists are a small minority. That larger society is dominated by two currents that would appear to be poles apart: a large Muslim mainstream and a smaller but equally important secular realm.

On closer inspection, these two components of the region's culture today turn out to be deeply, even inextricably, intertwined with one another. Indeed, both parties to this interrelationship see their links with the other as a source of strength, not of weakness. Any sound western measures against Islamic radicalism in Central Asia and the Caucasus must be calculated to strengthen these two elements of the social mainstream and to preserve a harmonious relationship between them, and not alienate them.

The Muslim Mainstream

Islam is by no means the only religion to have flourished in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Prior to the Arab invasions of the seventh century, this region was the main locus of Zoroastrianism. This fundamental religion of both East and West gave the world the concepts of both Heaven (paradise) and Hell, and also of saints, and thus directly inspired Judaism, Christianity and Islam itself. Central Asia was also a great center of Buddhism, the region where that faith was consolidated and codified in a way that enabled it to be transmitted to China, Korea, and Japan.

Absorbed into this world, Islam in Central Asia and the Caucasus took on several distinctive features that long distinguished it from its Arab variant. First, it had a strong and consistent practical streak. The traders who

adopted Islam naturally favored the Hanafi school of law, Islam's most pragmatic and worldly system of regulating conduct. Second, it possessed a strong analytical streak that interacted easily with classical and secular learning. Thanks to this, Central Asians played an exceptionally powerful role in codifying Islam, with al Bukhari's compendium of the sayings of Mohammed remaining the standard text. Third, it was indifferent and even hostile to formalism. When by the eleventh century Arab Islam had gelled into a stultifying array of external rituals, Central Asian Islam reacted by developing the Sufi movements, which rapidly took root also in the Caucasus.

Directly influenced by Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity, Sufism stressed inner spirituality, mysticism, and the cult of saints. The latter led to an intensive *localization* of Islam in Central Asia and the Caucasus, with shrines to local saints dotting the landscape in a way that aside from South Asia has its closest parallel not in the Muslim world but in Mediterranean Catholicism. Tradition asserts that the relics of Old Testament patriarchs like Solomon and Daniel, the Christian apostle St. Matthew, and many of the founders of Islam itself are all to be found in the region. Whether or not this is true, it has left Muslims there convinced that their region is the heartland of the faith, not a provincial outpost.

The one point on which Islam in Central Asia and the Caucasus followed the Arabs was its close links to political power. St. Paul's dictum to "Render unto Caesar..." has no meaning for either Arab or Central Asian Islam, which assume instead that the secular power's first responsibility is always to protect the faith.

The Secular Strain

The rich preexistent culture of Central Asia and the Caucasus *adapted* Islam as much as it *adopted* it. In no area was this more evident than in secular learning. Ibn Sina (known to Europe as Avicenna, the founder of modern medicine), al Khorezmi (inventor of algorithms), and many other scientists advanced secular learning, even as they affirmed Islam. This strain died out even before the Mongol conquest but remains a cultural factor to this day, its memory having been reclaimed in Soviet times.

Soviet rule in Central Asia and the Caucasus found an Islam that was stagnant, dogmatic, and illiterate, and which had lost contact with its greatest days. The Soviets repressed most Muslim institutions and reduced them to the conduct of life-cycle rituals. Mass Soviet education successfully imposed both literacy and secular western learning on the entire population. By the 1960s one could be “Muslim” in the sense of practicing birth, marriage, and death rituals, but meanwhile participate fully in the secular world. This was the easier since many of the great thinkers Central Asia gave to the world had practiced the same dualism centuries earlier. It is fair to say that nearly the entire intelligentsia of Central Asia and the Caucasus came to fit this pattern, while the rest of the population absorbed large doses of Soviet popular culture at the expense of a fading knowledge of Islam.

Secularism was, and remains, equated with social mobility and modernity. It is also intertwined with western links and orientations, whether via Russia during Soviet times or directly today. At the same time, it was organized around the secular religion of Communism, which was particularly important among the less educated. The erosion of faith in salvation through Marxism-Leninism opened a cultural and psychological gap. Secular parts of the population filled it by looking directly to the West for the first time. The rest of the population tried to follow suit, but at the same time began groping into the region’s Muslim heritage for a new base of identity.

The states supported both developments simultaneously, seeing them as complementary. Mainstream traditional Muslim practice revived to some extent. As this happened, positive links between Islam and the states were forged anew, using old patterns. Meanwhile, new channels into the broader secular world opened with the help of state support in the form of international scholarships, etc.

For a small number of both secular and traditional inhabitants of the region, this new arrangement proved inadequate. Both the modern secular world and the world of traditional Central Asian Islam remained for them remote and inaccessible. For such people, the present became a very uncomfortable place, for they found themselves unable to move either forward or back. This is the dilemma into which Islamic radicalism imposed itself. Islamic radicalism

emerged as a means of filling the psychological gap left by both traditional Islam and secular modernism.

Some western analysts and NGOs claim that this gap exists because the governments, especially in Central Asia, are hostile to Islam and because they pursue repressive policies towards the “especially pious.” Alternatively, they claim that “official” Islam has sold out to the state and no longer has at heart the interests of “true believers.” Neither claim is on the mark. Without exception, Central Asian governments support the practice of Islam among their people as it has evolved over the centuries. Their methods vary, and, especially in Turkmenistan, are mixed inextricably with the interests of the state. Yet in their strong opposition to forms of Islam that are deemed irregular, let alone “foreign,” the secular and religious leaders are at one. Pluralism *among* religions may be practiced in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and to some extent also in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (but definitely not in Turkmenistan), but pluralism *within* Islam is all but nonexistent, with the partial exceptions of Azerbaijan, with its coexistence of Shi’a and Sunni currents, and Tajikistan, where Sunni and Ismailis coexist. The greatest danger to the faith is from being smothered by the state’s embrace rather than being ignored by civil authorities. And the subservient relation between the local religious elites (Muftis, etc.) and governments differs little from what existed prior to Russian colonization. Indeed, the shared hostility of religious and secular leaders to all non-traditional forms of Islam is virtually identical to the hostility that the region’s *emirs* and *muftis* showed to religious deviants over the past five centuries.

Significantly, this stance today enjoys the strong support of the vast majority of the region’s population, just as it did in 1800, or 1500. Islamic radicalism, in short, presents genuine and serious dangers to the societies of Central Asia and the Caucasus but nowhere is it likely to become a mass movement. It is significant that no election or authoritative opinion poll in the region has found more than 5 percent support for radical Islamists of any stripe.

Currents of Islamic Radicalism in the Region

Islamists have long been interested in Central Asia, a historic center of classical Islam located in a region of strategic importance. Yet, they entered the region in significant ways only since the late 1980s, as it had been closed off to the rest of the Islamic world by decades of harsh Soviet rule. As for the Caucasus, the South Caucasus is the only major Shi'a center in the former Soviet Union, while the Northeastern Caucasus – mainly Dagestan – has been a center of Sunni activism. Islamic currents in Central Asia and the Caucasus display significant similarities but also important differences. The North Caucasus is a particular case, where the war in Chechnya has been a major incubator of extremism, bringing foreign Islamic volunteers and groups to the region, which pushed parts of the Chechen resistance toward Islamic militancy and terrorism.

Geographic Focal Points

An Islamic revival has taken place across Central Asia and the Caucasus. This revival represents a natural return to spiritual values following decades of Communist atheism. In turn, the Soviet heritage has survived in the sense of a level of acceptance of secularism that is substantially higher than in most other parts of the Muslim world. Yet the strength of this revival, and in particular signs of Islamic radicalization, have been largely confined to specific localities within this larger region. This has been partly related to differing strength of Islamic tradition, but also to external factors such as foreign proselytizing, and to domestic political and social developments, such as armed conflict and political systems.

In Central Asia, the focus of Islamic revival and of radical groups has been the Ferghana valley, a densely populated and ethnically mainly Uzbek territory divided politically between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The valley has traditionally been a center of Islamic fervor, and was the area

Map of the Ferghana Valley



where foreign radicals first established a presence. As we will see, though, there are other factors besides tradition at work here.

Aside from the Ferghana valley, the main other localities of radicalism have been Tajikistan and southern Kyrgyzstan. The spread of radical Islamic political movement in Tajikistan in the 1980s was very much a result of the growing interaction between Afghanistan and Tajikistan during the Soviet occupation there. Islamic radicalism was the key force behind the resistance to the Soviet occupation, and spread to Tajikistan where important political movements on an Islamic basis emerged. South Kyrgyzstan is exposed to most of the same currents that prevail in neighboring Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. By contrast, northern Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have seen considerably lower levels of Islamic activity.

Dagestan is probably the most traditionally Islamic area in the Caucasus. This was true in Soviet times and remains the case at present. Indeed, Dagestan was one of the earliest areas to convert to Islam, and Derbent was a major outpost of the early Islamic armies in their struggle with the Khazar state in the North Caspian. Whereas Azerbaijan later came under the

influence of Shi'a Islam, Dagestan stayed strongly Sunni. By contrast, Chechnya and Ingushetia were not converted to Islam until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, roughly the time of the conversion to Islam of the northwestern Caucasus. Hence pre-Islamic traditions and pagan beliefs remain stronger in all of these republics than in Dagestan, where Islam took an early hold on society. This has also made Dagestan the most promising area for Islamic proselytism. Salafi movements first came to Dagestan in the late 1980s, and Dagestan in the 1990s gradually became a base for Salafi movements. Following the Russian defeat in Chechnya in 1996, radical Islamic groups acquired an ever stronger foothold there as well, greatly influencing Chechnya's political development. Only since the onset of second Chechen war did radicalism further spread in a significant manner to the remaining republics of the North Caucasus, taking advantage of the grave socio-economic problems there and the Russian government's failure to address these problems, enabling these groups to recruit among the disenfranchised youth of the region.¹

As for the South Caucasus, three areas of Azerbaijan and one in Georgia have been particularly affected by radicalism. Azerbaijan's southern areas around Lenkoran are historically the most fervently Shi'a regions of the country, and are also the areas where Iranian state-sponsored proselytism has been most active. A resurgence of Shi'a movements has been observed here, though the radical elements remain relatively weak. In the predominantly Sunni North of Azerbaijan, bordering Dagestan, a parallel growth of Islamic fervor has been observed, influenced strongly by Dagestan but also to some extent by Turkish Islamic groups. Finally, in the capital Baku and its surroundings, both Shi'a and Sunni Islamic activity has grown. As for Georgia, the Pankisi gorge bordering Chechnya was a center of Islamic activity following the renewed Chechen war in 1999, where foreign Chechen as well as Arab movements briefly prospered. It is notable that radicalism in the South Caucasus has a strong element of contagion from bordering regions.

¹ For further detail, see the report released in parallel with this paper, Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, *The Caucasus: A Challenge for Europe*, Washington & Uppsala: *Silk Road Paper*, CACI & SRSP Joint Center, 2006. (www.silkroadstudies.org)

The Origin of Radical Groups

The first recent Islamists came to Central Asia in the 1970s. By this time, many of the repressed clergy members had begun to lose contact with the traditional Hanafi school of Islam and began to be influenced by Salafi-Wahhabi thought – thanks to the initial work of the *Ikhwan al-Muslimun*, the Muslim Brotherhood. The first *Ikhwan* group to arrive in Central Asia consisted of an ethnically diverse collection of Muslim students from countries such as Jordan, Iraq and Afghanistan. These students created the “Tashkent Group,” which sought to establish clandestine cells in Central Asian universities with the goal of recruiting local students into their movement and ultimately establishing an Islamic state. While at first they operated secretly, the *Ikhwan* and other Islamists began to act more openly as the reforms of perestroika were implemented. They were further emboldened in their openness by the Taliban takeover of neighboring Afghanistan in the 1990s.

For most radical Islamists, the main point of entry to the region was the Ferghana Valley, a densely populated area with a traditionally deeply religious population. The valley is shared among Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. At first, four radical Islamist groups were active there: *Adolat* (Justice), *Baraka* (Blessings), *Tauba* (Repentance), and *Islam Lashkarlari* (Warriors of Islam). These groups existed underground during the Soviet period, but emerged in the era of Gorbachev’s reforms. Over time, other groups also became active in the region, including *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and its splinter groups *Akramiya* and *Hizb un-Nusrat*, as well as *Uzun Soqol* (Long Beards), *Tabligh Jamaat*, *Lashkar-i-Taiba*, *Hizballah*, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Since the operation in Afghanistan following 9/11, the IMU has apparently splintered into additional groups, such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the Islamic Movement of Central Asia (IMCA), and the Islamic Jihad Group (IJG). The Turkish *Nurcular* (followers of light), a less radical group working openly, has also established a presence.

In Azerbaijan, radical movements sponsored by Iran and organizations in the Persian Gulf region have led to the growth of Salafi and radical Shi’a thought, but the growth of clandestine organizations has been controllable. In

the North Caucasus, the Islamic groups are less clearly structured in identifiable groups, given their merger with Chechen guerrilla formations. Indeed, the militant element in the Chechen war was grafted upon it by Arab volunteers, most prominently the late Emir Al-Khattab (Samer bin Saleh bin Abdallah al-Sweleim), a Saudi veteran of the wars in Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Bosnia who made the Chechen cause his own, while contributing greatly to changing the course of the war from a nationalist to a religious conflict – similarly to what like-minded groups had tried to do in Kosovo in 1998-99. Kosovo, as Chechnya, was predominantly *Sufi* in tradition, implying a moderate, introspective and tolerant form of Islam that radicals despise. The grafting of the *Jihadi* element succeeded in the Chechen war but failed in Kosovo due to the ‘glaring contrast’ in international reaction.² NATO supported the Kosovo Liberation Army’s fight against Serbian oppression, contributing to the movement’s choice to mainly remain aloof of Islamic radicals courting them. On the other hand, the Chechens were isolated with no external support, leading several important field commanders to gradually embrace the foreign *jihadis*, in the process marginalizing the moderate, secular-minded Chechen political leadership. In the North Caucasus more generally, the Islamic radicals are organized in the form of small *Jamaats* or societies, which operate politically and militarily in an undercover fashion.

While their methods and strategies may differ, almost all of the groups listed above have as a shared goal the overthrow of the secular government and society and the establishment of an Islamic state, typically a Caliphate. *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, however, is the only group with a coherent ideology. Neither Osama bin Laden, nor former Taliban leader Mullah Omar, nor IMU leader Tahir Yuldashev has come up with an ideological and theological framework that justifies their actions. Instead, these and other leaders have relied on the comprehensive teachings of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* – which is currently the most popular radical movement in Central Asia.

² See Brian Glyn Williams, “Jihad and Ethnicity in Post-Communist Eurasia. On the Trail of Trans-National Islamic Holy Warriors in Kashmir, Afghanistan, Central Asia, Chechnya, and Kosovo”, *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, vol. 2 no. 3-4, March 2003. (www.ethnopolitics.org)

Radical Groups: A Survey

The following pages provide a short survey of the radical Islamic groups active in the region. This will include groups across a political spectrum ranging from self-proclaimed peaceful groups, such as *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and *Tabligh Jemaat*, to militant and terrorist groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the North Caucasian groups tied to Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev.

*Hizb ut-Tahrir al Islamiyya (The Islamic Party of Liberation)*³

Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) was founded in 1952-1953 by Shaykh Taqiuddin al-Nabhani in Jordanian-ruled East Jerusalem. Its main goal is to recreate the Caliphate, the Islamic state formally brought to an end in 1924 following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Al-Nabhani died in 1977 and was succeeded by Abu Yusuf Abdul Qadim Zallum, another Palestinian cleric who led the movement until his illness and death in 2003. He was succeeded by Ata Ibnu Khaleel Abu Rashta, who previously served as the party's official spokesman in Jordan. Abu Rashta, alias Abu Yasin, is a Palestinian who is believed to have lived most recently in the West Bank. Under his leadership, HT activities have become more aggressive. During fall 2003, the governing body (*kiedat*) is believed to have instructed members to engage in acts of aggression towards the diplomatic representations of countries that supported the Iraq War. At the same time, members are urged to reach out to the liberal politicians and media, as well as pro-democracy and human rights NGOs to obtain their support in their own "freedom" agenda. Today HT is active in over 40 countries, with its ideological "nerve center" in London, and official headquarters in Jordan.

Whereas the West has seemingly forgotten the ideological dimension of the war on terror – the "war of ideas" – HT is openly discussing how it is engaged in such a war, which is aimed at undermining the legitimacy of both liberal democracy and market economy. Indeed, over the last several years, HT's long-standing vision of creating a global Caliphate has become a

³ For a detailed analysis of *Hizb-ut-Tahrir*, see Zeyno Baran, *Hizb-ut-Tahrir: Islam's Political Insurgency*, Washington DC: The Nixon Center, 2004. (<http://www.nixoncenter.org/Monographs/HizbutahrirIslamsPoliticalInsurgency.pdf>).

mainstream terrorist goal. Although HT's immediate aim is to create a Caliphate somewhere in the Muslim world, ultimately it seeks a global reach. This is evidenced in a 1999 leaflet, which states: "In the forthcoming days the Muslims will conquer Rome and the dominion of the [nation] of Muhammad will reach the whole world and the rule of the Muslims will reach as far as the day and night." ('Rome' is characteristically used to refer to the U.S. in Islamist writings.)

HT claims to be non-violent, and this is the basis for its successful aspiration to function legally in western Europe, where only Germany has banned the movement. Yet HT openly acknowledges that violence may eventually be necessary in order to overthrow the regimes standing in the way of the Caliphate. Thus HT cannot be called "non-violent"; rather, its ideology suggests that it is not using violence *yet* but will do so when the time is right. HT's decision not to use violence stems from a pragmatic policy, having learned from the experience of other Islamist groups (and most recently from the Georgian and Ukrainian revolutions) that the "peaceful" overthrow of authoritarian or corrupt governments receives international commendation, whereas violence and coup attempts lead to imprisonment or worse.

The ideology that forms the basis of HT's work is by no means 'non-violent'. It is viciously anti-Semitic and anti-Western, and disseminates a radical Islamist ideology fundamentally opposed to liberal democracy, the free market, and to Western concepts of freedom more broadly. While HT as an organization does not engage in terrorist activities, it operates as an ideological vanguard that supports and encourages terrorist acts. Furthermore, its members appear to be recruits of movements that do involve in violence.

HT calls for the unity of the *umma* – a unity which it seeks to bring about by emulating the steps that the Prophet Muhammad took to establish the original Caliphate. According to al-Nabhani, the Prophet's work was performed in "clearly defined stages, each of which he used to perform specific clear actions" that led, in the end, to the creation of a Sharia-based Islamic government. HT effectively combines Marxist-Leninist methodology and Western-style slogans with reactionary Islamist ideology to shape the internal debate within Islam. As an organization, HT also bears

striking similarities to the early Bolshevik movement. Both have an ultimate, utopian political goal (whether “true communism” or the Caliphate), and both show an intense dislike for liberal democracy, while seeking to establish a mythical “just society.” Both also function with a secretive cell system. And while it insists on non-violence until the final stage, HT does justify the use of force, just as Lenin and the Bolsheviks did in 1917.

In a recent interview, an HT member put the organization’s vision succinctly: “Islam obliges Muslims to possess power so that they can intimidate – I would not say terrorize – the enemies of Islam ... In the beginning the Caliphate would strengthen itself internally and it would not initiate jihad ... But after that, we would carry Islam as an intellectual call to all the world ... And we will make people bordering the Caliphate believe in Islam. Only if they refuse, then we’ll ask them to be ruled by Islam ... And after all discussions and negotiations they still refuse, then the last resort will be a *jihad* to spread the spirit of Islam and the rule of Islam. This is done in the interests of all people to get them out of darkness and into light.”⁴ Its partly leaflets, accessible over the Internet in various languages, provide the *umma* with timely and coherent explanations of current events that fit HT’s ideological framework. The language of these leaflets is simple and direct; for instance, many repeat the call to Muslims to “kill Jews wherever you find them.”

The tight compartmentalization of HT ensures that little information is known about its financial structure. The movement’s cell structure ensures that data obtained from all but the most senior members is of little importance. Hence Central Asian and Western authorities have been unable to deny the group access to its funding sources. Moreover, HT does not require a great deal of money to sustain its activities. Its ability to create a virtual Islamic community on the Internet has allowed the movement to reach the hearts and minds of many without investing in an elaborate communications network or in party offices. Interviews with arrested HT members indicate that local entrepreneurs, party members and other

⁴ James Brandon, “The Caliphate: One nation, under Allah, with 1.5 billion Muslims,” *Christian Science Monitor*, (10 May 2006)

sympathizers tend to make individual donations to HT's local organs. Meanwhile, more detached businessmen and Islamic charities are most likely to direct their money to HT's leadership committee, which in turn sends money to the movement's various regional branches. Funding is essentially drawn from a combination of private donations and the dues of party members. The latter is particularly significant, since in Central Asia each member is obliged to donate between 5 percent and 20 percent of their monthly income to the party.

Since 2001, there has been a clear and consistent trend towards the radicalization of HT. In June 2001, the HT publication *Al-Waie* (Consciousness) stated unequivocally that it is acceptable to carry out suicide attacks with explosive belts. In March 2002, HT argued that suicide bombs in Israel are a legitimate tactic of war. Over the next two years, HT leaflets and writings continuously emphasized that in the context of a clash of civilizations, offensive *jihad* against the Americans and the Jewish people is acceptable. It went as far as declaring, in a May 2003 leaflet, that *jihad* against unbelievers is the only type of *jihad*. At the time, an HT website displayed an image of American soldiers superimposed over the burning of the twin towers, carrying the legend "U.S. Troops: Die Hard." It is yet to be established whether HT has already formed a militant wing or whether it is simply "inspiring" members independently to join terrorist groups or engage in terrorist acts.

HT has made Central Asia its main battleground. The post-Communist identity crisis there implies a limited popular knowledge of the tenets of traditional Islam, which benefits a radical, unorthodox movement such as HT. Furthermore, poor economic performance by some Central Asian governments has denied them a high level of popular support among people who feel they lack opportunities for socio-economic improvement. HT's public relations campaign has already succeeded in diverting the world community's attention away from its activities in Uzbekistan. As a result of this propaganda effort, western observers are concerned more with the prison conditions of HT supporters than the possibility of a successful HT *coup d'état*. Also assisting HT's campaign in Central Asia is the proximity of

Afghanistan and Pakistan, two primary bases for terrorists and radical sympathizers.

While in principle a centralized movement, HT is known to have splintered, including into specific Central Asian splinter groups. To date, known HT splinter groups include:

- Palestinian Islamic Jihad (founded in 1958)—Shaykh Assad Bayyoud Tamimi, a former HT member, founded both PIJ and a second splinter group, the Islamic Jihad Organization (also known as the al-Aqsa Battalions), which was created in 1982. PIJ has no known presence in Central Asia or the Caucasus.
- Al-Muhajiroun (1996)—Omar Bakri Muhammad, a former HT member, founded this extremely radical organization. Bakri has claimed to be “the eyes of Osama bin Laden” and reports indicate that communication between the two men dates back at least as far as 1998. Bakri fled London after the July 2005 bombings there. Al-Muhajiroun has no known presence in Central Asia or the Caucasus.
- Akramiya (1995)—Formed in the Uzbekistani section of the Ferghana Valley, it is a group with a primarily local focus (mentioned below).
- Hizb un-Nusrat (1999)—The Party of Assistance (mentioned below).

HT material was first brought to Uzbekistan in the late 1970s, but its activities there took shape in earnest only during 1992-1995, in the Ferghana Valley. HT is still most active in the Ferghana Valley, but has successfully spread to the rest of Uzbekistan and to all other Central Asian countries, as well as Azerbaijan. The February 1999 bombings in Tashkent were wrongly attributed to HT, though the charge was later retracted. Yet this sparked the activation of the movement in the region.

As a result of the repressive methods used by the authorities in the subsequent crackdown, many HT members left Uzbekistan and moved to more open Central Asian states, thus becoming excellent missionaries for the movement. At first, many settled in the ethnic Uzbek regions of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, but the group’s activities have since expanded. Within the last year, *Hizb ut-Tahrir* members have been arrested in northern Kazakhstan, the Bishkek area of Kyrgyzstan, and in Tajikistan’s capital of Dushanbe—

areas that are neither near the border with Uzbekistan nor known for significant Uzbek minority populations.

The precise number of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* members in Central Asia today is difficult to estimate. HT is numerically strongest in Uzbekistan, with estimates there ranging from 7,000 up to 60,000 members. There are 3,000–5,000 members in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The number in Kazakhstan is no more than a few hundred. But numbers are not central to HT's strategy which is based on penetrating political power centers as a method of obtaining power. Recent arrests indicate that support for HT is growing throughout the region, including among teachers, military officers, politicians (especially those whose relatives have been arrested), and other members of the elite.

Akramiya

Akramiya is named after its leader Akram Yuldashev, born in 1963 in Andijan. Yuldashev is believed to have been a member of HT for one year before founding a splinter group in 1992. He is believed to be profoundly influenced by al-Nabhani, and founded Akramiya in his native Andijan region, preaching widely among the youth of the area. He was first arrested in 1993 and later that year received amnesty and was released. Following the bomb attacks in February 1999, he was re-arrested and sentenced to over ten years in prison.

In 1992, Yuldashev wrote a theological pamphlet in Uzbek titled “Yimonga Yul” (The Path to Faith), which aims to call people to Islam. According to Uzbek scholar Bakhtior Babajanov, Yuldashev wrote a supplement (in March 2005) to this more philosophical piece, in which he outlined a five-stage process to establish an Islamic leadership. Those few analysts who have read the supplement believe that Akramiya shares HT's conspiratorial methodology and its multistage process for achieving the ultimate objective of the Caliphate. The aim of Akramiya is to gather enough strength to exert influence on regional authorities, if not to control them directly. With this aim in mind, Akramiya promotes a simplified version of Islam, in order to maximize its potential support base. Its structure is communal and cult-like, and members have limited exposure to outsiders.

Akramiya seems to have been rather successful in developing a following by delivering on socio-economic promises that the Uzbek government has been unable to fulfill: jobs and money. Wealthier followers set up small businesses such as bakeries, cafeterias, or shoe factories, in which they employ young males who are then required to attend study groups after work – a practice also known from other Islamic movements across the world to recruit followers. The owners of these businesses contribute about a fifth of their profits to a fund, which then assists poorer members of the group. This is one of the most successful examples of the bottom-up approach of pro-Islamic social engineering.

Hizb un-Nusrat

Hizb un-Nusrat (the Party of Assistance) was founded by a group of HT members in Tashkent in 1999. Its current leader and founder is believed to be Sharipzhon Mirzazhanov. Like HT, this group is fundamentally clandestine in nature, and prospective members must undergo six months of training in *The System of Islam*, HT's guidebook. Members are also required to donate money to the party's communal fund. Unlike HT, however, this group does not spread propaganda among the general public. Instead, it only recruits those whose backgrounds are first investigated. The group is thus mainly comprised of former members of other Islamic fringe groups, and those accused by Uzbekistan's government of engagement in Islamic radical activities. Its supporters also include HT sympathizers who fear public exposure.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)

The IMU was formed in 1992 by Tahir Yuldashev, an underground Islamic cleric who operated out of the Otavalihon mosque, in the Namangan region of Uzbekistan. Yuldashev's views were shaped by extensive travel to Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, where he was influenced by Wahhabism and Deobandism.⁵ His radical message spread throughout the network of

⁵ Established in India in the 1860s, the Deobandi school was a purist form of reform within Islam, nominally within the majority and normally tolerant Hanafi school of thought, but with much influence from the rising orthodoxy of Wahhabism in Saudi

mosques and madrassas in the Ferghana Valley. With the help of al-Qaeda, the Taliban, *Harakat-ul-Ansar* and *al-Jihad*, Yuldashev unified the four radical Islamist groups mentioned above (*Adolat* and *Islam Laskarlari*, both of which he led, as well as *Barak* and *Tauba*), under the framework of the IMU. At first, all four groups consisted of only a few hundred members, but in the absence of decisive action by the Uzbekistani government, they were able to disseminate their propaganda in the Ferghana Valley and recruit many more followers.⁶

Yuldashev's ally, Juma Khodjiev Namangani, became the military commander of the IMU. Along with a Saudi-trained militant, Abdul Ahad, Namangani was Yuldashev's main supporter. By 1998, there were reports of hundreds of Uzbek *mujahidin* training in and operating between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, taking advantage of Tajikistan's civil war.

The first instance of IMU violence occurred in August 1999, when Namangani and his associates abducted Japanese geologists, along with Kyrgyzstani government officials and military personnel in southern Kyrgyzstan, thus expanding its activity to a third country. The IMU was also believed to be launching carefully orchestrated attacks against Uzbekistan from neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, including the 1999 Tashkent bombings. Soon thereafter, when Namangani declared his aim to seize the region by force, thousands of refugees fled the Ferghana Valley. Namangani then headed for Afghanistan where, with the permission of the

Arabia. Like Wahhabism, Deobandi Islam rejects the concept of *Ijtehad* or interpretation of religious tenets according to context and circumstance.

⁶ For further detail on the IMU, see Vitaly Naumkin, *Militant Islam in Central Asia: The Case of The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan*, Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies Working Paper Series, Spring 2003; Michael Fredholm, *Uzbekistan and the Threat from Islamic Extremism*, Sandhurst: United Kingdom Royal Military Academy, Conflict Studies Research Centre, Report no. K39, March 2003; Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.; Ahmed Rashid, "They're Only Sleeping - Why Militant Islamicists in Central Asia Aren't Going to Go Away", *The New Yorker*, 14 January 2002; Bakhrom Tursunova and Marina Pikulina, *Severe Lessons of Batken*, Sandhurst: United Kingdom Royal Military Academy, Conflict Studies Research Centre, Report no. K28, November 1999; Mahmamin Mahmaminov, "The Development of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (Turkestan)", Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Johns Hopkins University, 2003; Richard Weitz, "Storm Clouds over Central Asia: Revival of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)?", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 27 no. 6, 2004, p. 505-530; Svante E. Cornell, "Narcotics, Radicalism and Armed Conflict: The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 17 no. 3, 2005, 577-597.

Taliban, he established an IMU training camp. Militants from all over the Ferghana Valley began to flock to the camp to receive instruction in terrorist tactics, under the guidance of the Taliban. In the only interview he has ever given, Yuldashev declared, “The goal of IMU activities is the creation of an Islamic State. We declared a jihad in order to create a religious system and government. We want the model of Islam which is nothing like in Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan or Saudi Arabia.”

In late 2001, the IMU joined forces with the Taliban and al-Qaeda against U.S.-led forces during the Afghanistan campaign. After suffering grave losses (including the death of Namangani in Afghanistan), some IMU fighters fled to South Waziristan (a Federally Administered Tribal Area in Pakistan’s Northwest Frontier Province along the border with Afghanistan), along with other jihadists who also escaped U.S. entrapment at Tora Bora. On orders from Bin Laden, IMU militants have taken a leading role in South Waziristan, with Yuldashev in command of military activities. Since the conclusion of Operation Enduring Freedom, the IMU’s infrastructure and manpower has been significantly weakened, but today there are at least 150 IMU militants who still have the capacity to fight.

HT and the IMU do not have a formal alliance, as it runs contrary to HT’s interests to be directly associated with a terrorist group. The main difference between the two groups is one of focus: The IMU openly advocates and carries out militant operations, while HT concentrates on the ideological battle. The two nonetheless admit to the closeness of their goals, and both are propelled closer to the achievement of their ends by the weakness of Central Asian states.

The Islamic Movement of Central Asia (IMCA)

Central Asian governments believe that in 2002 the region’s Islamic radicals united in a framework of a new underground organization called the Islamic Movement of Central Asia (IMCA), which would bring together the IMU, Kyrgyz and Tajik radicals, and Uighur separatists from China, whose East Turkestan Islamic Movement had recently broadened to include Afghans, Chechens, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks and Kazakhs who share its new goal of forming an Islamic state in Central Asia.

Kyrgyz authorities believe that the IMCA was indeed formed in 2003, with the immediate goal of creating a Caliphate in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic, while reserving expansion to Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and northwest China for a second stage. The headquarters of IMCA, which is led by Yuldashev, are believed to be located in Afghanistan's northeastern Badakhshan province. This unified, militant Islamic force seeks to destabilize Central Asian governments by attacking American and Israeli targets. The main insurgent targets are the American bases in Uzbekistan (now closed) and Kyrgyzstan, as well as the embassies in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

While many other radical Islamist organizations have mushroomed in the region over the last two years, they can all be considered, in one way or another, to be under the IMCA umbrella.

Tabligh Jamaat (TJ)

TJ was established in India in the 1920s by Maulana Mohammad Ilyas as a direct response to Hindu proselytizing. The group claims to follow the Prophet's *sunnah* (way of life), which to Tabligh members means wearing long beards, robes, and leather shoes to replicate the Prophet's dress; the group firmly believes in outwardly showing that one is Muslim. Members are also required to conduct "Tabligh," that is, to try and convert others to Islam, on a regular basis. Members can spend this time camping in small groups in order to preach "the Prophet's way" in mosques. In Central Asia, they also preach in bazaars. Today, Tabligh has offices and schools in Canada and the UK, though its main centers are on the Indian subcontinent. Its annual gatherings in India and Pakistan attract hundreds of thousands. Tabligh's annual summit in Raiwind is the largest Muslim gathering in the world following the *hajj*.

The group does not involve itself in politics (and has been criticized by radical Islamists for being apolitical), but over time Tabligh has become an international movement, active mostly in South and Central Asia. Tabligh has succeeded in introducing Islamic networks to Europe and the U.S., and often functions in parallel to the Wahhabi Muslim World League. In recent years, like many other Islamic movements, Tabligh has also become

radicalized. Consequently, those who learn about Islam via the Tabligh are today at risk of supporting or joining terrorist groups. The group has been accused of having indoctrinated its followers to fight for the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

Al-Qaeda or other terrorist groups are believed to have used Tabligh as their cover to travel and smuggle operatives across borders; because the group is apolitical, Tabligh's members can fairly easily travel between countries. Other terrorist groups may have used the movement as a recruitment pool; its failure to discuss politics leaves room for others to provide a political message. In Central Asia, Tabligh is currently most active in the Ferghana Valley, especially in Andjien. Following their arrest in the summer of 2004, 14 members of Tabligh were sent to prison.

Jeyshullah

The Jeyshullah group is a terrorist Salafi group in Azerbaijan. It was mainly active in the late 1990s, reportedly responsible for several murders and an attack against the Hare Krishna society's Baku headquarters. In spite of being Salafi in orientation, the group according to Azerbaijani authorities had clear contacts with Iran, and potentially is related to a group with the same name that was briefly active in Turkey in the mid-1990s. Jeyshullah is thought to have planned to bomb the U.S. Embassy in Baku. The group's leaders were apprehended and sentenced in 2000.⁷ Little more is known about the group's origins and finances.

The North Caucasus Militant Network

Islamic radical groups in the North Caucasus are somewhat different from those in Central Asia, given the very specific conditions of the region – being a part of Russia and a zone of war. The radicalization of parts of the Chechen resistance took place mainly after the first war in Chechnya. The first war had been mainly a nationalist affair, though isolated mujahids made their way there. The first presence of Gulf organizations reportedly took place in 1995, when the Illinois-based Benevolence International Foundation is

⁷ "Azeri God's Army Cult Members to Stand Trial for Murder", *BBC Monitoring Central Asia*, 25 July 2000.

thought to have established links to the first Islamists in Chechnya. The group was originally devised to channel funds to the Afghan jihad, but later also was heavily involved in Bosnia before it shifted its focus to Chechnya. In 2002 the U.S. government identified it as a funder of terrorism.

Unlike in Central Asia, the Islamist movements of the North Caucasus have not developed into clear and visible organizations, but rather as networks of individuals and sub-groups that are known variously under different names. Hence the main radical figures are associated variously with entities that are often known by a variety of names, such as the Islamic International Peacekeeping Brigade, the Special Purpose Islamic Regiment, the Riyadus-Salikhin (Garden of Martyrs) Reconnaissance and Sabotage Battalion of Chechen Martyrs; in Dagestan the *Sharia Jamaat* and in Kabardino-Balkaria *Yarmukh*.⁸ These labels are at any rate nevertheless secondary to informal personal and often clan ties and loyalties to charismatic individuals. Hence the amorphous character of the threat they pose, and the ease with which they change shape. For example, the *Riyadus-Salikhin* group was unknown when it appeared in the siege of a Moscow theater in 2002.

The key native figure that came to lead the radicals is the notorious Chechen field commander, former computer engineer and terrorist Shamil Basayev. Alongside Basayev was a Saudi-born veteran of the Afghan, Tajik, and Bosnian wars, Samer Bin Saleh Bin Abdullah Al-Swelim, better known by his *nom de guerre*, Amir Khattab. Khattab provided the chief linkage between the radicalized parts of the Chechen resistance and the *jihadi* international, including elements associated with Al Qaeda such as the Benevolence International Foundation. Yet it should be noted that rather than an organic link between Basayev and Al Qaeda, the North Caucasus radicals have mainly sought to emulate the tactics and language of their more famous role model. Khattab was killed in 2002, and his role was taken over by another Saudi known as Amir Al-Walid (Abd Al-Aziz Bin Ali Bin Said Al Said Al-Ghamdi).⁹ Walid was in turn killed in April 2004, leaving a vacuum in terms

⁸ Gordon M. Hahn, "The Rise of Islamist Extremism in Kabardino-Balkariya", *Demokratizatsiya*, vol. 13 no. 4, 2005, p. 574.

⁹ Murad Batal Al-Shishani, "The Killing of Abu Al-Walid and the Russian Policy in Chechnya", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 5 May 2004.

of contacts with the Arab world. This also took place at the time of increasing focus on Iraq by militant Islamic groups, further contributing to pushing Chechen groups into the periphery of the *Jihadi* international.

Basayev and Khattab controlled areas of southeastern Chechnya in the 1996-99 inter-war period, and worked incessantly to unite Dagestan and Chechnya into a joint, Islamic state on the model of the Imamate of Imam Shamil in the nineteenth century. Hence Basayev organized and led the Islamic Majlis of Chechnya and Dagestan, an organization devised to be the nucleus of the joint state. From there, they invaded mountain areas of Dagestan in September 1999, sparking the second Chechen war.

In Dagestan, meanwhile, Salafi Islam had been spreading steadily since the arrival of missionaries there in the late 1980s. Several villages (Chabanmakhi, Karamakhi, and Kadar) were seized and controlled by Salafi groups who set up their local laws and denied Russian or Dagestani authorities control.¹⁰ Khattab seized on the opportunity by building links through marriage with these *jamaats* and training young men in camps in Chechnya. Even though the Khattab-Basayev invasion failed and resulted in the debacle of the second Chechen war, Salafi radicals have continued to exist in Dagestan. Indeed, just as Moscow gradually managed to reduce the intensity of the war in Chechnya, the problem has grown worse in Dagestan. The Dagestani rebels are led by Rabbani Khalilov, an ethnic Lak who married into the same Dagestani family in Karamakhi that Khattab had married into. Khalilov is thought to be responsible for a major terrorist attack on a victory parade in the Dagestani city of Kaspiysk in May 2002.¹¹ The group reorganized itself as the “Sharia Jamaat” in early 2005. Presently, the frequency of military clashes between Islamic fighters and security forces in Dagestan equals or surpasses the number in Chechnya.¹²

¹⁰ Lorenzo Vidino, “The Arab Foreign Fighters and the Sacralization of the Chechen Conflict”, *AL-Nakhlah*, Spring 2006. (Fletcher School Online Journal), p. 4.

¹¹ Paul Tumelty, “Chechnya and the Insurgency in Dagestan”, *Chechnya Weekly*, vol. 6 no. 18, 11 May 2005.

¹² Murad Batal Al-Shishani, “From Grozny To Nalchik: Is the North Caucasus Heading Back to The Nineteenth Century?”, *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 19 October 2005.

Following the same pattern – young men trained in militant camps in Chechnya, who then returned to their home republics – militant cells have been formed also in Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachai-Cherkessia. The Yarmuk group in Kabardino-Balkaria, which was the main responsible group for the carnage in the local capital Nalchik in October 2005.

Current Issues in Central Asia and the Caucasus and Implications for Islamic Radicalism

If September 11 and its aftermath brought a strong blow to radical Islamists in Central Asia and the Caucasus, this was mainly a lull. Since 2004, a series of events have taken place that indicate that the problem of Islamic radicalism is not going away. However, it is also apparent from these developments that the radical groupings are continuously able to alter their shape, methods and tactics in order to evade attempts by governments to fight them. In this sense, the regions have come to differ. In the North Caucasus, the Chechen rebellion gradually morphed into a region-wide insurgency with Islamist overtones, negating all efforts by Russia to control the situation. In Central Asia, however, Islamists seem to have drawn important lessons from the ‘color revolutions’ in Eurasia, and the western reaction to them.

Uzbekistan, 2004: Terrorism Re-Emerges

In light of the inability of Central Asian governments to deal effectively with corruption, poverty, and basic governance issues more than ten years after independence, it is not surprising that the well-organized and focused ideological work of HT is producing results. Following the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, the Islamists seem to have decided it is also time for them to rise.

Radical Islamist and terrorist activity in Central Asia has increased markedly since early 2004. Having seen no major terrorist activity since 2000, Uzbekistan was hit by two waves of terrorist attacks between March 28 and March 31, including the region’s first ever female suicide bombing. The attacks, which caused 47 fatalities in total, were aimed primarily at police and Uzbek private and commercial facilities. A second attack targeted the American and Israeli embassies as well as the prosecutor general’s office. The

scale and level of preparation for these attacks suggests strongly that they received support from outside Uzbekistan. The country's chief prosecutor alleged that all 85 individuals (including 17 women) arrested had been trained as suicide bombers.

Yet another group, the Islamic Jihad Group (IJG), released a statement claiming responsibility for the Uzbek attacks, which was followed by the U.S. State Department's May 2005 designation of this group (under ten different names) as a terrorist organization. In the State Department's statement, IJG is described as a splinter of the IMU, and is held responsible for the July 30, 2004 bombing attacks in Tashkent targeting the U.S. and Israeli Embassies, and the office of the Uzbek Prosecutor General. The State Department's designation also called attention to the fact that "those arrested in connection with the attacks in Bukhara have testified to the close ties between the IJG leaders and Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar. Kazakhstani authorities have declared that IJG members were taught by al-Qaida instructors to handle explosives and to organize intelligence work and subversive activities."

Despite all this information, most of the attention in the West from the spring of 2004 onwards was on the Uzbek government's reaction and not on the terrorists – even though these attacks were the first major violence in Uzbekistan since the 2000 insurgency. And despite being in the midst of the 'war on terror', the U.S., a self-avowed strategic partner of Uzbekistan, highlighted the need to improve democracy and human rights while doing very little to help the Uzbek government in its investigation or its response to the attacks. Overall, the terrorists were greatly emboldened, concluding that western opinion would allow them literally to get away with murder.

The Kyrgyz 'Revolution', 2005

In November 2004, in Jalal-Abad, where some of the strongest anti-government protests took place in March 2005, HT reportedly collected some 20,000 signatures on a petition calling for more Islamic instruction in schools and segregation of sexes. In the February 2005 parliamentary elections, candidates who supported this view received backing from HT. While there was almost no overt Islamist activity during the revolution, the events began

and gained momentum in the southern part of the country, which is where HT and other groups have, for several years, been urging people to rise against poverty, corruption and injustice – all of which were blamed on the central government.

Following the Georgian and Ukrainian revolutions, opposition forces in the Kyrgyz Republic overthrew their government in March 2005. Unlike the Georgians and the Ukrainians, however, the Kyrgyz opposition used violence, and in the post-revolutionary period failed to bring stability and order to the country. Indeed, the March 24 revolution ushered in a period of chaos, with the new government unable to control the country's borders or to bring about internal stability. This risks leading to ever deeper popular disappointment with secular politics in Kyrgyzstan. Unless the new government is brought to establish a democratic order and deliver on its promises, HT and others are certain to gain strength from this growing disillusionment.

The West's reaction to the collapse of the Akaev government emboldened the terrorists even further. They drew three key lessons from the experience: First, if a revolt were to be framed the right way, i.e. as another 'color revolution' against an oppressive, corrupt regime, neither the US nor the Europeans would be likely to step in. Second, that the West would, within limits, also tolerate the use of force, as in the Uzbek attacks the preceding years. Third, the radicals found that by using the excitement and anticipation of 'color revolutions' among the Western media and the various democracy and human rights NGOs, they could convince the world that they were the unalloyed champions of human rights and good governance.

Andijan, 2005: Insurgency, Crackdown, and the Western Reaction

The third significant event of lasting importance to the region took place in Andijan in May 2005. In fact, Andijan may prove to be a turning point in the West's loss of influence in Central Asia and the further strengthening of the radical groups.

Andijan is close to Osh, where the Kyrgyz uprising began, and even closer to Jalalabad, where only weeks before the Andijan events the majority Uzbek population successfully laid armed siege to the provincial government's

headquarters. It is also close to Namangan, a center of *Salafi* activity in Uzbekistan. In many ways, Andijan is the heart of the Ferghana Valley, which itself is the heart of Central Asia. Akram Yuldashev realized that Andijan is the first stop along the path to power in Uzbekistan, which is the prize of the Islamists because of its geostrategically central location in Eurasia, and because of its historic and cultural position in the Islamic world. Its under-government and stagnation is also making it an increasingly easy target.

In June, 2004, 23 businessmen, followers of Akramiya, were arrested and in February 2005 they were put on trial. Peaceful demonstrations in support of the defendants went on for several weeks. According to reports from the region, Akramiya organized the uprising in a carefully planned way: the accused businessmen promised to pay their staff a full day's salary if they attended the protests. Moreover, their relatives organized transport for others to come from more distant regions. The protesters were orderly and asking merely for "justice" for their relatives and friends. By May 12th, the presumed final week of the trial, there were already several thousand peaceful demonstrators.

That night, the Uzbek government arrested some demonstrators. This arrest marked the start of the uprising. On the morning of May 13, armed militants first seized a police station, then a military post, and then a high-security prison, collecting weaponry in each place and killing officials and others along the way. Negotiations between the government and the militants broke down, in part because the release of Akram Yuldashev was the main demand of the insurgents. Expecting a harsh reaction from the government, the insurgents then formed human shields with women and children.¹³ While it is yet to be determined who shot first, by the end of the day, some two hundred persons were dead, most killed by government troops but a large number killed by the armed insurgents.

¹³ Margarita Assenova, "Uzbekistan is Running Out of Time", *Internationale Politik: Transatlantic Edition*, Fall 2005. See also Igor Rotar, "Uzbekistan: What is Known About Akramiya and the Uprising?", *Forum 18 News Service*, 16 June 2005, including the following quote: "The hostages had wire tied round their necks and were placed at the perimeter of the square as human shields." (http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586)

Over a year later, many in the West still do not have a sense of who the insurgents were. In fact, few have shown much interest in the insurgents, and instead blamed only the Karimov regime for conducting what was immediately labeled a massacre of peaceful protestors. As of June 2006, the number of people killed by both sides is still contested, although the Moscow Human Rights organization Memorial's estimate that the total was probably around 200 will probably prevail. But Western governments were quick to rush to conclusions, without carefully weighing the evidence and without seeking detailed knowledge of the mode of operation of groups like HT and Akramiya. The Uzbek scholar Bakhtiyor Babajanov (who served as a state's witness in the trial) interviewed Yuldashev in November 2005 in his prison cell. During a May 2006 visit to Washington DC, Babajanov stated that Yuldashev had told him that in a March 2005 article published a month and a half before the Andijan attacks, he had claimed that Akramiya was in the process of "waging a jihad against the oppressors and infidels" and stated that "death in the way of Allah is not death but a return to your Lord". There is as yet no independent verification of Babajanov's claim.

The planners of the Andijan uprising seem to have waited to initiate it until they felt that the local and international context was right. Specifically, they seemed to have been inspired by the successful Uzbek uprising in Jalalabad in the Kyrgyz Republic and also by the subsequent breakdown of civil authority there.

Following the events in Andijan, western intelligence agencies, governments, and media did a poor job of seeking and weighing the many conflicting strands of evidence left by the events. Most simply rushed to whatever conclusions they were predisposed to reach, attacking those who questioned them. The overall inability of many analysts to understand how Islamic radical groups operate is one of the reasons for why the analysis of the Andijan events has been inadequate. The role of Islamists in the uprising was generally not recognized, in spite of the fact that the organizers of the uprising are recorded as shouting religious slogans. On the other hand, it must be noted that Islamist groups are growing increasingly sophisticated, focusing on secular slogans that are likely to elicit more positive reactions internationally.

It is also important to understand the growing role of women in Islamic radicalism. The first suicide killings in Central Asia took place in 2005, and were conducted by women who did not fit the traditional profile of poor, uneducated and repressed. For example, the 19-year old Dilnoza Holmuradova and her 22-year old sister Shahnoza Holmuradova came from a relatively affluent family in Tashkent and were well-educated.¹⁴ Dilnoza reportedly spoke five languages and had attended the police academy. What seems to have turned them into extremists were the people they met. According to an interview with their mother, “they began studying Islam in 2002...they began to change a great deal...stopped wearing modern clothes, listening to music and watching television.” They left home in 2004 and soon after carried out their attacks.

It is likely that at some vulnerable moment these women made contact with Islamists, who in turn influenced them ideologically, and led them to become terrorists. In the future, increasing numbers of women may be used in terrorist attacks, since they are harder to profile than men and more likely to slip through security controls. This process has already taken place in the North Caucasus.

The Long-term impact of Andjian

Sadly, what really happened in Andjian, how many people were killed, and by whom, has lost much of its relevance. Radical Islamist groups have won the information war. While the insurgency was an attempted coup d'état, international media framed the story as the massacre of innocent civilians comparable to the Tiananmen Square incident. Even some Uzbek dissidents in exile have deplored the West's reaction, and called sanctions counter-productive.¹⁵

While many in the West condemned Uzbek President Islam Karimov, leaders from the Muslim world either remained silent, or, in the case of the Great Shaykh of Al-Azhar University, Mohammad Sayed Tantawi, focused

¹⁴ “Uzbekistan: Affluent Suicide Bombers,” IWPR, RCA No. 278, (20 April 2004)

¹⁵ I.e. former Birlik leader Abdumannob Polat, see “Sanctions Urged on Uzbekistan”, *Washington Times*, 17 June 2006; “Can US- Uzbekistan Relationship be Saved”, *Registan.net*, <http://www.registan.net/?p=6277>.

on the threat of a radical takeover. He reportedly stated that the methods and tactics used by Andijan extremists resemble acts of terrorism in Egypt in 1974, when commandos of Salah Sirriya, the former chief of the military wing of the *Hizb ut-Tahrir* division in Egypt, attacked the military technology institute in an effort to obtain enough weaponry for a coup.

Russia benefited most from the post-Andijan fallout. Russian government officials have publicly supported the Uzbek government, and declared that the uprising was planned and carried out by foreign groups wanting to overthrow the government. With scant evidence, Russia also backed the government's claims that about 50 foreigners were detained or killed. It also noted the ideological similarities with Chechen terrorist groups, citing the posting on a Chechen website of the IJG's call for jihad. Following his meeting with Putin, in Moscow, shortly afterwards, Karimov said that the attacks were planned from abroad, by mercenaries who "were trained at military training camps ... We have enough facts to prove that the operation was prepared several months and perhaps several years in advance from outside Uzbekistan." Putin backed Karimov and even added that Russians had information that militants had been crossing from Afghanistan into Tajikistan and Uzbekistan prior to the Andijan uprising.

The end result of Andijan is that the U.S. military lost its base in Uzbekistan, a major setback for essential intelligence and counterterrorism work. No less significant, the West lost whatever possibility it previously had to influence the Uzbek government to reform or open up the system. Its precipitous condemnation of the government's actions, without corresponding attention to the insurgents, effectively discredited whatever reformist currents had existed earlier within the Uzbek government. Instead, Uzbekistan now leans on Russian and Chinese guidance, which gives *carte blanche* to the most repressive forces within the Uzbek government. Indeed, the pro-Western liberal forces that had slowly strengthened their positions within the Uzbek elite over that past decade have now been almost completely purged and marginalized.

Another consequence of Andijan is the flight of hundreds of people who are seeking refuge in various parts of Central Asia. The question is whether these are all indeed innocent civilians, or whether there are radical Islamists

among them, something that interviewers have not been trained to identify. Many of these refugees sought refuge in the Kyrgyz Republic (and some in Tajikistan), as did many Uzbek Islamists, who for years have been fleeing the repression at home to operate in a more open neighboring country. In fact, it is believed that the Central Asian HT leadership is based in the Kyrgyz city of Karasu, which has a large ethnic Uzbek population.

There have been numerous reports of Uzbek militants trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan going back to Uzbekistan. The militants are using networks of terrorists, criminals, as well as Islamist sympathizers to cross borders, traveling either via Tajikistan or Iran. Former IMU members have identified Mashhad, Iran's second largest city, as the transit center for Uzbek militants. In this context, the May 2006 incursion of militants from Tajikistan to Kyrgyzstan's Batken region is worrisome. Armed men attacked a border post killing several guards, before seizing a stockpile of weapons and killing additional people while crossing into the Kyrgyz Republic. It is surely not accidental that the site of these events lies astride an important and contested drug route. These events were reminiscent of a January 2006 incident, when militants raided a Tajik prison, killed the warden, and freed a prisoner with alleged IMU ties. It is clear that numbers of heavily armed people are operating in and around the borders of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. It is less clear who these are, given the interaction of organized crime and radicalism, and whether they have any links with the Andijan uprising. Government officials in all three countries seem to be confused, variously blaming different radical groups, but in all likelihood simply do not know who they are.

Azerbaijan

Compared to Central Asia, the situation in Azerbaijan is rather calm. Thanks to its location, Azerbaijan is more open to influences from the West and its people much better off economically. This is partly due to the relatively small size of the country and the increased amount of money becoming available following oil and gas related developments. President Ilham Aliyev has also pursued careful, pragmatic and evolutionary policies and is more popular than any of his opponents – secular or Islamic.

That said, it is widely known that both Saudi Arabia and Iran are actively trying to spread their Islamist views to Azerbaijan, building new mosques, and supplying local imams with radical Islamist literature. But they have so far failed to make much headway. Groups like HT also have not found a fertile ground in Azerbaijan, in part due to Azerbaijan's exposure to the West and close ties to Turkey. Consequently, the Turkish model of a democratic, secular, pro-Western vision is a commonly shared one by the majority of the Azerbaijanis. They are also closer to Israel than Iran, which not only sided with Armenia during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, but also challenges Azerbaijan's oil and gas fields in the Caspian Sea.

While there is little support for radicalism inside Azerbaijan, the country itself is a target for terrorists, precisely because it is a secular democratic country where Sunnis and Shi'ites live together peacefully. There have been several rounds of arrests of people who targeted the U.S. embassy and other strategic allocations.

Radicalization and Insurgency in the North Caucasus

The spread of Islamic radicalism across the North Caucasus has been advancing steadily in the past several years. This has been exacerbated by Russian policies of extreme centralization, which have brought increased amounts of repression to the region since 2002. To that is added the dislocation of entrenched government elites and the appointment of politicians loyal to Moscow without strong grounding in the region to lead the republics of the North Caucasus. The alienation of the population has progressively increased, and Russia's failure to resolve the socio-economic situation in the North Caucasus in spite of its newly found oil wealth is making matters worse.

Yet the radicalization of Islamist groups in the North Caucasus is mainly a result of the lingering ulcer in the region, the conflict in Chechnya. The emergence of the militant cells in the other republics of the region follows a general pattern: they are typically formed by a small number of individuals that have fought in Chechnya and received training by militants linked to Chechen radicalized formations, led by Shamil Basayev and in the past also by the Arab leaders in the Chechen *Jihad*, Al-Khattab and Abu Al-Walid.

They are then sent back to their home republics, where they silently developed a greater following by recruiting young and disaffected members. Young and frustrated men without jobs or prospects for either creating a family or self-realization are then further alienated from the political leadership of their republic, and attracted to the radical message of the Islamic *jamaats*. In this way, the local militant groups have been able to grow and multiply. Clearly, they still form a small minority of the population, yet the mismanagement by the region of the federal and republican authorities demonstrably increases the number of people either willing to or considering taking up arms against the government.¹⁶ In particular, the Russian policy of assassinating moderate Chechen separatist leaders is gradually leaving the playing field in the hands of the radical groups. The murder of Aslan Maskhadov, Chechnya's legitimate president, in 2005 was followed by the murder of his successor, Abdul-Khalim Sadulaev, in June 2006. His successor in turn, Doku Umarov, appointed Shamil Basayev as Vice President and his successor should he be killed as well. Whether by design or by accident, Moscow is ensuring that there are no moderate Chechen leaders left to negotiate with, while the radicals' control over the resistance in the North Caucasus becomes cemented.

¹⁶ See the report written in parallel to this one, Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, *The Caucasus: A Challenge for Europe*, Washington and Uppsala: *Silk Road Paper*, June 2006, for a detailed discussion.

The Sociology and Economics of Islamic Radicalism

Many facile claims have been advanced about the social profile of radical Islamists in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Since these claims have also served as justification for western policies on the issue, it is some importance to “get right” the social and economic dimensions of the phenomenon.

The Sociology of Radicalization

Various explanations have been advanced to explain the development and spread of Islamic radical ideologies. These have centered around economic as well as political explanations, or the class origins of the militants. Yet these hypotheses offer at best a partial and insufficient explanation.

Socio-Economic Factors

In the West, the most frequently repeated claim regarding the social profile of radical Islamists in the Caucasus and Central Asia is that they come from the post-Soviet poor of the region. The fact that the North Caucasus is among the most impoverished regions of Russia and the Ferghana Valley a relatively poor region of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and the Kyrgyz Republic, would seem to support this hypothesis. On this basis, all four governments are criticized for their failure to create economic opportunity in these zones of poverty, and generally to embrace reform.

It is undeniable that governments have failed to alleviate poverty in these and other areas in which Islamists have found a welcome. Yet poverty per se can scarcely be seen as the incubator of Muslim extremism. Andijan, for example, with its large Daewoo factory and international tennis center, is far more prosperous than most neighboring towns. Moreover, the Uzbek city of Khojent in Tajikistan is far poorer than any city in either Uzbek or Kyrgyz parts of the Ferghana Valley yet has not generated the same level of extremism. This does not exonerate governments from the duty to address

issues of poverty, but it should not be assumed that, in doing so, they will also remove the cause of extremism.

The fact is that of those Islamists whose social profile is known (mainly on the basis of evidence brought forward in trials) the overwhelming majority are not poor, and are in fact drawn from middle class backgrounds or higher. This is, of course, the case with many Islamic movements elsewhere.

The Class Origins of Militants

A second widely cited hypothesis focuses on the middle or upper middle class origins of many of the leaders of the extremist movements, and on their education in the technical fields. Drawing mainly on the experience of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and also on the Saudi leaders of al Qaeda, it is frequently claimed that radical Islamists in the Caucasus and Central Asia are drawn mainly from the technical intelligentsia, and even from the elite of that group. This hypothesis in turn leads to several possible corollaries. One faults the cultural vacuum created by Soviet-style technical education, with its absence of humanistic learning and values. Another criticizes the states for training young men for jobs that do not exist, leaving them in a professional limbo from which Islamism becomes a plausible avenue of escape.

The trouble with this hypothesis is not that it is false but that it explains too little. It is undeniably true, for example, that most identified Islamists have had technical training. But so have many others. The Soviet-type educational system that still prevails across the region one-sidedly focuses on technical fields, at the expense of the humanities. Thus, nearly of all those who advance through secondary school and beyond are of the technical intelligentsia. Yet only a tiny fraction of these have found their way into the radical Islamists' camp.

Political Participation and Repression

A much-touted hypothesis, often advanced in both Central Asia and the West, is that repression and authoritarian rule is a direct cause of Islamic radicalism. With avenues of political activity closed, the assumption goes, frustrated opposition-minded young individuals are driven into the arms of radical groups that form the only possible avenue for political activity. There

is some merit to this hypothesis, as the prohibition of moderate and secular forms of opposition leaves the playing field open to radical groups. Yet neither in Central Asia nor globally does the growth of Islamic radicalism seem to be correlated with levels of repression. Uzbekistan's Ferghana valley was affected by determined Islamic radical movements in the early 1990s, and their presence formed a *cause* of Karimov's repressive policies toward political opposition rather than being a *consequence* thereof. Meanwhile, southern Kyrgyzstan – a relatively liberal political atmosphere – has seen a growth of radicalism in the past few years comparable to that in Uzbekistan. Outside Central Asia, the picture is similar: radical groups prosper not only in repressive societies such as Egypt or Syria; their performance has been even stronger in Pakistan, where the state, far from being repressive, long followed a policy of appeasement toward radical groups. Moreover, a major element in radical Islamic recruiting is what French researcher Olivier Roy terms 'Euro-Islam' – the Islamic communities of western Europe. In global perspective, Turkey seems to be a successful balance: a political atmosphere that is generally liberal, but a state that simultaneously understands the dangers of Islamic radicalism and that draws clear lines in the sand to prevent radical groups from emerging and threatening secularism. These examples show that it may not necessarily be repressive political systems as such that lead to a radical backlash, but the relative deprivation and alienation of specific communities.

Even this brief overview shows the difficulty in tracing radical Islamism to simple issues of class, economic deprivation, or political systems. Why do some follow this path, but not most others? It is worth noting that no single explanation covers more than a portion of the known Islamists. Because of this, we are reduced to citing multiple factors that occur with enough frequency to draw attention.

Vendettas and Relative Deprivation

First among these are personal vendettas against a political leader, whether at the national or local level. These may have arisen from the official's perceived mistreatment of the future Islamists or a relative of his. While statistical evidence is lacking (this type of information is obviously suppressed in state trials), it is probable that this is the single most common

factor leading to radicalization. But unlike Sicily, where a vendetta culture leads to personal retribution against individuals, in the Caucasus and Central Asia the reaction is more often focused on the “system” and its local defenders.

Closely related is the sense among rising members of a regional intelligentsia that their province lacks real power in the capital. This feeling unites such otherwise disparate groups as Ferghana Valley residents of both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, Chechens and Ingush in the North Caucasus, and even the Pashtuns in post-Taliban Afghanistan down to 2005. To speak only of the Ferghana region of Uzbekistan, this region has been systematically excluded from national power for all but three years over the past four decades. Some have claimed that the radicalization of the Ferghana Valley traces to old traditions of religiosity. But these are equally developed in Bukhara and Samarkand, yet these centers have not produced radical Islamists in numbers. It is relevant that these cities are far more closely linked with national power centers than is the Ferghana region.

The “Drugs-Crime-Radical Islamist Nexus.”

A third specific element concerns links with drug traffickers and criminal groups in general. It is not clear the extent to which this is cause or effect but the close tie between the more violent Islamist groups and organized crime has been undeniable from the time the IMU emerged as a major drug dealing enterprise. Indeed, in this sense Central Asia and the Caucasus are examples of a worldwide trend, the increasing involvement of violent groups in organized crime, particularly the drug trade. In fact, the traditional division of non-state armed groups into mutually exclusive ideal types – the ideological and the criminal – is an increasingly misleading description of most armed groups today. A criminal element is increasingly visible in the financing of most groups, but also in the motivations of many. This fusion of crime and terrorism or insurgency can be most clearly seen as regards the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and certain formations in the North Caucasus. For some of these groups, it is unclear whether they are mainly driven by ideological zeal or by criminal pursuits.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

Though the IMU incursions of 1999 and 2000 were ostensibly waged in the name of the creation of a Caliphate with a base in the Ferghana valley, a strong body of evidence suggests they are in fact best explained by more mundane motivations, especially the drug trade. The geographical areas targeted, the timing of the attacks, as well as the tactics used, all point in this direction.

Rising Afghan opium production in the late 1990s led to increasing smuggling into Central Asia. This in turn led traffickers to seek out new smuggling routes. A new important route crossed the Tajik-Kyrgyz border from Tajikistan's Garm province.¹⁷ The Jirgatal and Tavildara areas of Tajikistan had been IMU strongholds during the civil war, and the IMU used these areas as a base from which to launch two armed incursions into Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and 2000. IMU militants established routes for crossing the border with the help of "drug barons" in Kyrgyzstan's Osh region.¹⁸ The geographical overlap in the late 1990s of the IMU's camps and activities with the main areas of drug trafficking into Kyrgyzstan point at a symbiosis between the group and drug trafficking networks. Yet other evidence shows that the IMU was in fact a leading actor in the drug trade in its own right. It had well-established links with the Taliban government and Al Qaeda,¹⁹ while maintaining close contacts with old comrades-in-arms in the former Tajik opposition, who were now in government, and in turn had close links with the ethnic Tajik-led Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. Only the IMU had a network of contacts on all sides of the Afghan conflict, which enabled it to freely move across Afghanistan and Tajikistan unlike any other known organization.

¹⁷ See Maral Madi, "Drug Trade in Kyrgyzstan", Structure, Implications, and Countermeasures", *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 23 no. 3-4, December 2004.

¹⁸ Mahmadinov Mahmadinov, "The Development of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (Turkestan)", Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Johns Hopkins University, 2003.

¹⁹ See eg. Michael Fredholm, *Uzbekistan and the Threat from Islamic Extermism*, Sandhurst: United Kingdom Royal Military Academy, Conflict Studies Research Centre, Report no. K39, March 2003, pp. 9-10.

The IMU's insurgencies into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan were in the form of simultaneous but small-scale incursions by comparatively small groups of fighters. This makes little military sense as the IMU could neither hope to defeat government forces nor to trigger an uprising that way. However, considered as a diversionary measure intended to create instability, confuse law enforcement and military structures, and gain access to mountain passes for trafficking, the incursions make perfect sense.²⁰

There is a significant consensus that the IMU was strongly involved in drug trafficking from Afghanistan toward Osh in Kyrgyzstan, where opiates are handed to trafficking networks that ship them further north and west. Drug control experts concurred with the estimate that the IMU controlled up to two thirds of opiates entering the Kyrgyz Republic.²¹ Interpol labeled the IMU "a hybrid organization in which criminal interests often take priority over 'political' goals", whose "leaders have a vested interest in ongoing unrest and instability in their area in order to secure the routes they use for the transportation of drugs."²² Kyrgyz government officials noted that the volume of drugs trafficked into Kyrgyzstan increased significantly after the 1999 incursion.²³

This does not mean, however, that the IMU completely jettisoned its religious ideology. In fact, the IMU was not a monolithic organization. Most studies of the movement indicate the coexistence of a more guerrilla-oriented

²⁰ Makarenko, "Traffickers Turn from Balkan Conduit to 'Northern' Route"; Madi, p. 7.

²¹ Personal communications from international drug control officials, Washington, May 2001; Tamara Makarenko, 'Crime and Terrorism in Central Asia', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, July 2000.

²² Ralf Mutschke, "The Threat Posed by the Convergence of Organized Crime, Drugs Trafficking and Terrorism", Testimony to the Subcommittee on Crime of the Judiciary Committee, U.S. House of Representatives, 13 December 2000. Also testimony to the same hearing of Donnie R. Marshall, Drug Enforcement Administration administrator, at <http://usinfo.state.gov/topical/pol/terror/00121301.htm>.

²³ Bolot Januzakov, quoted in Glenn E. Curtis, "Involvement of Russian Organized Crime Syndicates, Criminal Elements in the Russian Military, and Regional Terrorist Groupings in Narcotics Trafficking in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Chechnya", Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, October 2002, p. 14.

and criminal faction and a more religious one within the group.²⁴ As such, different actions attributed to the IMU were likely caused by different motivations. The IMU is best understood as an amalgam of personal vendetta, Islamism, drugs, geopolitics, and terrorism.

Chechen Armed Groups

Since the late 1980s, there have been strong connections between the Chechen separatist movement and Chechen organized crime, and this has evolved into the involvement of various types of Chechen militant groups and organized crime. Much like other Caucasian peoples, the Chechens were well-represented in Soviet-era organized crime. But as the conflict developed, militants in Chechnya increasingly appropriated the ability to directly engage in criminal activities instead of allying with criminal groups. This was partly related to changes on the field, with Chechen groupings becoming smaller in size and less centrally coordinated. Meanwhile, the North Caucasus became an increasingly prominent smuggling route for drugs, arms, people, and various commodities. Chechnya's position as a territory outside Russian jurisdiction also attracted criminal interests in the early 1990s, including prominent Russian figures who needed this free-trade zone. In the 1996-99 inter-war period, Chechnya was threatened by economic collapse as reconstruction funds were stolen and diverted in Moscow before they reached Chechnya.²⁵ This further increased incentives among decommissioned troops to engage in crime, given the absence of other economic alternatives.

In the second war, Chechen groupings experienced increasing financial problems. The first to be hit were the secular, moderate leadership which lacked wealthy patrons abroad. Yet the radical groups, led by Shamil Basayev and Ibn ul-Khattab, benefited from a steady flow of funds from the Middle East. This has nevertheless changed. Growing international measures to curb terrorist funding after 9/11 were followed by the killing of Khattab, who had been the main channel of funding. Subsequently, the Iraq war diverted the attention of the 'sponsors' of the Chechen Islamic resistance, contributing

²⁴ Makarenko, "Crime, Terror, and the Central Asian Drug Trade".

²⁵ President Boris Yeltsin's famous quote in this connection is "only the devil knows where that money went".

further to isolating Chechnya. As a result, the Chechen rebel groups have had increasing incentives to turn to organized crime for their financing. Near Chechnya, Georgia's Pankisi Gorge became a center of drug trafficking when now deceased Chechen warlord Ruslan Gelayev was in the valley in 1999-2002. Likewise, it is believed that Shamil Basayev ran narcotics operations between the two wars with his brother Shirvani Basayev, which may very well have been taken up again.

The war in Chechnya has gradually been criminalized, on both sides of the conflict: the Russian military and internal forces in Chechnya are known to be plagued by widespread corruption at all levels, not least among the top brass, which profits from involvement in the smuggling of oil products and other commodities. This is the background against which the conflict has in many ways changed from a war to a criminal operation. Vested interests on both sides of the divide profit from the conflict through criminal involvement; and moreover, Chechen and Russian armed groups are known to cooperate in criminal operations. This is facilitated by the fragmentation of forces on both sides: Russia has successfully fragmented the hierarchical structure of the Chechen resistance, leading to smaller units dependent on crime for their survival, with no one to rein in wayward commanders. On the Russian side, there is little coordination between troops loyal to the pro-Russian Chechen government; the army; the Ministry of Internal Affairs; the Federal Security Service; the border patrol forces; or the military intelligence. Hence various Chechen groups may cooperate in smuggling with one Russian formation while actively fighting another, and vice versa. This includes Islamic radical groups. An excellent example is the late Arbi Barayev, one of the most brutal and criminalized Chechen field commanders with an Islamist leaning, and one of the most wanted men in Russia. As Anna Politkovskaya reported, Barayev was able to live calmly in a luxury villa a few miles from a Russian checkpoint, with an FSB sticker on his car allowing him free travel across Chechnya.

These examples show the complex nature of radical Islamic groups in the region, and in particular the violent formations. Socio-economic conditions, political systems, external influences, and crime are all factors that contribute to the development of radical Islamic groups in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

How Should the EU Respond?

The prospects of Islamic radicalism in Central Asia and the Caucasus remain unclear. On the one hand, it is evident that radical groups do not have strong following in local societies. In spite of repression, poverty, and foreign proselytizing, only a minority of the population of the region appears to find the message of the radicals appealing. What is worrying, though, is that this message appears increasingly tempting to segments of the youth in the region. This does not appear to be related to levels of economic development or the openness of political systems. Indeed, if radical groups are finding an attentive audience amidst the poverty and repression of the North Caucasus, they have shown equal skill at attracting the relatively well-to-do middle-class youth that flock around Baku's Abu Bakr mosque, or among businessmen in Andijan.

The regional scene is also far from positive. The insurgency in along Afghanistan's border with Pakistan has grown again, and Western countries have shown a disturbing inability to deal with the ideological element of the war on terror. Aside from the energy-rich countries such as Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, the region's governments are failing to meet their citizens' basic socio-economic needs. All this fosters an environment in which Islamic radical groups can thrive. Islamist and terrorist organizations have also shown an ability to modify their tactics and increasingly cooperate with one other – based on the needs of local conditions. For example, HT distributed free meals and toys during the last Islamic holiday in Kyrgyzstan, in spite of never having done any social work before. It is therefore essential to regularly review assumptions and analyses as the radical groups are constantly adopting their tactics based on changing conditions on the ground. Meanwhile, western influence in Central Asia has been decreasing rapidly, and is non-existent in the North Caucasus. Only Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan

can be said to be increasingly linked with the western realm. With the West more or less out of the picture, and Russian and Chinese influence growing, the Central Asian governments are likely to become more repressive and less reformist. Thus, the regional environment is moving in a direction where the worst authoritarian tendencies of the local governments will come out, while it will do little to improve the economic conditions. This will make the Islamist message of injustice increasingly appealing, and help the Islamists to grow stronger. In comparison, the carrots that the EU and the U.S. can offer the Central Asian governments will not be attractive enough, while the sticks that the West can use will not be painful enough to induce change.

If this general situation is less than rosy, there are indeed areas where the West in general and the EU in particular can be effective.

- First and foremost, it is crucial to develop skills, especially in the intelligence community, in understanding the ideological framework of the radical and terrorist groups. Unless this happens, even if there is increased human intelligence capacity (which is also needed), western governments will continue to be unable to put the information into the right context.
- As the preceding discussion has shown, the radical and externally sponsored Islamic movements and organizations existing in the region offer little hope for a meaningful dialogue. Even if they were prepared to engage in such dialogue with the West (for which there is no evidence), it would constitute a gross breach of normal diplomatic relations with countries of the region. The moderate majority is less organized and much weaker financially. However, it is quite possible to engage representatives of this majority, and also of the secular parts of the population, in dialogue. This could prove useful and should be pursued.
- In seeking to foster more constructive approaches within the region, the West needs to support reform-minded officials within governments, not just anti-government forces. Unfortunately, some recent EU policies have indiscriminately hounded the same reformers who are being punished by their own governments. To move beyond this situation will require a much higher quality of information than the EU states now command. Such

information must focus on informal groupings and networks *within* the governments as well as groups outside.

European governments and the various NGOs are today perceived in the region as exclusively supporting the opposition, with strongly counter-productive effect. Especially since the ‘color revolutions’ in Georgia and Ukraine and the overthrow of the Akaev government in the Kyrgyz Republic, Central Asian leaders were convinced that both the U.S. and the EU sought to oust them from office. Segments of the mainstream public appear to agree with them. This in turn led to deteriorating relations and the closure of NGOs. It is important to change this perception, to be able to invest in internal change and to provide political space for reformers and NGOs to function properly. For that, the EU, together with the U.S., needs to find points for collaboration within the governments. It must quietly and deftly support progressive groups within the system and work patiently but tenaciously toward evolutionary change. This will lay the foundation for a new generation of pro-democratic, tolerant, and competent leaders who provide alternatives both to the current leaders and to the Islamists who raise the banner of radical change.

- The link between drug trafficking and religious extremism is proven beyond doubt. While most drug traffickers may have no connection to religious extremism, those who do are sufficiently important to provide a steady income stream for Islamic militant and terrorist groups. The drug trade in Afghanistan and Central Asia is demand-driven, with the majority of the demand arising from EU member countries. The one action by the EU that would do most to address the problem of religious extremism in the region would be to lend major financial support to counter-narcotics efforts. Such support must be commensurate with the huge European demand that sustains the industry and, indirectly, much of the extremism.

- Beyond this, the EU should understand that the expansion of continental trade across Central Asia and the Caucasus (i.e. trade involving Europe, China, India, and the Mediterranean) is likely to be the single most powerful and positive engine of change in the coming years. As roads, railroads, pipelines, and electric lines increasingly link the region to the great economic centers of Eurasia, local populations will be drawn out of the

isolation that breeds extremism, and into a larger multi-cultural mainstream. The EU should understand that in promoting continental trade, it is bringing these regions into the larger world, and opening to them opportunities that do not exist at present.

- Related to this increasing economic engagement with Europe and with other Eurasian economic centers, is the value that comes from educational and cultural exchange. EU educational exchanges should be moved out of the exclusive control of the capital cities and the national elites, and extended to the provinces, including those now experiencing Islamic radical movements. The presence of a few dozen young men and women with cosmopolitan outlooks in such places can open prospects to thousands of others. Significantly, they can also be a source of future leaders at the regional level. Educational exchange is a productive and cost-effective means of fighting sectarian extremism.
- In dealing with governments throughout the region, the EU should focus on the delivery of governmental services to “deprived” areas, and in general, on greater degrees of decentralization and self-government, which is essential to reintegrate alienated regions to national polities, and also to providing social and economic prospects for their citizens. To be effective, such programs must receive the support and cooperation of the central governments, without therefore being allowed to slip into cooptation by central ministries. Striking a deft balance in this regard could allow the EU to present itself as a credible champion of civic improvement without cutting off its access the governments whose performance it seeks to improve
- Further, the EU should treat the issue of support for extremism in Central Asia (including Afghanistan) and the Caucasus as a subject for bilateral discussion with relevant Arab states and Iran. The governments of Central Asia and the Caucasus all know full well that extremist movements receive support from abroad. If the EU, with its extensive ties with the countries in question, fails to include this matter in its bilateral talks with them, it will be signaling to the Caucasus and Central Asia that the EU’s priorities lie elsewhere.

- On dealing with religious radicalism and government repression, the EU may find it useful to look at the Turkish example, which is relevant to understanding the tension between trying to create a modern and open democratic system and dealing with the threat of fundamentalist and militant Islamic political ideology. Eurasia's Muslim majority countries that want to maintain their secular regime, will not listen to naïve suggestions from Western countries that have never dealt with the holistic nature of Islam. They will, however, listen to advice on creating the right legal and constitutional safety nets so that radical groups, or "sleeper cells," cannot take over secular systems. To this end, the EU should engage Turkey as it addresses issues of radical Islam in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Besides underscoring a common interest between Turkey and the EU, this would bring benefit in the form of better focused initiatives on the EU's part, and even possibly to initiatives that are coordinated between the EU and Turkey.