

Paving The Path to Jihad:  
Explaining the Development of Political Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia

By

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**ABSTRACT**

Despite its relatively secular nature and traditionally non-challenging relationship with the state, Central Asian Islam has nevertheless produced political manifestations in regional opposition groups today. Why has this happened? Clearly, the reasons behind this development are multi-faceted and complex, involving both internal and external pressures, and it would be overly simplistic to assert that any one factor has acted in isolation. This thesis argues that, both directly and indirectly, state responses to Islamism have created a self-perpetuating cycle in which excessive government controls have created an environment of social frustration that is conducive to the rise of unofficial opposition groups, while simultaneously reducing the states' capacity to oppose the movement. In this context, where there are no moderate authority alternatives and little opportunity to achieve change within existing state structures, Islamism has emerged as the main mobilization of opposition forces, providing an alternative system based on the failures of the state and the symbols of a common and persecuted ideology.

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*The real crisis in Central Asia lies with the state, not with the [Islamist] insurgents.<sup>1</sup>*

## **Introduction**

Central Asia could well be described as the new potential powder keg of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With issues of culture, religion, ethnicity and resources intensified, and deeply-rooted hostilities heightening the level of instability, conflict is, as we have seen, a very real and extremely damaging possibility.

The post-Soviet states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – are all relatively recent subjects in the study of this potentially explosive region. Having been kept fiercely under Soviet rule for most of the twentieth century, they are only now beginning to venture out from the shadow of the former empire. Thus far, there is relatively little known about the nature of these states, although outside interest in their development is considerable.

At the same time, the issues of Islam and the boundaries that define it have recently grown to radical levels on the international stage. Islam has become one of the, if not the, most divisive lines of definition and identity. This is being manifested in the post-Soviet Central Asian states, in which Islam has a long and entrenched history, and the issue is now being brought to the surface in the new states' struggle for identity and evolution.

Within the Islamic revival of Central Asia, one manifestation in particular remains an enigma. Political Islam has little indigenous ideological basis in the region, yet it has rapidly developed a small but firm base in the years leading up to and immediately following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The states' responses to the movement have often been severe and marked by the consolidation of state controls on everyday life. Nevertheless, the specter of Islamism has remained a threat to regional security, and has continued to impede the development of many of the Central Asian states. Why has Islam in Central Asia, despite its unchallenging nature towards the state, given rise to the political Islamic groups in operation today? Why has Islamism in the region become such a significant threat to regional state stability, despite intense official opposition? And perhaps most importantly, what does this mean for the future security of Central Asia?

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<sup>1</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, (New Haven: York University Press, 2002) 245

Of all of the Central Asian states, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan enacted the earliest and most severe measures against Islamism. Both have used the threat of political Islam as justification for a complete withdrawal from political/ economic reform and the implementation of increasingly harsh authoritarian measures, including the repression of religious expression. Uzbekistan, as the rising regional hegemon, "has become the center of Islamic resistance and extremism in Central Asia and the weakest link in the arc of instability that is spreading across the region";<sup>2</sup> state controls in that country impact neighbouring states, particularly Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, with which it shares the volatile Ferghana Valley. Uzbek policies have been mirrored, to varying degrees, by these other administrations. Observation of these countries finds that the more extreme state responses have, in fact, contributed to the strength of the Islamist movement while simultaneously undermining state capacity and stability.

As the world is beginning to recognize, Central Asia is of vital strategic interest to the future stability of South Asia, the Middle East, China and Russia,<sup>3</sup> and any conflict in Central Asia will have international consequences. The very possibility of a fundamentalist takeover in Central Asia has international actors fearing the destabilization of not only the immediate region, but also of the alignment of forces in the Middle East and South Asia. It is therefore imperative that political Islam in the region be explored, beginning at its sources, and the ways in which it has managed to develop despite the inhospitable environment. It is also important to analyze the real threat that political Islam poses to the region, so that appropriate response measures to this and other situations of religious radicalism can be defined.

This research addresses these questions, focusing on the states of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Turkmenistan, the fifth post-Soviet Central Asian state, has pursued a distinct path from the others by establishing a harsh authoritarian regime immediately after independence. This is a major difference between it and the other Central Asian states, which saw periods of liberation that allowed for the expression of self-definition and nationalism by the population. This was the period that allowed political Islam

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<sup>2</sup> Rashid, *Jihad* (2002) 86.

<sup>3</sup> See Louise Fenner, "Assistant Secretary Jones Stresses Growing Importance of Central Asia," US Embassy in Tokyo (July 2004) <[japan.usembassy.gov/e/p/tp-se0934.html](http://japan.usembassy.gov/e/p/tp-se0934.html)>; Ehsan Ahrari, "The Importance of Central Asia to China," Asia Times Online (13 March 2003) <[www.atimes.com/atimes/China/EC13Ad02.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/EC13Ad02.html)>; Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall, "Building Cooperative Security Ties in Central Asia," *Stanford Journal of International Relations* 3.2 (Fall-Winter 2002) <[www.stanford.edu/group/sjir/3.2.06\\_sherwoodrandall.html](http://www.stanford.edu/group/sjir/3.2.06_sherwoodrandall.html)>.

to gain a foothold in the region. Turkmenistan experienced no such period, and consequently has not reported the growth of Islamism opposition. Turkmenistan will not be examined in this research. Uzbekistan, however, has been one of the earliest and most clearly affected targets of Islamism and exerts considerable influence on the region,<sup>4</sup> the analysis will begin with Islamism in that republic, followed by the subsequent implications of Islamism on the other Central Asia republics. The effect of state repression on the strength of Islamism will be analyzed by comparing Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the countries with the highest reported levels of Islamist insurgency, with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which have traditionally been less religious. Of particular interest is the experience of Kyrgyzstan, which began its period of independence as Central Asia's "Island of Democracy".<sup>5</sup> In recent years, however, the Kyrgyz state has been withdrawing from its commitment to reform and has been reverting to a more authoritarian regime with centralization of state control. Opposition has been stifled in the name of state security and anti-terrorism, and avenues of popular dissent are becoming restricted. This trend is particularly significant as Kyrgyzstan, which, despite its historically lower levels of Islamic observance, has recently begun to experience increased Islamist activity and security concerns like those of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, as its state policies follow their direction. Kazakhstan, meanwhile, which has maintained a relatively liberal approach to Islamic observance, has encountered no such increases in religious opposition.

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### **Analytical Framework**

In order to investigate the means by which political Islam has become such an important factor in Central Asia, this research will address two questions. Why has political Islam become a threat to Central Asian security, and what is its impact? In order to answer these questions, this study will first examine the bases for the development of social opposition movements – historical, social, economic and political – by applying the social movement theories of relative deprivation. Second, the unlikely evolution of Islamism will be examined, explaining why and how political Islam has become the vehicle of popular dissent in Central Asia. These two steps will be accomplished through an in-depth analysis of the regions' most active Islamist groups, followed by an assessment of the state's responses to the threat of political Islam and how they have actually promoted the growth and intensity of

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<sup>4</sup> Uzbekistan, which shares borders with all four other Central Asian states, has established itself as the new regional hegemon.

<sup>5</sup> John Anderson, *Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia's Island of Democracy (Post-Communist States and Nations)* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999).

Islamist opposition. Finally, the significance of this movement in the region will be discussed, untangling the limitations and possibilities for political Islam in Central Asia, and what effects it is likely to have in the foreseeable future.

This thesis examines one factor in the political and socioeconomic development of Central Asia; while there are additional factors that contribute to the situations in these states, this research asserts that the states' overemphasis on the threat of Islamism has exacerbated these existing tensions. This thesis will argue that, although the existence of Islamism in Central Asia is real and must be addressed, its capacity is being greatly exaggerated by three of the Central Asian states – Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan – and that the degree to which these states are overreacting to the movement is, in fact, the real source of Islamism's threat. The states have reinforced and strengthened Islamism's capacity in the region both indirectly and directly: indirectly, exaggerated claims of an Islamist threat have justified state policies that have led to economic, political and social deterioration in these states. This has resulted in widespread social dissatisfaction with the regime, and encouraged popular sympathy and support for the alternative regime proposed by the Islamists. Directly, state suppression of moderate Islamic structures have created an ideological void that has encouraged the spread of radical Islamist groups; in their efforts to prevent the establishment of an independent religious authority, these regimes have eliminated the structures which normally would have opposed the extremism of the region's political Islamist groups.

In order to provide an accurate analysis of Islam in Central Asia, it will be necessary to consider the effects of historical legacies and events on the region. This historical analysis will take into consideration the early formative years of Islam in Central Asia (ninth and tenth centuries AD), the time period closely preceding the Bolshevik revolution (late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries), as well as some of the years of Soviet rule (1917-1991). However, with the exception of this limited historical context, the bulk of analysis will be focused on the period closely leading up to the fall of the Soviet Union (1980 +), through to present day.

A variety of sources will be used in order to guard against inaccuracies and biases, as well as to provide a wide spectrum of experience and information. Journal articles, non-governmental and government agency reports, books, official data, and other reputable Internet sources will provide the bulk of published material. Russian sources will be used, in

addition to English texts, and additional input will be provided by experts in the field of Central Asia and Islam in the region.

A fundamental weakness of this research design is the necessary lack of sources in the Central Asian languages. Because of the often closed political systems, a great deal of empirical evidence is either unavailable or unreliable. In addition, information for this study will rely on outside observation and accounts, as the researcher will not be able to travel to Central Asia to conduct first-hand interviews and research. However, it is hoped that the use of a wide range of research sources, in both English and Russian languages, as well as first-hand input from individuals with extensive experience in the sphere, will counterbalance the limitations in the research.

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**Chapter Outline:**

This thesis will be divided into six chapters. Following this first, introductory chapter, the Theoretical Framework will provide a theoretical outline of explanations for the development of social movements and the mobilization of opposition around Islam. In addition, stipulations through which to measure the potential, long-term impact of such movements will be provided. A number of anticipated findings will be projected, based on the specific application of existing theories to the Central Asian context; first, however, this section will consider and reject one of the main alternative theoretical explanations for the growth of political Islam in Central Asia. The third chapter, this chapter will provide an outline of the history of the Central Asian states, positing the presence of Islam within the culture prior to and during Soviet rule. This section will also examine the changes brought about by the Soviet period in relation to Islamic reform and identity. Following this, the fourth chapter will provide an analysis of the major Islamist movements in Central Asia, and a description of the effects of their presence in the region. The fifth chapter, State Responses, will examine the ways in which state policies have responded to this Islamic resurgence and the appearance of political Islam; it will also consider how these state responses have affected the economic, social and political sustainability of their respective states. Finally, the analysis will apply the theoretical framework to the findings of the previous chapters in order to provide answers to the research questions. In light of this analysis, the chapter also provides three possibilities for the future of Central Asia, depending on the course of action adopted by the state authorities.

*In the developing world, fundamentalism usually appeals particularly to people who are disgusted by the inequalities and injustices in their country's political-economic system.<sup>6</sup>*

### **Theoretical Framework**

This thesis poses two central questions: why has Islamism grown in Central Asia, and what is its likely future impact on Central Asian stability and security? In order to understand the rise of Islamism as a form of political opposition in Central Asia, it is necessary to analyze the question on two levels. First, the development and activation of social opposition must be considered in order to determine the factors behind the growth of popular dissent. Second, the reasons for the mobilization of dissent around Islam, and thus the politicization of the religion must be explained, as well as the ways in which it is accomplished. In addition, a counterfactual scenario is briefly presented, to posit what might have happened had state responses not stunted religious development in the region and had Islam not become a frame for state injustice and mobilization for opposition.

First, however, it will be useful to define some of the term that will be central to this research. Although the expressions "fundamentalist" and "militant/radical Islam" are often used interchangeably, they are not the same. 'Islamic fundamentalism', according to Voll, is "the reaffirmation of foundational principles and the effort to reshape society in terms of those reaffirmed fundamentals".<sup>7</sup> Fundamentalists wish to preserve their religion's traditional worldview and resist efforts of religious liberals to transform it, and they desire to revive the role of religion in private and public life, including politics, lifestyle and dress.<sup>8</sup> In his study of fundamentalism, Voll asserts that,

Islamic fundamentalism is, in other words, a distinctive mode of response to major social and cultural change introduced either by exogenous or indigenous forms and perceived as threatening to dilute or dissolve the clear lines of Islamic identity, or to overwhelm that identity in a synthesis of many different elements.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Howard Handelman, The Challenge of Third World Development (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed) (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002) 60.

<sup>7</sup> Although all Muslims affirm the revelation in the Koran and have an obligation to implement the essentials of that truth in their daily lives and societies, 'fundamentalists' are distinguished by the identifiable approach with which they adopt this common obligation – an approach that is marked by exclusivist and literalist interpretation of the fundamentals of Islam and by rigorist pursuit of socio-moral reconstruction [John O. Voll, "Fundamentalism in the Sunni Arab World: Egypt and Sudan," Fundamentalisms Observed (The Fundamentalism Project, Vol. 1), eds. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) 347].

<sup>8</sup> Handelman, Third World Development, (2002) 60

<sup>9</sup> Voll, "Fundamentalism," (1991) 347.

Generally, Islamic fundamentalists base their objective on the Caliphate established by successors to The Prophet Muhammad, which, in the early Islamic period after His death, united all Muslim lands under a single caliph.<sup>10</sup>

Pursuit of this goal varies, however; radical, or militant fundamentalists are inspired by a 'sacred rage', and feel that they are conducting a holy war against forces that threaten to corrupt their fundamental religious values. In contrast, conservatives do not envision themselves in such a battle.<sup>11</sup> Political Islam, or Islamism, promotes the religion as a political ideology, and seeks the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate under Islamic law, or Sharia. Although Islamists may or may not advocate violence in the pursuit of their objective, they do perceive themselves to be engaged in a 'war', much in the same way as Islamic militants do.<sup>12</sup>

In the analysis of political Islam and its appearance from the relatively benign form of Islam that has predominated in Central Asia, it is important first to address the argument that the inherent nature of the religion itself leads to politicization and conflict. Such a perspective is not rare in the analysis of religions; over two centuries ago, Montesquieu was asserting that Islam has a violent streak predisposing Muslim societies to conflict, arguing that "the Mohammedan religion, which speaks only with a sword, continues to act on men with the destructive spirit that founded it".<sup>13</sup> More recently, researchers like Samuel P. Huntington - have agreed that Muslim societies are especially prone to political violence;<sup>14</sup> in his research, Huntington concludes that ethno-political conflicts occur overwhelmingly more frequently in the Muslim world, and many contemporary experts explain this fact by noting the lack of differentiation between church and state in Islam, as compared with the Christian tradition. As Ira Lapidus describes,

The study of the life of the prophet Muhammad and the caliphate, and of Muslim juristic, political, literary and philosophical theory, have all reinforced the notion that Islam does not have a church and institution, that Islam encompasses all domains including law and the state, and the state and religious authority are embodied in the same person.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Rashid, *Jihad*, (2002) 265.

<sup>11</sup> Handelman, *Third World Development*, (2002) 60-61.

<sup>12</sup> For an example of 'non-militant' Islamist manifesto, see the Hizb ut-Tahrir official website: <[www.hizb-ut-tahrir.com](http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.com)>

<sup>13</sup> Charles Louis de Secondat (Montesquieu), *The Spirit of Laws*, eds. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 162.

<sup>14</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the Modern World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> Ira M Lapidus, "State and Religion in Islamic Societies," *Past and Present* 151 (May 1996) 3.

According to experts, Islam is a 'total' religion, encompassing all aspects of social existence and incorporating them into its own regulatory system. Alain-Gerard Marsot applies this to the politicization of the religion by arguing that "Islam was political from the very first day, concerned with the governing of the religious community and with any and all political questions, as well as with dogma and religious problems".<sup>16</sup> By extension, then, the politicization of Islam becomes an inherent aspect of its existence and development, and the challenge of religion over the secular state becomes less of a condition and more of an eventuality. In his extensive work on Central Asia, Malashenko applies this assumption to the region under investigation, maintaining that, "rooted in Islamic values and ideas, economic and political programmes and activities intended to bring them into effect are an inalienable part of the sociopolitical life of the entire Muslim world. Central Asia is hardly an exception".<sup>17</sup>

While the argument that politicization is a natural characteristic of Islam as a religion is frequently cited as an explanation for the development of Islamist movements, closer analysis of the argument destabilizes its logic. First, such reasoning eliminates the concept of differentiation within the religion itself, painting all facets and followers of Islam with the same brush. This oversimplifies the situation, which in reality entails an overwhelming amount of diversity within the Muslim world. Without going into a theological survey, the early split between Sunni and Shi'a branches of Islam entailed the legitimization of election by popular consent (Sunni), and the authority of heredity (Shi'a).<sup>18</sup> Within the two main branches of Islam, there are many additional branches and schools; within Sunni, for example, four major schools of jurisprudence (*maddhab*) are recognized: Hanafi, Maliki, Shafii and Hanbali.<sup>19</sup> The Hanafi school, which predominates in Central Asia, is characterized by its accommodation of tradition and promotion of a tolerant relationship between the religious community and the state, in which theological elites have not traditionally challenged political leaders for supremacy in the political realm by the

<sup>16</sup> Alain-Gerard Marsot, "Political Islam in Asia: A Case Study," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 524, Political Islam (Nov. 1992) 158.

<sup>17</sup> Aleksei Malashenko, "Islam and Politics in Central Asian States," Political Islam and Conflicts in Russia and Central Asia, eds. Lena Jonson and Murad Esenov (Stockholm: The Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 1999). <[www.ca-c/dataeng/02.malash.shtml](http://www.ca-c/dataeng/02.malash.shtml)>.

<sup>18</sup> Among the Sunni, the *imam* (clergy) should be elected through the consensus of the community, while Shi'a maintain that the *imam* must be a descendent of Ali, who bestowed special knowledge from the Prophet on all of his descendants, rendering them infallible.

<sup>19</sup> Sunni Islam also recognizes other lines of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), such as Deobandi, Salafi and Wahhabi, although they do not have the same levels of authority as the madhhab ["Is Political Islam Inevitable in Central Asia?" ICG Asia Report No. 72 (Osh/Brussels, 22 December 2003) 5].

theological elites.<sup>20</sup> As Ashirbek Muminov notes, although Hanafites were active in matters of cooperation with the authorities, and “despite the formal recognition of the authority’s theocratic character, the spheres of activities of the state and spiritual figures were actually separate in the Muslim states of Central Asia”.<sup>21</sup> In addition, the development and spread of Sufi networks in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries,<sup>22</sup> great masses of the Muslim population became affiliated with one or more of the Sufi brotherhoods in addition to their particular school of Islamic jurisprudence. Such evidence not only points to the fallacy of labeling all forms of Islam with the same titles, but also shows that the politicization of Islam is not an inherent eventuality, and that other factors in its development must be considered.

A brief historical analysis shows that, while researchers have been correct in determining that the Koran does not codify a separation between church and state in the same way that the Christian bible does, there is actually a long legacy of separation between religious and state authorities in Islam, underlining the importance of practice over doctrine. The distinction actually began early in Islam’s history, when “in the ninth and tenth century there emerged a new pattern of state and social organization in the Islamic lands”.<sup>23</sup> The caliphate, or successors of Muhammad, which had encompassed the political, social and religious aspects of Muslim life gradually evolved into a political structure, legitimized in both Muslim terms and in regards to a cultural heritage derived from the non-Muslim political traditions of the region. For the Hanbali school of Islam, the ulama became custodians of religion, and were charged with the upkeep of the teachings of Islam and to enforce those teachings in the community; however, “in pursuit of their obligations, they could refuse to obey the caliphate in matters where the caliphs departed from the law, but they did not claim the right to rebel against the regime as such”.<sup>24</sup> This distinction effectively made the religious scholars the leaders of the Muslim communities, and the religious communities independent organisms within the caliphal order. Based on this historical assessment, it appears that a Muslim-based society does not necessarily engender political Islamic organization, and the experiences of Muslims in one country do not explain those of Muslims in another. It therefore remains to be explained why Islam in Central Asia, despite

<sup>20</sup> “Central Asia: Islam and the State,” *International Crisis Group Asia Report No. 59* (Osh/Brussels, 10 July 2003) 1.

<sup>21</sup> Ashirbek Muminov, “Traditional and Modern Religious-Theological Schools in Central Asia,” *Political Islam and Conflicts in Russia and Central Asia*, eds. Lena Jonson and Murad Esenov. Stockholm (The Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 1999). <[www.ca-c.org/dataeng/09.muminov.shtml](http://www.ca-c.org/dataeng/09.muminov.shtml)>.

<sup>22</sup> Sufism, a form community-based religious organization which preaches direct communication with God and tolerance towards other forms of worship, actually originated in Central Asia and Persia after the Arab invasions.

<sup>23</sup> Lapidus, “State and Religion,” (1996) 11.

<sup>24</sup> Lapidus, “State and Religion,” (1996) 11-2.

its unchallenging nature towards the state, gave rise to the Islamist groups which today form the backbone of political and social opposition in the region.

Theorists from Ted Gurr to James Davies and Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly have emphasized the role of the state in shaping underlying state-social tensions.<sup>25</sup> They argue that in an environment of declining social standards, the failed expectations of the population become targeted at the state, which has proven unable to fulfill its anticipated obligations. When the 'losers' of a particular regime begin to fear the loss of standards that they consider inalienable to their quality of lives, these social groups begin to consider themselves at odds with the government, and mount an opposition. In the case of Central Asia, Islam was both the consolidating factor across regional and ethnic lines, and proposed the answer to the inefficient regimes. Harsh state opposition of these opposition movements only reinforced their *raison d'être*, and polarized the societies in which they operated.

In his analysis of the conditions underlying social conflict, Ted Gurr posits that a sense of relative deprivation is the basic precondition for civil strife, and argues that as an innate response to perceived deprivation, anger is a motivating state for which aggression, or conflict, is an inherently satisfying response.<sup>26</sup> Relative deprivation is defined as the perception of discrepancy of actors between their value expectations (the goods and conditions of life to which they believe they are justifiably entitled) and their value capabilities (the amounts of those goods and conditions that they think they are capable of receiving and sustaining).<sup>27</sup> Gurr presents a set of conditions that mark pervasive and intense deprivation and affect the level of social conflict; three of these apply most critically, although with significant varying levels of intensity, in Central Asia:

- 1) Economic deprivation (the exclusion of some groups from the economic arena);
- 2) Political discrimination (the exclusion of some groups from the political arena);
- 3) Potential separation (the size of the separatist regions or groups).<sup>28</sup>

Relative deprivation is important to the concept of social mobilization. Charles Tilly identifies one cause of social revolution as "the sudden failure of government to meet

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<sup>25</sup> Other works dealing with relative deprivation include: Ryan Dudley and Ross A. Miller, "Group Rebellion in the 1980s," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42.1 (February 1998) 77-96; Peter R. Grant and Rupert Brown, "From Ethnocentrism to Collective Protest: Responses to Relative Deprivation and Threats to Social Identity," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 58.3 (September 1995) 195-212.

<sup>26</sup> Ted Gurr, "A Causal Model of Civil Strife: A Comparative Analysis Using New Indices," *American Political Science Review* 62. 4 (December 1968) 1104.

<sup>27</sup> Gurr, "Civil Strife," (1968) 1104.

<sup>28</sup> F. Crosby, "Relative Deprivation Revisited: A Response to Miller, Bolce and Halligan," *American Political Science Review* 73 (1979) 108.

specific obligation which members of the subject population regarded as well established and crucial to their welfare”,<sup>29</sup> a situation which has risen with increasing urgency in many parts of Central Asia since independence. Specifically, Gurr points out that “deprivation attributable to such conditions as discrimination, political separatism, economic dependence, and religious cleavages tends to contribute at a relatively moderate but constant rate to civil strife whatever may be done to encourage, deter, or divert it, short only of removing its underlying conditions”.<sup>30</sup> According to Davies, the crucial factor is the vague or specific fear that the satisfaction of needs is under threat, and “this fear does not generate if there is continued opportunity to satisfy continually emerging needs; it generates when the existing government suppresses or is blamed for suppressing opportunity”. Consequently, the state’s role in fomenting civil conflict must be analyzed not only by what it fails to do, but also in terms of what it does.

Indeed, Gurr’s research finds a curvilinear relationship between state coercion and civil movement: as levels of resources devoted to coercive forces increase, the magnitude of violence also tends to increase to a point; only at very high levels of coercion do strife levels tend to decline. However, at the outer levels of this continuum, the relationship again changes directions, and states that implement the very largest forces of coercion tend to have more strife than do states with somewhat smaller forces.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the long term benefits of coercive action remain doubtful, for the causes behind the sense of social deprivation remain unchanged. In fact, “if an aggressive response to deprivation is thwarted by fear of punishment, this interference is itself a deprivation and increases the instigation to aggression”.<sup>32</sup>

The relationship between state force and opposition is complicated even further by consideration of the nature of government involved. Coercive action by authoritarian regimes is often more successful in quelling civil strife than that of democratic regimes; McAdam and Tarrow explain that, “since governments in nondemocratic states do not govern by popular consent, they can repress movements with more impunity and tactical license than governments in democratic states”.<sup>33</sup> Democratic states rest on the concept of “consent of the governed”, meaning that if citizens perceive that their consent is being

<sup>29</sup> Charles Tilly, From Mobilization for Revolution. (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1978) 204-5.

<sup>30</sup> Gurr, “Civil Strife,” (1968) 1124.

<sup>31</sup> For more information on these studies, see Gurr, “Civil Strife,” (1968) 1104-1124.

<sup>32</sup> Gurr, “Civil Strife,” (1968) 1105.

<sup>33</sup> Doug McAdam and Sidney Tarrow, “Nonviolence as Contentious Action,” Political Science and Politics 33. 2 (June 2000) 151.

coerced, the legitimacy of the government itself becomes fatally compromised.<sup>34</sup> This has placed further pressure on the Central Asian governments, which claim to be committed to democratic rule, but increasingly demonstrate authoritarian measures in their responses to opposition. Consequently, state coercion among these rulers carries the further risk of delegitimizing their authority and creating additional support for the opposition. Gurr supports this by noting that, “regime legitimacy . . . acts much as deprivation itself does: low levels of legitimacy, or by inference feelings of illegitimacy, apparently motivate men to collective violence”.<sup>35</sup>

Once collective opposition has been established, what explains its mobilization under the banner of Islam? Tilly refers to social networks as the structural foundation required in order to generate a collective identity, and explains that while those networks remain submerged in everyday life, they become visible when employed by mobilization campaigns, which educe otherwise latent structures and symbols.<sup>36</sup> Christian Smith elaborates on this, arguing that because such underlying features can shape moral sensibilities, the violation of these creates a shared sense of outrage and thus grounds for social mobilization.<sup>37</sup> In his analysis of social movements, Aldon Morris presents the useful concept of “movement halfway houses”,<sup>38</sup> which consist of an established group or organization that creates an environment in which collective consciousness is fostered. This idea can be applied to the secret Islamic study groups that were formed in Central Asia during the Soviet Union and continue to thrive under contemporary repression. In this environment, knowledge of previous struggles is acquired, and a common moral foundation is established. William Gamson pursues this idea, labeling the groups “base communities”, and noting that while they are not in and of themselves vehicles of demands for change and collective action, they do provide a setting in which cultural construction can occur.<sup>39</sup> Particularly when this collective identity is based on religion, it “becomes a central part of one’s personal identity, [and] group solidarity and personal honour become indistinguishable”.<sup>40</sup> In this case, members of a community who remain loyal to those under attack for seeking “social justice” are likely to feel that doing so is a part of being true to their faith.

<sup>34</sup> McAdam and Tarrow, “Nonviolence,” (2000) 150.

<sup>35</sup> Gurr, “Civil Strife,” (1968) 1123.

<sup>36</sup> Tilly, *From Mobilization* (1978) 94.

<sup>37</sup> Cited in Richard L. Wood, “Religious Culture and Political Action,” *Sociological Theory* 17.3 (November 1999) 308.

<sup>38</sup> Aldon D. Morris, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, (New York: The Free Press, 1984).

<sup>39</sup> William A. Gamson, “Commitment and Agency in Social Movements,” *Sociological Forum*. 6.1 (March 1991) 38.

<sup>40</sup> Gamson, “Commitment and Agency,” (1991) 46.

Islamism has frequently been used in the developing world to express a rejection of political, social and economic corruption, ratifying Klandermans' notion that successful mobilization campaigns frame their goal more in terms of preventing a collective bad, rather than producing a collective good.<sup>41</sup> Appropriately, according to Esposito, "Islam has been appealed to as an alternative political or social order as well as a yardstick by which existing governments have been judged autocratic, corrupt, economically unjust, or religiously and morally bankrupt".<sup>42</sup>

In understanding how Islamist groups in particular can mobilize, Martin<sup>43</sup> suggests four possible responses for social 'losers' to take in opposing the state: first, groups may make an appeal to a universal value that they argue the state is undermining, such as Islam. This allows them to justify their challenge and find allies among other groups in society. In the case of Central Asia, despite the many deep cleavages that separate the Central Asian societies, Islam is the one unifying factor, and the mobilizing force with which everyone can find sympathy. In the second response, opposition groups may rally around the theme of economic redistribution of the provision of services, a response that is particularly effective where the central state may be strong but corrupt, and where the economic situation in the country, or among certain groups, is deteriorating. Third, opponents of the state can take advantage of divisions within the regime and security forces, by promoting criminal activity like drug trafficking or by coordinating attacks to create discord among regional security actors. This has been seen in Central Asia, where Islamist groups have not only capitalized on the powerful drug trade through the region, but have also coordinated their attacks to foment the greatest contention between the regime's republics.

Based on this theoretical review, it can be said that, although the states are not responsible for the appearance of political Islamic groups, their response to the movement can have a direct impact on the threat such groups pose to the state. This research will argue that state responses to Islamism in Central Asia have created a self-perpetuating cycle in which excessive state security measures have contributed to the degradation of the economic,

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<sup>41</sup> Bert Klandermans, "The Social Construction of Protest and Multiorganizational Fields," *Frontiers of Social Movement Theory*, eds. Aldon D. Morris, Carol McClurg Mueller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 91.

<sup>42</sup> John L Esposito, *Islam and Politics (4<sup>th</sup> Edition)* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1984) 307.

<sup>43</sup> Keith Martin, "Whither Central Asia's Radicals? A Comparative Framework for Examining Political Islam in Central Asia," eds. Lena Jonson and Murad Esenov, *Political Islam and Conflicts in Russia and Central Asia* Stockholm: The Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 1999  
<[www.ca-c.org/dataeng/03.martin.shtml](http://www.ca-c.org/dataeng/03.martin.shtml)>.

political and social situation in their country, thereby creating a state of progressive deprivation in the population. As social dissatisfaction with the state has grown, Islam has emerged as the main mobilizing force of the opposition, benefiting from state social failures and providing an alternative based on shared background and ideology. Regime attempts at broad coercion, in turn, jeopardize state security and continually polarize the population, increasing the numbers of deprived and contributing to the membership of the opposition.

In order to challenge this argument, an alternative of Islam in Central Asia can be proposed by considering an alternative set of state responses. John Esposito has developed a framework of analyzing Islamic revival movements throughout the Muslim world through their various stages, beginning from premodern revival and progressing into contemporary politics.<sup>44</sup> This framework can be applied to the Central Asian context to provide a basis of comparison with the wider Muslim world, and to analyze what might have resulted had Islamic development in Central Asia not been aborted and repressed by the regimes.

In his analysis of the development of Islam and Islamic revival, Esposito describes three stages of Islamic growth that can be compared with the Central Asian experience: premodernist, modernist, and nationalist. According to Esposito, the first of these, the premodernist revival of Islam, took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and operated by: a) bringing into focus the weakened and disorganized condition of the community; b) providing the diagnosis and solution – departure from true Islamic belief and practices required a return to Islam; c) rejecting the blind acceptance of tradition and a recognition that the medieval synthesis of Muslim life included un-Islamic historical accumulation; and d), reemphasizing the belief that socio-moral revival of Islamic society required political action, epitomized by *jihad*, the exertion to realize God's will through moral self-discipline and, when necessary, military combat or warfare.<sup>45</sup> This stage can be compared with the Basmachi rebellions of pre- and early-Soviet Central Asia, as well as the post-Soviet manifestations of the movement in the reincarnated form of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

The next level, modernist revival, developed out of this premodernism to establish continuity between the Islamic heritage and modern change. "Islamist modernists. . . did not simply

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<sup>44</sup> Esposito, *Islam and Politics*, (1984) 308.

<sup>45</sup> Esposito, *Islam and Politics*, (1984) 308.

seek to return to the straight path of Islam but to chart its future directions";<sup>46</sup> by implanting an outlook and attitude that encompassed both the past and the future, modernists countered the sense of weakness and religiocultural backwardness fostered by subjugation to the West, and by emphasizing the dynamic, progressive and rational character of Islam, they enabled new generations of Muslims to embrace the modern civilization with more confidence. In terms of this stage, the Central Asian Jadids epitomized modernist reform, as they operated from within the established structure to promote progressive change and development in the Islamic society. This development was suppressed, however, first by the Soviets and then by their successors. As a result, the modernizing tendencies within the official religious structures in Central Asia were prevented, allowing the peripheral growth of extremist and fundamentalist Islam to continue unchecked.

In the progression to independence, Esposito targets the twentieth century as the political crossroads for the Islamic world, when, following long periods under colonial rule, Islam was invoked in the evolution of nationalism; by appealing to their Islamic heritage and legacy, reformers attempted to restore Muslim pride and self-confidence, and to revitalize the community politically and socially. Because of Central Asia's isolation under Soviet rule, this nationalist turn to Islam came later than in the rest of the Muslim world, and did not take full effect until the end of the twentieth century. However, despite Islam's role during independence movements and its influence on the early development of nationalism, Esposito asserts that for the younger generations of modern, educated nationalists, religion had been a means, not an end in itself,<sup>47</sup> and that once political independence had been achieved, Islam tended to recede from public life. In Central Asia, however, this has not happened, because Islamic relations with the state have not been given the chance to normalize, and the relationship has remained one of conflict, and of oppressor versus oppressed.

Having established the factors behind the spread and significance of Islamism in Central Asia, it becomes possible to assess the potential impact of such a movement on regional stability and security. According to regional and international security actors, the greatest concern is that political Islam will achieve its ultimate objective – the establishment of an Islamic state in Central Asia, which would entail a sustained social revolution. How likely is

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<sup>46</sup> Esposito, *Islam and Politics*, (1984) 58.

<sup>47</sup> Esposito, *Islam and Politics*, (1984) 98.

this to occur? What factors must be identified as precursors to social revolutionary movements?

In her analysis of social change, Theda Skocpol maintains that neither repression of the masses nor the skills of the revolutionary leadership alone can lead to successful social revolutions.<sup>48</sup> A true revolution can take place only when the state is undermined by internal pressures such as war, economic competition, and so on. Consequently, the primary factor in revolutionary transformations, so widely feared among regional and international powers, is not the revolutionaries' strategy, tactics or zeal, but rather the internal rot of the decaying old order. Howard Handelman agrees with Skocpol, noting that "revolutionary opportunities may also develop when the economy deteriorates, standards of living decline, and the government is unable to meet long-standing economic responsibilities to its population".<sup>49</sup> He also adds that war can often play a role in the weakening of the state apparatus, and that "military defeats have frequently delegitimized the regime in power, setting the stage for subsequent revolutions".<sup>50</sup> Although Handelman does not explicitly say so, it is assumed that military engagement extends to non-traditional conflict, primarily terrorism. Islamist groups are able to conduct successful terrorist campaigns against the state, weakening it and facilitating an eventual revolution.

Although social revolution may seem likely according to these conditions, Charles Tilly presents a more detailed examination of the causes of successful social transformation. While he also supports the role of internal degeneration as a cause of revolution, Tilly considers it to be only one factor in the process, and identifies three additional conditions that predicate a successful revolutionary process: First, the revolutionaries must establish themselves as an "alternative sovereignty", and demonstrate that the alternative they present could function as a viable government. Second, significant numbers of the population must support this revolutionary alternative; and third, the established government must be unable to suppress revolutionary opposition.

In the event that a social revolution is not fulfilled, another potential outcome is possible, based on widespread social discontent but insufficient popular commitment to the ideology and objectives of political Islam. Without other avenues of opposition, popular discontent can become mobilized and radicalized around Islamism, leading to social upheaval and

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<sup>48</sup> Theda Skocpol, *Social Revolutions in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994)

<sup>49</sup> Handelman, *Third World Development*, (2002) 205.

<sup>50</sup> Handelman, *Third World Development*, (2002) 204.

removal of those in government. However, without a commitment to ideological objective, or to the vision of that ideology, such an uprising would lead to a protracted social and political upheaval, potentially causing more damage than the 'social revolution' which currently incites so much concern among Western observers.

By combining these existing theories on social movements in a new light and applying them in the specific context of political Islam in Central Asia, a number of hypotheses emerge:

1. Growing levels of deprivation, meaning the reduction of people's abilities to achieve their basic expectations for employment, education, earning, and living opportunities, lead to decreasing levels of state legitimacy and growing social opposition.
2. Social mobilization against the state focuses on a common feature that has consistently remained beyond state control – Islam.
3. Ongoing state repression of moderate Islamic development within the official structure leads to the proliferation of more extreme unofficial Islamist groups.
4. Increasing levels of state coercion against Islamism actually contribute to the strength of the movement, legitimacy of the state continues to erode, eventually leading to a loss of state legitimacy and ultimately to the degeneration of state control.
5. Without the conditions necessary for complete social revolution, violence that does occur will be protracted for lack of common objective and ideology

*The evolution of nationalism in the Muslim world provides a forceful example of the role of Islam in mass mobilization and sociopolitical change.<sup>51</sup>*

### **History of Islam in Central Asia**

Islam in Central Asia has long and deeply-entrenched history, and it formed the civilizational backbone of a region which, while most of Europe was still in the Dark Ages, was scientifically and culturally ascendant. The great cities of Samarkand and Bukhara became important centres on the main East-West caravan route – the Great Silk Road - and following the Arab invasion and importation of Islam, an important Islamic civilization flourished in the territory of Central Asia. This linked the region spiritually and intellectually with the entire Muslim world, from North Africa and the Middle East to South Asia and the East Indies. The nature of Islam in Central Asia, however, maintains certain characteristics as a result of its unique history in the region, and these provide the basis for the study of Islam today, and the emergence of political Islamic groups since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Islam arrived in Central Asia with Arab invaders in the seventh century, and early in its history in the region, two branches of the religion emerged: traditional, conservative and scholarly Islam took hold more quickly in the settled areas, among today's Tajiks and Uzbeks, while a looser, less restrictive interpretation of Islam was promoted by the colonizing Russians as a means of controlling the nomadic peoples, and it was more gradually adopted by the nomads in the regions of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Even today, it is argued that the nomadic Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Turkmen tribes are less Islamized – and consequently less susceptible to Islamic radicalism – than their counterparts in the traditionally settled areas of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.<sup>52</sup>

It is important to note that Islam, as an ideological system, has always been far from monolithic, and its formation has taken place within a struggle of ideas and opinions. In order to understand Islamism in Central Asia today, it is necessary to understand the environment from which it has developed. This section will therefore provide a brief background of information on Islam as it pertains to Central Asia, as well as a historical summary of the struggle between liberal and extremist tendencies.

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<sup>51</sup> Esposito, *Islam and Politics*, (1984) 97.

<sup>52</sup> Rashid, *Jihad*, (2002) 29.

Hanafite teachings took shape in Central Asia in the ninth and tenth centuries, particularly in the eastern part of the region, including the cities of Nasaf, Bukhara and Samarkand.<sup>53</sup> The Hanafi school, and thus Central Asian Islam, is characterized by its accommodation of tradition and the promotion of a tolerant relationship between the religious community and the state, in which the political leaders are not challenged for supremacy in the political realm by the theological elites.<sup>54</sup> One provision of Hanafite teaching that made it particularly well-suited to Central Asia was its recognition of the secondary nature of actions compared with faith.<sup>55</sup> This made it possible for the local people to preserve their old customs and traditions while also adopting Islam as a cultural identity. The result of this was a combination of ‘theoretical Islam’, which firmly and consistently upheld the provisions of traditionalist Islam, and a ‘popular Islam’, inhabited by local beliefs and rituals.

The transmitters and preservers of this ‘theoretical Islam’ were members of the substantial intellectual community, comprising the learned *ulama* (clergy), theologians, priests, teachers and students of religious schools, while the centres of the popular religion were the family, urban and rural communities (*mahalla*), clans, tribes, closed ethnic minorities and religious communities.<sup>56</sup> The *ulama* were connected to the local population, and provided the balance between the teachings of normative Islam and the practice of popular beliefs, while the *madrasahs* (religious schools) were an important component of the ‘theoretical Islam’, and were funded by rulers and dignitaries.

Islamic resistance, for its part, is not new to Central Asia. Long before Russian colonization of the region, an important Islamic civilization flourished in the territory of Central Asia. Keith Martin asserts that, “political Islam – as an integrated part of advanced communal Islam – has had a role in many areas that constitute present-day Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and those parts of Kyrgyzstan located in the Ferghana Valley for centuries”,<sup>57</sup> and much of what is today considered ‘fundamental’ or ‘radical’ Islam was practiced in the Khiva, Khivan and Bukhara khanates.<sup>58</sup> The Ferghana Valley, in the heart of Central Asia,<sup>59</sup> has traditionally

<sup>53</sup> In today’s Uzbekistan.

<sup>54</sup> “Islam and the State,” *International Crisis Group*, (2003) 1.

<sup>55</sup> This meant that verbal admission (*al-iqrar bi-l-lisan*) and internal accord, or understanding of one’s heart (*at-tasdiq bi-l-qalb*), of Allah’s truth, His scriptures and messengers are sufficient for a person to be regarded as a believing Muslim [Muminov, “Schools in Central Asia,” (1999)].

<sup>56</sup> Muminov, “Schools in Central Asia,” (1999).

<sup>57</sup> Martin, “Whither Central Asia’s Radicals?” (1999).

<sup>58</sup> Martin, “Whither Central Asia’s Radicals?” (1999).

<sup>59</sup> Today, the Valley incorporates territory of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in an area 200 miles long and 70 miles wide at its largest point. The fertile valley has also been the home of the largest concentration of

been the center of Central Asia's political and cultural Islam, and has produced saints, scholars, mystics and warriors whose knowledge and learning spread far beyond the territorial boundaries. This legacy linked the region spiritually and intellectually with the entire Muslim world, from North Africa and the Middle East to South Asia and the East Indies, and forged cultural links that would resurface with great impact following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Thus, when Russian expansion began in the sixteenth century, it faced a strong Islamic civilization of feudal rulers, sedentary cultivators and nomadic tribesmen. By the mid-to-late nineteenth century, Russia had established a colonial administration in the region, with Tashkent<sup>60</sup> as the administrative centre, and although the resource- and strategy-driven occupation<sup>61</sup> left Russian colonizers disinclined to interfere heavily in Central Asian affairs, opposition movements continued to flare. In May 1898, an Andizhan uprising of approximately two thousand participants assembled under the green banner of Islam triggered unrest in other towns of the Ferghana Valley, including Kokhund, Namangan and Osh, and was purportedly in response to the harsh colonial regime and the deteriorating social and political situation.<sup>62</sup> Episodic unrest would continue to erupt in the region throughout the period of colonial rule, and a significant legacy of the era was the creation of cohesive and self-aware Islamic reform movements in response to Russian rule.

During this period, while 'popular Islam' remained rooted in tradition, 'theoretical Islam' in Central Asia responded to changes and began a process of religious reform that is rarely credited to Islam in the region. The introduction of Western ideas and technologies that came with Russian colonialism gave rise to a modernist reinterpretation of Islam by the Jadids, one of the many intellectual reform movements that swept the colonized Muslim world in the late nineteenth century. The Jadids sought to reconcile the problems associated with the

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the population, and today there are approximately 10 million inhabitants, composing 20% of the total Central Asian population [Rashid, *Jihad*, (2002) 18].

<sup>60</sup> Today, Tashkent is the capital city of Uzbekistan.

<sup>61</sup> Russia's goals in Central Asia were primarily economic and strategic: to make money and block any attempt by the British to expand their sphere of influence from their imperial base in India [James Critchlow, *Nationalism in Uzbekistan: A Soviet Republic's Road to Sovereignty*, (Oxford: Westview Press, 1991) 8].

<sup>62</sup> Before being overwhelmed by the Russian military, the untrained rebels killed 22 Russian soldiers and wounded 24; as a result of the uprising, there were 226 death sentences and 777 prison sentences. French historians Bennigsen and Lemercier-Quelquejay [*Islam in the Soviet Union*, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967) 32] attributed the events to the influence of Wahhabism, while historians Yusupov and B. V. Lunin ["The Andizhan Uprising of 1898 in Soviet Historical Literature". *Obschestvennye nauki v Uzbekistane*. 1 (1987)] have argued that the uprising was a religious response to the harsh colonial regime and subsequent social degeneration [in Critchlow, *Nationalism*, (1991) 121-122; Rashid, *Jihad* (2002) 20]. The 1898 Andizhan uprising is interesting as an early example of popular opposition to social and political discontent mobilized under Islam.

Muslim exposure to Western modernism by advocating an anti-colonial and pan-Islamic ideology, along with religious reform, modern education and an understanding of the sciences.

As an intellectual movement, the Jadids were concentrated primarily in the urban centres and were largely made up of educated Uzbek and Tatar Muslims. These 'new' Muslims held various positions in the military, state, and academic circles and engaged the modernist discourse without sacrificing their Islamic identity in the process. The motivation for this discourse was the common view that, according to Lazzarini, "the cultural community with which they identified most, the Islamic, was faced with economic, social, intellectual, and political challenges necessitating urgent response that included a willingness to accept the need for an all-embracing reform effort".<sup>63</sup>

In order to pursue the long-term objective of regaining the wealth, power and dignity of the Islamic community, efforts were made to generate public discussion on the structure of social life the role of Islam within it. While the Jadids were generally willing to work within the framework of the empire, they were immediately concerned with reform of the traditional Muslim schools in order to give Central Asians a better chance to compete in the new world of science and technology.<sup>64</sup>

In keeping with their modernist message, the Jadids used modern technology and mediums, such as the periodical, to disseminate the movement's ideas. The embrace of modernism that Jadidism espoused, however, brought the movement into conflict with the Russian colonizers and parts of the conservative Islamic clergy, who considered the Jadids to be reactionary and obscurantist.

Deeper along the spectrum of religious extremism, however, other Central Asian movements manifested a far more outright – and violent – challenge to the state and administration. Following the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, the Muslim population in Central Asia was made to suffer the worst of war-time deprivation and brutality,<sup>65</sup> and out of this environment

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<sup>63</sup> Edward J. Lazzarini, "Beyond Renewal: The Jadid Response to Pressure for Change in the Modern Age," *Muslims in Central Asia: Expressions of Identity and Change*, ed. Jo-Ann Gross (London: Duke University Press, 1992) 151.

<sup>64</sup> For more information, see Critchlow, *Nationalism*, (1991).

<sup>65</sup> Until the Soviet army was able to break through White forces in Siberia to reach Central Asia, the independent Tashkent Soviet brutalized the population, attacking a Muslim autonomous government set up in

arose the Basmachi movement<sup>66</sup> of armed opposition to the Soviets, which incorporated conservative Muslim guerrilla groups from a number of Central Asian regions. The first of the Basmachi rebellions, consisting of independent guerrilla groups led by mullahs and clan leaders, erupted in February, 1918, and fighting continued sporadically until 1929. Finally, however, the movement's internal divisions and incoherent leadership and ideology weakened them against the Soviets,<sup>67</sup> and the movement was effectively quelled.

The Bolshevik revolution that swept through the colonized Russian territory in 1917 heralded the beginning of seventy years of Soviet rule. Although it did not crush Islam in Central Asia, Soviet rule nevertheless had a profound impact on the religion. The course of Islamic reform, its role in society and in politics were all deeply affected by Soviet policies, and many of the unique characteristics of Central Asian Islam today can be attributed to this period.

In addition to the Basmachi insurgencies of the early Soviet period, the presence of large numbers of Jadid intellectuals in the new communist hierarchy was an early impediment to ideological consolidation. While the Basmachis engaged in violent confrontation with the new administration, the Jadids pursued their objective of initiating change from within, and for some time formed a considerable 'passive' opposition within the system.<sup>68</sup> However, under Stalin's intensified anti-religious campaign, the Jadids were targeted and purged from their positions of influence. The consequence of this, according to the International Crisis Group, was that "the Bolsheviks transformed the social and political milieu in which Islam existed in Central Asia and cut short its modernizing tendencies",<sup>69</sup> and the reform movements that had just begun were prematurely aborted, preventing the development of a modernist study of Islam in Central Asia.

As part of its attempt to restructure the social networks in Central Asia, the Soviet administration launched a complete attack on Islamic institutions and practices, a campaign which intensified in the late 1920s and 1930s during Stalin's purges and the 'revolution from above'. The ensuing drive against religion resulted in the destruction of religious literature,

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Kokhund, in the Ferghana Valley, causing significant damage to the city and its population [Critchlow, *Nationalism*, (1991) 11].

<sup>66</sup> "Basmachi", or 'bandits' is a title applied by the Bolsheviks to the armed rebels.

<sup>67</sup> Rashid, *Jihad*, (2002) 35.

<sup>68</sup> An example of this position was their 1923 resistance to the campaign of 'anti-religious agitation', which led to a five year delay in the implementation of the programme [Critchlow, *Nationalism*, (1991) 70].

<sup>69</sup> "Islam and the State," *International Crisis Group* (2003) 1.

the closure of religious institutions of learning, and the physical elimination of transmitters of 'theoretical Islam'. During this period, the number of mosques in the region dropped from 27,000 before the Bolshevik Revolution to 1,000 in the 1940s,<sup>70</sup> and Islamic clergy members were imprisoned and/or shot.

As Muminov argues in his analysis of Central Asian religion, Soviet religious repression resulted in "the actual transformation of Islam, which was reduced to the level of 'popular' religion ('everyday Islam')".<sup>71</sup> Consequently, although official repression did not succeed in eliminating Islam from Central Asia, it did produce significant changes to the role of Islam in Central Asian society and what it meant to the region's populations. With a ban on the publication of religious texts and public proselytizing, Islamic learning was pushed underground and transmitted orally, according to preexisting tradition. In fact, it was this 'popular', unofficial Islam that sustained the faith through the Soviet period, and allowed it to survive and adapt to Soviet repressions. A tradition of unofficial religious observance flourished, with a proliferation of clandestine mosques, underground prayer groups, and itinerant mullahs. People ran madrassahs from their homes, assembling at night for religious ceremonies and prayer, and concealing visits to shrines and tombs by going during Communist holidays.<sup>72</sup> The Ferghana Valley became a notable centre of such unofficial religious activity, and hosted a large number of itinerate mullahs and home madrassahs. Indeed, children from all over Central Asia were sent to the Ferghana Valley for religious studies. These underground activities created the "base communities" for future Islamism, both by consolidating a common heritage and ideology among Central Asians and by incorporating the feature of resistance into the popular practice of Islam. In fact, it was precisely from these unofficial study groups in the Ferghana Valley that the early manifestations of political Islam would appear at the end of the Soviet period.

Thus, despite Soviet controls and widespread persecution, Islam remained an essential part of Central Asian identity, although it was adherence to customs and tradition, rather than observance of Islamic ritual, which defined one as Muslim. As Aleksei Malashenko explains, "Islam has always been a main factor of the religious and cultural identity of Central Asia, even if this self-identification existed unofficially under the Soviet

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<sup>70</sup> Hooman Peimani, Regional Security and the Future of Central Asia: The Competition of Iran, Turkey, and Russia (London: Praeger, 1998) 55.

<sup>71</sup> Muminov, "Schools in Central Asia," (1999).

<sup>72</sup> Rashid, Jihad (2002) 40.

government".<sup>73</sup> This gradually became recognized by the Soviet administration, which, much like the Russian colonizers that preceded it, began to see popular Islam as an opportunity to harness the loyalty of the people.

During WWII, religious repression softened as the Soviet administration recognized the potential of Islam as a means to consolidate support among Central Asians. An official Islamic body was established under strict government control, and this became the Spiritual Administration for the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (*Dukhovnoe upravlenie musulman Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana*). Based in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, the body controlled a small number of officially approved mosques and was permitted to conduct seminaries for the training of 'official' ulama.<sup>74</sup> In addition, four Muslim 'spiritual directorates'<sup>75</sup> were established, and were used as a convenient means of channeling religious activity through controlled mechanisms, and for advancing foreign policy interests in outside Muslim countries. The manipulation of the official clergy by the state, however, was widely recognized by the population, and as a result there "was a distrust of 'official' Islam by Muslim believers that led to bifurcation of Muslim religious activity, with many spurning the established religion in favour of an underground variant led by unregistered mullahs, the so-called 'parallel' Islam".<sup>76</sup> The legacy of this would be a lasting distrust of official religious structures, which would consequently become increasingly sterile as a means of contact between the state and its people.

In the late twentieth century, as the Soviet Union began its process of decline, a number of factors combined to create an environment for the development of Islamist groups in Central Asia. There has been considerable debate over the importance of internal versus external factors in the rise of Islamism in post-Soviet Central Asia; however, it seems clear that, while the internal situation was primed for the manifestations of political Islam, the influence of external factors in the importation ideology and resources cannot be ignored. It was the combination of external forces, meeting with internal dynamics at an appropriate point in their development, which allowed for the first manifestations of Islamism in Central Asia.

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<sup>73</sup> Malashenko, "Islam and Politics," (1999).

<sup>74</sup> "Islam and the State," *International Crisis Group* (2003) 2.

<sup>75</sup> These became the precursors of today's 'religious boards'.

<sup>76</sup> Critchlow, *Nationalism*, (1991) 174.

With the adoption of Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost in the late 1980s,<sup>77</sup> the Soviet Union began a process of massive reform and redefinition. In Central Asia, as central control weakened under these new policies, "Central Asians began rediscovering their heritage. . . [and] Islam emerged as a major focus for people seeking a new identity".<sup>78</sup> Although the policies of perestroika did not include the lifting of restrictions against religious practice, the people of Central Asia interpreted it differently; to the increasingly autonomous republics, and especially Uzbekistan, Islam became both a tool of nationalism and a search for post-colonial identity. Rashid explains that, "as the Soviet Empire fell apart, the people of Central Asia, who had been forced to renounce or hide their religion for seventy-four years, at last saw an opportunity to reconnect spiritually and culturally with their Islamic past".<sup>79</sup>

Although this rapid religious resurgence tended more towards the restoration of Muslim rights to worship, it was also accompanied by a new kind of Islamic movement, one which saw Islam as a potential political force in the context of the weakening Soviet administration, and which found support among sections of society that had been excluded from Soviet modernization programs and urbanization. Anna Matveeva addresses the significance of this period in the rise of political Islam by remarking that, "although Islam as a faith and a cultural force has had a continual influence on Muslim parts of the USSR, its political role was virtually non-existent until the 1990s".<sup>80</sup> Focused in the Ferghana Valley region, new Islamic groups appeared, often emerging from the illegal study groups that had existed under Soviet repression, and frequently demonstrating radical opposition to the secular state.<sup>81</sup>

Predictably, the Soviet administration was quick to condemn these early manifestations of political Islam; the severity of their response, however, led to confrontation, violence, and the appearance of extremist and terrorist groups. As Rashid observes, "the more the Soviets tried to stamp it out, the more it spread throughout Central Asia as an act of ethnic and regional as well as religious resistance".<sup>82</sup> The combination of rising nationalism and declining central control provided the spark for a series of uprisings, particularly in

<sup>77</sup> Perestroika was a program of economic, political, and social restructuring, presented at the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress in 1986; glasnost was a policy within the wider perestroika programme, and was intended to promote openness in public discussion and media about problems of the past and present.

<sup>78</sup> "Islam and the State," International Crisis Group (2003) 2.

<sup>79</sup> Rashid, Jihad (2002) 5.

<sup>80</sup> Anna Matveeva, "The Islamist Challenge in Post-Soviet Eurasia," Political Islam and Conflicts in Russia and Central Asia, eds. Lena Jonson and Muran Esenov (Sweden: The Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 1999) <[www.ca-c.org/dataeng/04.matveeva.shtml](http://www.ca-c.org/dataeng/04.matveeva.shtml)>.

<sup>81</sup> "Islam and the State," International Crisis Group Asia Report No. 59 (Osh/Brussels, 10 July 2003) 4.

<sup>82</sup> Ahmed Rashid, Jihad (2002) 43.

Uzbekistan and the Ferghana Valley region. In December 1988, during spontaneous mass demonstrations against the persecution of Islam in Tashkent, students made Muslim religious gestures<sup>83</sup> and waved what appeared to be the green banner of Islam.<sup>84</sup> This caused special concern to authorities, as it indicated the intertwining of Islam and secular cultural issues.<sup>85</sup> The following years saw a degeneration of state control and growing social discontent, increasingly mobilized around Islam,<sup>86</sup> and with independence in 1991, this became a confrontation over the nature of the new states. As social and economic conditions continued to deteriorate, this conflict was brought further into the centre of the political arena.

When independence came in 1991, the states of Central Asia were unprepared for the changes and obligations that it entailed. Having been entirely dependent on Russia for the development and distribution of many of their resources, Central Asia had little infrastructure or capacity to sustain itself independently. Moreover, population levels in the region were the fastest rising in all of the former Soviet Union, and it quickly became apparent that the new Central Asian states would not be able to support these numbers. Subsequently, despite early optimism, Central Asian living standards began to plummet shortly after independence; inflation soared, and there was a shortage of raw materials available for industry and agriculture. Poverty was concentrated within the rural, agrarian regions of Central Asia, and these also became strongholds of the Islamist movement. General attitudes toward Islam also recognized the steady growth of Islam in both the public and private affairs of the Central Asian countries; in the 1990s, studies found that eighty-six percent of Kyrgyz were sure that Islam's role in public affairs would continue to grow,<sup>87</sup> while in 1990, over fifty percent of Uzbeks believed that "Islam alone is the solution to Uzbekistan's many problems".<sup>88</sup> Accordingly, the small, informal Islamist groups developing at the time, including *Adolat* and *Islam lashkarlari*,<sup>89</sup> consisted mostly of young men, and sought to fill the vacuum left by the weakened state. Some of these created their

<sup>83</sup> Gestures included the *fatiha*, and reciting the opening verse of the Koran.

<sup>84</sup> Green is a very significant colour in Islam, and the Holy Banner – the most important relic of Islam – is green with golden embroidery.

<sup>85</sup> Critchlow, *Nationalism*, (1991) 175.

<sup>86</sup> The 1988 demonstrations in Tashkent were followed in May by youth riots in Ashgabat over unemployment; in June 1989, Uzbeks and Mekhetian Turks battled over land and housing in the Ferghana Valley, as were riots in Dushanbe between Tajiks and Armenians in February the following year; June 1990 saw the most violent ethnic clashes in southern Kyrgyzstan (the eastern part of the Ferghana Valley), between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz; also, in September 1991, in Namangan, Islamic militants led a rebellion against the new Uzbek president Islam Karimov [Rashid, *Jihad*, (2002) 52.

<sup>87</sup> *Svobodnye gory*. (Bishkek) 5 January 1993.

<sup>88</sup> R.D Kangas, "The Three Faces of Islam in Uzbekistan," *Transition* 1. 24 (29 December 1995) 19.

<sup>89</sup> These groups will be discussed in further detail in the next section.

own "Islamic militia" to establish order on the streets, and imposed elements of *Sharia*<sup>90</sup> on the population<sup>91</sup> where it was deemed that the state had failed in its obligations. These early groups lacked the organization and popular organization to become stable political organs; however, state responses to these early movements proved crucial to their development.

While the Islamic revival was taking place within Central Asia as a response to the faltering Soviet administration, a host of external factors also began to influence the Islamic resurgence. These factors are vital to the analysis of Central Asian Islamism today, as their impact has been considerable. Rashid takes this into account when he acknowledges that "Central Asians embraced Islam not only to reestablish their own ethnic and cultural identity but to reconnect with their Muslim neighbours to the south, who had been cut off from them ever since Stalin closed the borders between the Soviet Union and the rest of the world".<sup>92</sup> When the Soviet borders began to open in the 1980s, Central Asia was once again able to communicate and interact with the wider Muslim world.

Ironically, one of the earliest opportunities for the exchange of Islamic ideology came at the behest of the Soviet administration itself. In the 1980s, thousands of Central Asian Muslims were drafted into the Red Army to fight against the Afghan mujahedeen<sup>93</sup> in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The invasion brought the issues of Islamic identity and its struggle against secular, outside forces, to the forefront in Central Asia.<sup>94</sup> The war also introduced Central Asian Muslims to the wider Muslim world, and many were deeply affected by the Islamic dedication of the Afghan mujahedeen, and Soviet Central Asian soldiers taken prisoner often joined with their opponents against the Red Army.<sup>95</sup> This served to establish military and sponsorship ties that would come into play with later radical Islamic groups operating in Central Asia.

Also in the late 1980's Central Asian students began to react to the controlled Soviet religious education system by covertly travel abroad for religious training. In particular, Deobandi madrassahs in Pakistan attracted large numbers of Central Asians, and began to

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<sup>90</sup> *Sharia* is Islamic law.

<sup>91</sup> "Islam and the State," *International Crisis Group*, (2003) 4.

<sup>92</sup> Rashid, *Jihad* (2002) 5.

<sup>93</sup> Translated: 'holy warriors'. The Afghan mujahedeen were the opposition groups that fought against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan from 1979 – 1989, and then in the following civil war. Muslims from all over the Muslim world came to Afghanistan to join with the Afghan mujahedeen.

<sup>94</sup> Martin, "Whither Central Asia's Radicals?" (1999).

<sup>95</sup> Rashid, *Jihad* (2002) 43.

reserve places especially for these students.<sup>96</sup> Low levels of religious education throughout most of Central Asia also had an effect in making the region vulnerable to radical external influences. Guli Yuldasheva has astutely observed that “the most sensitive to radical Islamic teaching, by virtue of their traditional character and lack of religious education, are the rural population (60%) and the youth, constituting two thirds of the population”.<sup>97</sup> Missionaries entering Central Asia from the outside Muslim world encountered no moderate ideological opposition and were able to exert these demographics to their advantage.

As Soviet controls relaxed in Central Asia, “the Muslim Turkic and Persian people sought to reestablish themselves as part the greater *ummah* (global Muslim community) by emphasizing the Muslim heritage”.<sup>98</sup> Korans, Islamic literature, and money arrived, along with preachers and missionaries, as other Muslim countries, including Saudi Arabia, Oman, Egypt, Kuwait, Iran, Turkey and Pakistan, tried to win adherents to their particular interpretation of Islam in what was regarded as virgin territory. Saudi Arabia, in particular, became the promoter of Islamic radicalism through its proxy groups in the region, and many of the Sunni radical groups that emerged in Central Asia in the 1990s were inspired or funded by Saudi Wahhabi groups.<sup>99</sup> With the rapid influx of money and encouragement from these outside sources, thousands of new mosques and dozens of new madrassahs and other institutions appeared throughout the region, along with a proliferation of religious literature, which filled the ideological vacuum created by the state. Such contacts brought about a certain Islamic pluralism in Central Asia, as the new sects and religious groups appeared where there had previously been none. The mainstream Islam practiced in Central Asia, meanwhile, had little to offer in terms of opposition, as it continued to reflect the thinking of the early 1900s, when its development had been cut off. This meant that while much of the new ideology entering the region from outside was incompatible with the traditional tolerance of popular Central Asian Islam, it became a credible alternative for those in the population that were disenfranchised and opposed to the existing state, and was able to fulfill the ideological mobilization that socialism had failed to access. The political extremism and religious terrorism that was taking place in other Muslim countries had found its way to Central Asia.

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<sup>96</sup> Deobandism is a Sunni Islamic revivalist sect which, in combination with other branches of Sunni Islam, helped radicalize Islamic thought in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and now the Ferghana Valley. In the 1990s, Pakistan’s Deobandi madrassahs played a significant role in the education of the Taliban’s leadership, incorporating jihad as a major element of its programme [Rashid, *Jihad*, (2002) 44].

<sup>97</sup> Rashid, *Jihad*, (2002) 143.

<sup>98</sup> “Is Radical Islam Inevitable in Central Asia?” *ICG Asia Report No.72*. (Osh/ Brussels, 22 December 2003) 3

<sup>99</sup> Peimani, *Regional Security*, (1998) 52.

The earliest and most traumatic example of mobilized Islamist opposition was quick to develop. The Tajik civil war, which ran from 1992 until 1997, was a conflict about regionalism and resources more than anything else, but Islamic slogans were used to mobilize the opposition under the Islamic Renaissance Party. The war proved to be extremely destructive to Tajikistan, claiming the lives of between sixty and one hundred thousand people and displacing nearly seven hundred thousand others.<sup>100</sup> The legacy of the Tajik civil war continues to haunt the region as an example of the possibility of political Islam as an alternative source of authority and state opposition.

### **Conclusion**

Islamism in Central Asia is a product of internal and external forces that have combined over time to create a crucible of concerns in the region. Despite the quiescent nature of popular Islam in Central Asia, the abortive effects of Communism led to a developmentally immature Islamic society, one which had been cleaved of its theoretical component and left as little more than a staple of Central Asian tradition. When Communism ended, then, in the late twentieth century, Central Asians had little native structure to return to, save for Islam, which provided them with an identity apart from that of their colonizers, and an ideology on which to base their distinct culture. The influx of missionaries from the wider Muslim world entered this context of Islamic revival, and offered new ideas, literature, and abundant sources of funding; they found a region that was more open to new interpretations of Islam, particularly as a source of stability and answers in a time of rapid change and uncertainty. It was from this medium of upheaval that the new Central Asian Islamist groups took root, and from which a few would go on to change the face of Central Asian politics and society.

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<sup>100</sup> Approximately one tenth of the country (600,000) was internally displaced, and 80,000 fled the country altogether ["Islam and the State," *International Crisis Group*, (2003) 2].

### **Central Asian Islamist Groups**

Although the early years of independence in Central Asia were marked by the appearance of Islamist groups, the majority of these groups failed to establish any long-term influence, and most were quickly suppressed by the state regimes. Regional and clan loyalties, which remain firmly entrenched in Central Asian society, prevented Islamists from creating overarching identity and appeal, and forced the movement to adopt an enclave nature. Nevertheless, such groups did form, focused in the Ferghana Valley region, and a few were able to establish significant influence in Central Asia. Furthermore, as a result of external phenomena and internal pressure, Islamists have begun to cooperate, and there are indications of coordinated activity. This signifies a new stage in the development of Islamism in Central Asia, which, to be properly understood, needs to be examined according to its contemporary sources, as well as from the early Islamist groups of Central Asia.

Islamism in Central Asia has been characterized in large part by its internal dissonance, and groups and movements have adopted varying degrees of extremism in their ideology and method. Islamist groups of both Jadid and Basmachi traditions have appeared, with some, such as the Islamic Renaissance Party, striving to achieve their goals through participation in the official structure, and other, more extremist movements have been anti-establishment, and work to undermine the state structures in order to establish a new 'Islamic' society on the basis of Islamic law (Sharia). Even within this latter subcategory of Islamist groups, methodology differs, with some, such as Adolat and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, embracing more extreme violence as a means of pursuing their objectives, and others, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, eschewing violence as an approach. All of them, however, have in common three characteristics: first, they face inherent limitations of weak organization and lack of popular ideological support; second, they have each faced early and harsh repression; and third, each has been transformed – for better or for worse – as a result of the state responses that the movement has engendered.

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<sup>101</sup> ICG interview, Kyrgyzstan, July 2003: "Is Radical Islam Inevitable?" ICG Asia Report, (2003) 11.

## Wahhabism

Wahhabism, an extremist sect of Islam that has been associated with many Islamist extremist groups, originated in Saudi Arabia and is a puritanical offshoot of the Sunni branch of Islam.<sup>102</sup> The movement first arrived in the Ferghana Valley in 1912, but because it broke with the liberal and tolerant Islamic traditions of the region, had never found great popularity. However, in the 1980s it gradually found a greater foothold in the region through the Afghan war, as Saudi funds flowed to Wahhabi leaders of the Afghan Mujahedeen. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Saudi missionaries, often descendents of those who left the Ferghana Valley after the Bolshevik Revolution, returned to Central Asia and funded the construction of mosques and madrassahs in the tradition of puritanical Wahhabism. Today, political Islamic movements “such as the Taliban, HT, and even the IMU come from the new Deobandi-Wahhabi tradition, which sees the seizure of power only as a way to impose Sharia and transform social behaviour”.<sup>103</sup>

Real Wahhabism, however, invalidates the traditions and customs that characterize Central Asian Islam. Wahhabis advocate a strict adherence to the laws and norms of the Koran and *sunna*,<sup>104</sup> and strive to reduce shrine worship and other local practices.<sup>105</sup> Because it is so incompatible with indigenous Central Asian religious practice, Wahhabism does not incite widespread appeal, despite the reactionary response it has garnered from the state.

Nevertheless, in Central Asian “official media, as well as in common parlance, ‘Wahhabism’ has come to represent all fundamentalist Islam – or, even more broadly, anything that could possibly be construed as political Islam”.<sup>106</sup> The tendency of officials to label strong religious figures ‘Wahhabi’ creates confusion, as those accused of Wahhabism are often at odds with the actual followers of the movement. Official discourse frequently fails to distinguish between militant and non-militant, or radical and non-radical Muslims. Consequently, the term has lost a great deal of its import and use in determining the nature of Islamist activity in Central Asia.

<sup>102</sup> Wahhabi and Deobandi ideas have been the basis of many of the radical, militant Islamist movements that emerged in the 1990s, such as al-Qaeda and the IMU (which will be discussed later). See “Is Radical Islam Inevitable?” *ICG Asia Report*, (2003) 9.

<sup>103</sup> Rashid, *Jihad*, (2002) 122.

<sup>104</sup> The *sunna* is the body of traditional social and legal custom and practice that constitutes proper observance of Islam. In the 8<sup>th</sup> Century, the sunna of Mohammed was codified as the *Hadith*.

<sup>105</sup> “Is Radical Islam Inevitable?” *ICG Asia Report*, (2003) 9.

<sup>106</sup> Martin, “Whither Central Asia’s Radicals?” (1999).

## **Jadid Tradition**

### **Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP)**

The All-Union Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) was founded in 1990 – before the breakup of the Soviet Union – in the Russian city of Astrakhan. In its earliest form, the party exhibited considerable similarities with the pre-Soviet Jadid movement, both in terms of its appeal for Islamic reform and in its suppression by state authorities. As a result of state responses, however, the party became more radicalized and, for a time, symbolized extreme Islamic opposition during the Tajik civil war. Following its integration with the state structure, the moderated IRP once again came under state controls and as a result, it has been eclipsed by the more radical demands of other Islamist groups operating beyond the scope of state controls.

Initially, the IRP was created to protect the Islamic identity of all Soviet Muslims, and it strived to raise Islamic awareness among Muslims in the Soviet Union and represent them in a coordinated stance toward the Communist regime. It criticized the official clergy for its lack of militancy, and sought the establishment of an advanced Muslim educational network.<sup>107</sup> However, following independence, the IRP was weakened by the development of regional structures, and problems quickly arose within the party branches in Central Asia. The party was explicitly condemned by the four *muftiyyat* (official religious administrations) and the authorities of Soviet Central Asia, and laws were passed in nearly each of the republics, banning political activity in the name of Islam.<sup>108</sup> In Central Asia, the groups' success varied throughout the region, and it found itself unable to establish popular support outside of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In Kazakhstan, the IRP was displaced by Alash Orda,<sup>109</sup> most likely due to the fact that its primary constituency was non-Kazakh Muslims (Uzbeks and Uighurs).<sup>110</sup> The same was true in Kyrgyzstan, where the few IRP members seem to have been Uzbeks from Osh.<sup>111</sup> In short, according to Olivier Roy, “the IRP took root in areas where conservative Islam has traditionally been strong, not in the tribal and more superficially Islamized populations (Turkmen, Kazakhs, and Kyrgyz)”.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>107</sup> Olivier Roy, The Foreign Policy of the Central Asian Islamic Renaissance Party (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2000) 4.

<sup>108</sup> Roy, Islamic Renaissance Party (2000) 2.

<sup>109</sup> Alash Orda was a Kazakh nationalist party that predated Soviet rule.

<sup>110</sup> Roy, Islamic Renaissance Party (2000) 2; Rashid, Jihad (2002) 102.

<sup>111</sup> Roy, Islamic Renaissance Party (2000) 2.

<sup>112</sup> Roy, Islamic Renaissance Party (2000) 2.

When civil war broke out in Tajikistan in 1992, the IRP formed the backbone of the opposition to the Communist regime, and it collaborated with a number of militant Islamic groups, including Adolat. Its nature as a coalition of different ideas and personalities allowed it to survive the changing circumstances until the peace accord in 1997. This pluralism, however, which ranges from Islamists of various tendencies to those simply opposed to the government, weakened the movement, which was forced to compromise in order to satisfy its various constituents. Consequently, when the IRP was invited to take part in the Tajik government as part of the 1997 peace agreement, it lacked a clear identity and purpose, and was forced to make a number of important concessions to the Tajik government as part of the peace agreement. This has created dissatisfaction among the more orthodox Muslims of Tajikistan, who would favour the creation of a more Islamic regime, and who view the IRP as having sold out to the government; as Peimani argues, for many Tajiks, “the Islamic opposition does not represent a clear set of religious and political beliefs; nor does it have a common model to build”.<sup>113</sup> In the parliamentary elections of 1999, the Islamic Renaissance Party won only eight percent of the vote, and received just two seats nationwide;<sup>114</sup> although it has been widely agreed that these numbers were most likely manipulated, it is clear that, with the exception of an extensive rural support network,<sup>115</sup> approval for the party had declined since the early 1990s.

In addition to the compromises that have been necessary for the survival of the IRP and its role in the official opposition, the Islamic party has found itself increasingly under attack by the Tajik government. Since the 1997 peace accords assigned a thirty percent quota of positions in the executive branch of the government to the IRP, its representation has been steadily decreased by the president and his administration, to the point where, by 2003, only a handful of IRP members and opposition leaders remained in government positions. The administration had sought to undermine the IRP in other ways, by manipulating the ongoing ‘War on Terrorism’ to exert pressure on the party.<sup>116</sup> As a result, “[the IRP], potentially the most influential opposition party, walks a fine line, still concerned to avoid accusations of

<sup>113</sup> Peimani, *Regional Security*, (1998) 56.

<sup>114</sup> “Islam and the State,” *International Crisis Group* (2003) 13.

<sup>115</sup> In addition to the two seats in parliament and a number of government posts, the IRP’s grassroots network, which is strongest among the Gharmis in the Karategin Valley and in the Kurgan-Tyube area, is probably unmatched by any other political party. The IRP has also reportedly made recent inroads in the south of Khatlon province, and has been growing in parts of northern Tajikistan, particularly around Isfara and Chorku. See “Islam and the State,” *International Crisis Group* (2003) 21.

<sup>116</sup> “Islam and the State,” *International Crisis Group* (2003) 14. The section “State Responses” will discuss government responses to Islamism in greater detail.

extremism".<sup>117</sup> This leads to concern among experts, who argue that, "with the emasculation of the IRP, more radical groups have gained influence, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir",<sup>118</sup> and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

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### **Basmachi Revival**

Although the IRP had initially found rapid success in the Ferghana region of Uzbekistan, its momentum was lost when its leader, Abdullah Utaev, disappeared in 1992; it is widely believed that he was kidnapped and killed by the Uzbek secret service.<sup>119</sup> The Uzbek IRP was subsequently replaced by more radical religious groups in the Ferghana Valley, including Tauba (Repentance), Islam Lashkarlary (Fighters for Islam) and Adolat (Justice). These, and other subsequent militant groups differed from the other Islamic revivalist parties and from the IRP in that they had no respect for official Islam, no patience for tradition, and no fear of the political regime, which they sought to overthrow. Although some of these groups, with their militant and often terrorist activities, are clearly a concern to state security, their strength and impact has come about as a result of the excessive policies that have characterized state responses to the movement.

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### **Adolat/ Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan**

One of these new extremist movements, Adolat, found prominence in the Uzbek region of Namangan, in the Ferghana Valley. Although the differences in objectives and methods between Adolat and the IRP would later become more pronounced, both the IRP and Adolat initially came to represent the new Islamism in their respective republics; their successes in the early 1990s have equally been attributed to the collapse of state power and the desire for order in the contexts of rising instability and uncertainty.<sup>120</sup> The International Crisis Group explains that, "what was really important for the initial success of these groups was that they had leaders who were willing to capitalize on frustration and use Sharia and Islam in general to address what were essentially problems of law and order, social change, and governance".<sup>121</sup> In Uzbekistan, the leaders of Adolat accomplished this in the Ferghana Valley a few months before the dissolution of the Soviet Union; what started as a relatively

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<sup>117</sup> "Tajikistan's Politics: Confrontation or Consolidation?" *International Crisis Group Asia Briefing* (19 May 2004) 13.

<sup>118</sup> "Islam and the State," *International Crisis Group* (2003) i.

<sup>119</sup> Rashid, *Jihad* (2002) 102.

<sup>120</sup> "Is Radical Islam Inevitable?" *International Crisis Group* (2003) 14.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.* 14.

peaceful attempt to raise Islamic consciousness at the community level quickly turned violent and ultimately set in motion a chain of events that would lead to the creation of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), one of the most militant Islamist movements in Central Asia.

The leaders of Adolat, Tohir Abdouhalilovitch Yuldashev and Jumamboi Ahmadzhanovitch Khojaev (who later adopted the name of his hometown, becoming Juma Namangani), had both served in Afghanistan in the Red Army and had admired the mujahedeen; eventually they both became 'born-again' Muslims and participated in the Central Asian underground. In 1990, with funding from Saudi Wahhabis and the support of approximately five thousand followers, the newly-formed Adolat began to build mosques and madrassahs in Namangan, underlining their efforts with signs proclaiming "Long Live Islamic State".<sup>122</sup> The group began to impose strict Islamic practices in Namangan, including regular prayers and veiling of women,<sup>123</sup> and neighbourhood watch committees were established to combat the rising crime in the area.<sup>124</sup> In essence, Adolat was able to apply Sharia informally as a type of vigilante reaction to criminal activities and the government's inability to control them.

Many of Yuldashev's supporters were former members of Uzbekistan's Islamic Renaissance Party, and had become disillusioned with the IRP's refusal to demand an Islamic revolution. Mosques and madrassahs run by Adolat began to appear throughout the Ferghana Valley, including Andijan, Margilan, Kuva, Fergana City, and Osh, and this undermined the influence of the IRP in that region. Initially, the government ministers in Tashkent had little idea of the circumstances in Namangan, and knew less about the militants at work or their objectives; for a time, they were content to accept Yuldashev's rule in the region. This changed, however, when Yuldashev began to openly confront the Uzbek government, stipulating that Sharia be implemented on a national level.

In 1991, the leaders of Adolat challenged the government of Uzbekistan with the following inflammatory demands:

We set five conditions which must be fulfilled by the authorities. First, Islam Karimov must come here. Second, he must swear his faithfulness to Islam on the Koran and now proclaim an Islamic state. Third, visiting mosques must become compulsory for all Muslims including leaders of the state who must pray together with the population. Fourth, Friday

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<sup>122</sup> Rashid, *Jihad* (2002) 138.

<sup>123</sup> Women were made to give up their traditional colorful clothing and instead wear head-to-toe white veils.

<sup>124</sup> For more information, see Rashid, *Jihad* (2002) 138.

should be announced as a day off and fifth to reopen religious schools immediately.<sup>125</sup>

In response, Uzbek president Islam Karimov travelled to Namangan in April 1991 to debate the issues. The meeting quickly degenerated into a fighting match as Karimov predictably refused these terms, and the president left the city humiliated and furious. Many experts attribute much of Uzbekistan's overly defensive attitude towards Islam back to this event,<sup>126</sup> indeed, the events of 1991 marked the beginning of outright confrontation between the state and Islamist groups in Uzbekistan, the effects of which continue to be felt throughout Central Asia today.

By the end of 1991, Yuldashev and his followers had attacked the Communist Party of Uzbekistan (CPU) headquarters and had instigated a movement they called 'jihad' to remove Karimov from office; in response, in 1992 Adolat and other similar Islamic groups were outlawed and suppressed in Uzbekistan. Several Adolat followers were arrested in the subsequent crackdown, and those who escaped, including Yuldashev and Namangani, fled to Tajikistan and enlisted with the Islamic Renaissance Party there, which at that point was on the cusp of civil war. Once fighting began, Yuldashev left for Afghanistan; from there he continued to travel and conduct tactical research with assistance and funding from the significant numbers of Uzbeks who had fled during the Basmachi rebellion of nearly a century before. These Uzbeks had settled in Saudi Arabia and become citizens, and were now committed Wahhabis; they formed a considerable part of Yuldashev's financial support network.<sup>127</sup> During this time (1992-1997), Yuldashev worked to reorganize the underground cells of Adolat in the Ferghana Valley and in Surkhandarya (near the Tajik border), and these would later come to play an important role in future Islamist incursions into Uzbekistan.

While Yuldashev was travelling, Namangani remained in southern Tajikistan with approximately thirty Uzbek militants, as well as a few Arabs serving as liaisons between Saudi Islamist foundations and Adolat. Within months, their numbers swelled to over two hundred, joined by young men fleeing the persecution that had accompanied the suppression of Islamic activity in Uzbekistan, and Afghan Arabs fleeing the civil war there. The IRP of

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<sup>125</sup> Oleg Yakubov, The Pack of Wolves: The Blood Trail of Terror (Moscow: Veche Publishers, 1999) 256. This book was a propaganda treatise published by the Uzbek government, and so must be considered critically. Nevertheless, it has reprinted some interesting speeches of that period.

<sup>126</sup> See "Islam and the State," International Crisis Group (2003) 4; Rashid, Jihad (2002) 149.

<sup>127</sup> Rashid, Jihad (2002) 149.

Tajikistan augmented Namangani's forces with Tajik guerrillas, which fought with the opposition until the ceasefire in 1997. Namangani, however, opposed the peace settlement and broke from the IRP leadership, who called for an end to the jihad, and he retained a core group of guerrillas at his camp in the Tavildara Valley in Tajikistan.

Following the end of the civil war, Yuldashev returned to Tajikistan to reunite with Namangani, and a new round of attacks was launched against the Uzbek regime. On 2 December 1997, an Uzbek army captain was beheaded in Namangan, and his head displayed outside his office. On 11 December, the former chairman of a collective farm and his wife were also beheaded, and on 19 December, three Uzbek policemen were killed in a shootout with Islamists.<sup>128</sup> Karimov subsequently launched another crackdown, reportedly targeting "any man with a beard".<sup>129</sup> Over a thousand people were subsequently arrested in the Ferghana Valley, and on 2 May 1998 Karimov addressed the Uzbek parliament to call for tougher repression against Islamists. Following the 1997 events in Namangan, the government offensive led to a renewed exodus of Uzbek Islamists from the Ferghana Valley, many of whom joined Namangani, who, along with Yuldashev, relocated to Afghanistan to establish the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).

On 17 August 1999, the Spokesman of the Ministry for National Security of Kyrgyzstan, Talant Razzokov, reported that a group of Islamic insurgents entering Kyrgyzstan from Tajikistan and destined for Uzbekistan were attempting "to create an Islamic state in the Ferghana Valley that would include the Andijan, Ferghana, and Namangan Provinces of Uzbekistan and the Leninabad Province of Tajikistan".<sup>130</sup> In actual fact, when the insurgents did fax their demands to the Kyrgyzstan Government some two weeks later, the Chairman of the Political Council of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Zubair ibn Abdurrahim, expressed more modest goals, restricted to Uzbekistan alone. Announcing, "the beginning of a 'holy war' against Uzbekistan with the aim of forcing the release of fifty thousand Muslims held in Uzbek prisons and the reopening of thousands of mosques and religious training institutions",<sup>131</sup> Abdurrahim underlined the fundamental tension between the

<sup>128</sup> The reports of numbers of police officers killed varies, with most estimates between three and four [see Rashid, *Jihad* (2002) 146; Matveeva, "The Islamist Challenge," (1999).

<sup>129</sup> Rashid, *Jihad* (2002) 147.

<sup>130</sup> Quoted in an interview with RFE/RL Bishkek Bureau: *RFE/RL Newsline*, 3. 160 (18 August 1999). Reprinted in John Schoeberlain, "Islam in the Ferghana Valley," *Islam in Politics in Russia and Central Asia (Early Eighteenth to Late Twentieth Centuries)*, eds. Stephane A. Dudoignon and Komatsu Hisao (London: Kegan Paul, 2001) 323.

<sup>131</sup> *RFE/RL Newsline*, 3.173 (6 September 1999). The IMU's mandate was revealed by Tohir Yuldashev in a radio interview on *Voice of America*, 6 October 2000: "The goals of IMU activities are firstly fighting against

perception of the authorities toward the Islamists, and the self-perception of the Islamists themselves. As Schoeberlain elucidates, “though the insurgents’ own rhetoric is focused on Uzbekistan, the rhetoric more often enunciated by government officials in Central Asia – particularly Uzbekistan – is that the aim of the Islamist opposition is to overturn all of the secular states in the region and institute Islamic rule, Sharia law and an oppressively conservative Islamist cultural policy”.<sup>132</sup>

The basis of IMU support, although limited, remains the rural population of the Ferghana Valley, primarily among ethnic Uzbeks living in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It has been reported that IMU guerrillas receive monthly salaries of between USD \$100 - \$500 (in cash); although this has never been substantiated,<sup>133</sup> in an environment of intensifying unemployment and economic destitution, the rumour alone is sufficient to encourage additional recruits. While the IMU has reportedly struggled with problems of leadership and organization,<sup>134</sup> the movement was able to construct a network of financing and weapons supply.<sup>135</sup> In addition, control over Central Asian drug trafficking has provided significant financial resources, as well as access to clandestine travel routes throughout the region,<sup>136</sup> although recent reports suggest that this control is dwindling under competition from organized crime groups.

In 1999, the threats of the IMU against Uzbekistan were crystallized in a series of violent attacks that reverberated through the states of the Ferghana Valley. This instigated a set of state reactions that further compounded the already serious problems facing the region and exacerbated preexisting tensions among the Central Asian states. On 16 February, 1999, six massive car bombs were detonated in the capital city of Tashkent, killing approximately

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oppression *within our country*, against bribery, against the inequities and also to freeing our Muslim brothers from prison . . . We declare a jihad in order to create a religious system, a religious government. We want to create a sharia system . . . Before we build an Islamic state we primarily want to get out from under repression” [Schoeberlain, “Ferghana Valley,” (2001) 324. Italics added for emphasis].

<sup>132</sup> Schoeberlain, “Ferghana Valley,” (2001) 324.

<sup>133</sup> Rashid, *Jihad* (2002) 167.

<sup>134</sup> Saodat Olimova, “Antiterrorist Campaign in Afghanistan and its Impact on Central Asian Neighbors,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, 4.16 (2002) 43.

<sup>135</sup> According to some reports, Yuldashev secures funding, materials and volunteers from the Taliban, Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, the Uzbek diaspora, Islamic charities in Saudi Arabia, and Islamic parties in Pakistan [Rashid, *Jihad* (2002) 154].

<sup>136</sup> See CNS, “Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan”; according to the Center for Defense Information, the IMU handles 70% of the opium and heroin traffic through Central Asia [“In the Spotlight: Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU),” *CDI Terrorism Project*, (Center for Defense Information, 25 March 2002) <[www.cdi.org/terrorism/imu.cfm](http://www.cdi.org/terrorism/imu.cfm)>]. However, recent reports suggest that this control is dwindling under competition from organized crime groups.

fifteen people and injuring over a hundred others.<sup>137</sup> According to official reports, Karimov himself was the target of the violence, and narrowly escaped injury. Uzbek officials quickly reported that the bombings had been carried out by a ring of radical Islamists as an attempt to overthrow President Karimov and his regime, and that the attack had been executed through Islamist organizations based primarily in the Ferghana Valley, functioning under the direction and funding of radical international Islamist organizations, generally referred to as 'fundamentalist' or 'Wahhabi'.<sup>138</sup> In November 2000, both Yuldashev and Namangani were tried in absentia for the bombings, and were sentenced to death.<sup>139</sup>

In the summer of 1999, when the Kyrgyzstan Government was acknowledging the presence of anti-Uzbek Islamist groups from Tajikistan, the government of Uzbekistan was leveling accusations that Tajikistan – or at least Islamic elements in Tajikistan – were sheltering and supporting the insurgents, and there were concerns that Uzbekistan might launch an incursion into Tajik territory to flush out Namangani and his supporters.<sup>140</sup> Shortly afterward, the IMU launched another attack, one which would change the face of Central Asian security, and draw international attention to the region.

The Batken Uprising began on 6 August 1999, when four local officials were kidnapped from the area of Batken, in Kyrgyzstan's Osh Province. According to reports, the kidnapers were guerrilla fighters loyal to Namangani, and had entered Kyrgyzstan from camp bases in northeastern Tajikistan. This first incursion was relatively brief: about a week after the hostage-taking (on 13 August), the Kyrgyzstan government reportedly paid \$50,000 in ransom to secure their release.<sup>141</sup> Two days later, on 15 August, Uzbekistan's Air Force conducted bombing raids on the border between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan,<sup>142</sup> marking the first of a series of raids from Uzbekistan which failed to displace the Islamists but caused significant civilian casualties and, on more than one occasion, dropped bombs on Tajik

<sup>137</sup> Rashid, *Jihad* (2002) 85; Schoeberlain, "Ferghana Valley," (2001) 332; Matveeva, "The Islamist Challenge," (1999).

<sup>138</sup> By early March, there had been successive accusations leveled at the movement *Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Movement for Liberation, linked with Arab Middle East and other parts of the Islamic world), *Hezbollah* (linked with Arab Middle Eastern and Islamic countries), Osama bin Laden (linked with Saudi Wahhabism), Muhammad Salih (exiled leader of opposition party 'Erk'), former Chechen acting President Zelimkhan Yandarbiev, and others [Schoeberlain, "Ferghana Valley," (2001) 332].

<sup>139</sup> "Uzbek Court Sentences Two to Death for 'Terrorism'," *Uzbekistan Daily Digest* (20 November 2000); CNS, "Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)," *Special Section: Terrorist Attacks on America* (Center for Non-proliferation Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies) <cns.miis.edu/research/wtc01/imu.htm>. Accessed June 16, 2004

<sup>140</sup> Schoeberlain, "Ferghana Valley," (2001) 327.

<sup>141</sup> *RFE/RL Newslines* 3/159 (17 August 1999)

<sup>142</sup> Schoeberlain, "Ferghana Valley," (2001) 328. The Government of Uzbekistan said that this was done at the request of the Kyrgyz Government, but the exact status of such a request has been disputed.

territory, evoking protests from both the Tajik and Russian governments.<sup>143</sup> On 23 August, a band of IMU fighters kidnapped, among others, four Japanese geologists and the commander of Kyrgyzstan's Interior Ministry Forces, General Anarbek Shamkeev. This new hostage-taking resulted in considerable tension between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, as Uzbek officials wished to respond decisively and with military force, while their Kyrgyz counterparts, at the urging of the Japanese government, preferred to seek a peaceful release of the hostages.<sup>144</sup> The standoff lasted over two months, and ended with the payment of ransom and the release of prisoners, after which the militants reportedly relocated to their bases in Afghanistan. Following the uprising, many dozens of bombs were dropped on Tajikistan<sup>145</sup> in an attempt to target the Islamists.

As a result of the Batken uprising and the 1999 incursions, three consequences have been felt throughout Central Asia: First, for the first time, three of the Central Asian states were drawn into open struggle against Islamist fighters operating across their common borders. Second, outside states, including Russia, Kazakhstan and China, became involved in the conflict. Despite their efforts at coordinating an effective regional coalition, however, there was no significant cooperation between the primary states affected during the 1999 incursions; instead, uncoordinated responses led to the rise of considerable and lasting interstate tensions. Finally, the Batken uprising seemed to signify the materialization of the Islamist threat to Central Asia as a whole, and to the Ferghana Valley in particular.<sup>146</sup>

The events of the 1999 uprising were repeated again in the summer of 2000, but on a wider scale. Clashes broke out in the Surkhan-Darya Province (on the southeastern border between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan), in the Leilek, Batken and Chong Alay Districts of Kyrgyzstan, and most seriously in Tashkent Province itself, approximately one hundred kilometers from the capital of Uzbekistan and in the region of the only road connecting Uzbekistan with the Ferghana Valley.<sup>147</sup> While the IMU launched a multi-pronged attack on Uzbekistan through its network of support bases, other groups smuggled arms and ammunitions into the Ferghana Valley; it took the Uzbek army over a month to subdue the fighting, during which time more than two thousand people were forcibly evacuated from their mountain villages.

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<sup>143</sup> Schoeberlain, "Ferghana Valley," (2001) 328.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid. 328.

<sup>145</sup> RFE/RL Newswire 3/195 (6 October 1999) and subsequent issues. Although Kyrgyz officials have claimed that these raids were carried out jointly between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan's officials have so far addressed their protests only to Uzbekistan.

<sup>146</sup> Schoeberlain, "Ferghana Valley," (2001) 329.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid. 329

As Rashid explains, “their plight was to become a sorry example of Uzbekistan’s ability to alienate and traumatize its own population whilst trying to deal with the IMU”;<sup>148</sup> according to reports, the herdsmen’s flocks were destroyed by the Uzbek army, and men were held with little food in military camps for two months before being relocated to a more long-term holding area, where some were reported to have died from cold and hunger.<sup>149</sup>

Namangani eventually withdrew his forces at the end of October 2000 and retreated to Afghanistan, but not before his incursions had prompted another, massive international response. A pivotal event took place on 12 August 2000, when a group of twelve foreign mountain climbers, including four Americans, was kidnapped in southern Kyrgyzstan.<sup>150</sup> This was followed by a declaration by the US Department of State that the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan was being added to its official list of terrorist organizations.<sup>151</sup> In addition, the United States, along with Russia, China, Turkey, France and Israel, flew in supplies and counter-insurgency equipment to Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Still, the affected Central Asian states remained unable to mount an effective coordinated response to the problem. Indeed, this seems to be a prevailing advantage for Islamist groups such as the IMU, and the leaders have been eager to exploit it: some experts have observed that, “Namangani has the keen political sense to time his offenses to foment conflict within and between the Central Asia republics”;<sup>152</sup> attacks often came in the summer, and following each one the republican leaders would hurl a litany of accusations and counteraccusations at one another, further preventing any future cooperation and goodwill. As Ivo Petrov, head of the United Nations mission to Tajikistan, in Dushanbe, has suggested, “Namangani cannot afford to let the Central Asian states enhance their cooperation, and he calculates every move to create further differences between them”.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Rashid, *Jihad* (2002) 168.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.* 168.

<sup>150</sup> The American hikers were held after the others had been released, but eventually escaped. See Rashid, *Jihad* (2002) 171; Audrey Kurth Cronin, “Foreign Terrorist Organizations,” CRS Report for Congress. Order Code RL32223 (6 February 2004) 37-38.

<sup>151</sup> The IMU was officially classified as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the US Department of State 25 September 2000. Cronin, “Foreign Terrorist Organizations,” (2004) 38.

<sup>152</sup> Rashid, *Jihad* (2002) 154.

<sup>153</sup> Quoted in *ibid.* 155.

Today, there is debate over the contemporary status of the IMU.<sup>154</sup> In early 2001, it was reported that the IMU withdrew from their bases in opposition-controlled Tajikistan and relocated to Afghanistan, where it took up fighting with the Taliban. Following the attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001 and the ensuing War on Terror, there have been wide, but unconfirmed reports of heavy casualties on the part of the IMU as they fight alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan.<sup>155</sup> On 19 November, 2001, it was reported that IMU field commander Juma Namangani was killed in a US bombing raid in Afghanistan,<sup>156</sup> yet it remains unclear how these losses, if true, have affected the IMU. Nevertheless, many observers explain the need for continued monitoring of the IMU, by observing that “the IMU's power base lies not in Afghanistan, but in the Ferghana Valley itself, a region the organization has found to be a fertile recruiting ground, largely due to the brutal and counterproductive reprisals of the Karimov regime”.<sup>157</sup> Recently, the IMU has claimed responsibility for bombings in Tashkent on 30 July 2004, which apparently targeted the Uzbek Prosecutor General, as well as the American and Israeli embassies, and resulted in the deaths of four people. Whether or not this is true, it seems the IMU has not abdicated its objectives in Central Asia

As a militant Islamist movement, the IMU undoubtedly requires close attention and a well-engineered response. However, such action has not been forthcoming by the Central Asian leaders, who have consistently overplayed the military capacity of the group while simultaneously refusing to commit to the regional coordination that is necessary to counterattack such a movement. Independently, the states of the Ferghana Valley region – Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and especially Uzbekistan – have responded to the IMU as they have to other Islamist manifestations: with unfocussed, inappropriately general coercion that has most often affected the civilian population more than it has the IMU. As a result, when the damages inflicted on the population through the states’ anti-Islamist offensives are tallied, it

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<sup>154</sup> Also a matter of debate is the current name under which the IMU operates. In the spring of 2001, various news reports claimed that the IMU had changed its name to the Islamic Movement of Turkestan (*Hizb-i-Islamiya* of Turkestan), purportedly as an expression of the expansion of its original objective, from the establishment of an Islamic state in Uzbekistan to the creation of an Islamic state in all of Central Asia. However, the IMU issued a denial shortly thereafter, which claimed that the announcement had been false propaganda on the part of the government of Uzbekistan, and an attempt to mobilize international support against the movement (Igor Rotar, “The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan: a Resurgent IMU?” Terrorism Monitor, 1.8 (Jamestown Foundation, 18 December 2003); CDI. “Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan”. 2002). For the purposes of clarity and continuity, this paper will follow the precedence set by other contemporary researchers and continue to refer to the movement as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).

<sup>155</sup> Rotar, “The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan,” (2003)

<[www.jamestown.org/publications\\_details.php?volume\\_id=391&issue\\_id=2881&article\\_id=23428](http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=391&issue_id=2881&article_id=23428)>; CDI. “Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan”. 2002;

<sup>156</sup> Rotar. “The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan”. 2003; CDI. “Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan”. 2002.

<sup>157</sup> CDI. “Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan”. 2002

is by far the state measures which have caused the most harm. Consequently, the message of groups such as the IMU and their stand against state injustice become more relevant, increasing their potential capacity as time goes on.

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### **Hizb ut-Tahrir**

The second fundamentalist Islamic organization garnering significant response in Central Asia is Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT). Although it is a relatively new phenomenon in Central Asia, the movement has grown to become the largest Islamist group in Central Asia today. As such, it has been targeted with measures equivalent to those ascribed to the IMU by the state authorities, despite the fact that it advocates non-violence in the pursuit of an Islamic Caliphate. The Central Asian leaders have labeled it a terrorist organization and a threat to state security; there are wide reports of persecution against suspected members of Hizb ut-Tahrir, and its members constitute a significant portion of detainees in Central Asian prisons.

Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami (Islamic Party of Liberation), or HT, was founded in 1953 by diaspora Palestinians in Saudi Arabia and Jordan. The group was slow to spread to Central Asia, and it was not among the first wave of Islamic missionaries that flooded the region with the dissolution of the Soviet Union; in fact, it wasn't until 1995 that the movement was first introduced to Central Asia. The first HT cells were established in Tashkent and the Ferghana Valley, and from there were able to spread throughout Uzbekistan and into Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and southern Kazakhstan. Government authorities ignored the first signs of HT pamphlets, which were written in Arabic (a language few Central Asians could read) and were thus perceived to be relatively benign. However, when the speed of Hizb ut-Tahrir's spread became apparent, and the literature began to be translated into the republics' respective languages, the authorities began to take more notice, and crackdowns against the movement began.

The objective of Hizb ut-Tahrir is, like many of the other Islamist movements, to reunite the Central Asian republics – and eventually the entire Muslim world – with the eventual aim of establishing an Islamic Caliphate (*Kaliphate-i-Rashida*) in the tradition of that which existed after the death of The Prophet Mohammed in Arabia in the seventh century AD.<sup>158</sup> Central Asia has become a focal point of HT activity because it is perceived to be at a “boiling point” and “ripe for takeover”.

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<sup>158</sup> See the Hizb ut-Tahrir official website: [www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org](http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org).

Although Hizb ut-Tahrir believes in jihad as a means to mobilize supporters against non-Muslims, it differs from other prevalent Islamist groups in the region by refusing to advocate violence in the pursuit of its objectives. Instead, it promotes the development of mass support through information and education, in the belief that these supporters will one day rise up in peaceful opposition against the regimes in Central Asia. A vital component in the spread of the HT movement has been its enthusiastic use of technology as a means to spread its ideology; while the party is historical in its perspective, it does not propose a return to that historical state, nor does it seek to ignore the achievements and contributions of non-Muslim cultures and societies. The group makes emphatic use of all methods and technologies of globalization, and it receives considerable funding for these activities from supporters abroad.<sup>159</sup>

The operative activities of the Hizb ut-Tahrir are well adapted to the conditions of Central Asia, and make it extremely difficult to analyze or to penetrate. The organization is composed of secret, decentralized cells, consisting of between five to seven men, and scattered throughout Central Asia. These cells (*daira*) function as study groups, and are committed to the spread of Islam and the HT message; as such, members are expected to go out and establish their own cells in order to propagate the movement. Since its relatively recent introduction in Central Asia, Hizb ut-Tahrir has become the most popular Islamist group, although spokespersons of Hizb ut-Tahrir themselves claim to be unable to provide information on the numbers of HT adherents in Central Asia.<sup>160</sup> Media reports, however, suggest that the number may be as high as 100,000,<sup>161</sup> although this is likely an exaggeration.<sup>162</sup> In any event, support for the movement is significant, and pockets of HT support have appeared in each of the Central Asian states.<sup>163</sup>

<sup>159</sup> In fact, the main Hizb ut-Tahrir headquarters are located in London, England.

<sup>160</sup> Some of the generally accepted estimates for HT support in Central Asia, however, include the following: (Uzbekistan) in 1999, Zukhridden Husniddinov (former National Security Services officer, current presidential advisor on religious issues), claimed at a closed conference that there were between 6,500 and 7,000 HT members in Uzbekistan; since then, it has been suggested that those figures rose to approximately 15,000 in 2003. In Kyrgyzstan, suggested figures of between 1,000 to 2,000 receive the most support. Figures for Tajikistan, based on arrests during a government crackdown in 2000, suggest support is in the low, rather than high thousands, and estimates for Kazakhstan report numbers in the low hundreds, and possibly even dozens [“Radical Islam in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir,” *International Crisis Group Asia Report No. 58* (Osh/Brussels, 30 June 2003) 17].

<sup>161</sup> “Responding to Hizb-ut-Tahrir” *International Crisis Group* (2003) 17.

<sup>162</sup> The benefits of exaggeration for Hizb ut-Tahrir are increased credibility, and state security forces are also likely to overstate the threat in order to gain authority and resources.

<sup>163</sup> In Uzbekistan, Hizb ut-Tahrir is concentrated in the Ferghana Valley; in Tajikistan the main HT enclaves have been the Soghd Province in the north, and the cities surrounding Khojand in particular; in Kyrgyzstan, the

Although the exact numbers of HT supporters is unclear, many experts agree that the movement seems to be at least stable in Central Asia. As with both the IRP and the IMU, the majority of HT supporters are educated; however, while the IRP and IMU draw the majority of their support from rural areas, Hizb ut-Tahrir finds most of its recruits in the urban intelligentsia, including college students, educated but unemployed youth, and factory workers.<sup>164</sup> As the movement grows, observers are disturbed by changes in the HT constituency:

Critics and sympathizers alike note that even Central Asians with little or no religious training have become avid Hizb ut-Tahrir followers. Indeed, it is not the traditional religious conservatives who support the party, but for the most part youths with little knowledge of Islam, who read the leaflets and literature and educate themselves.<sup>165</sup>

This emphasizes the often secondary role of religion in the search for an alternative source of information when state censorship is high, and as a vehicle of dissent when none are provided within the official structure. Accordingly, experts report that the majority of HT members arrested in Central Asia are urban, educated, young males in their twenties.<sup>166</sup> Ethnic Uzbeks seem to be the main source of support for Hizb ut-Tahrir throughout the Central Asian republics, and it is feared that the movement is being spread with the migration of Uzbeks from areas of repression.

With authorities asserting the spread of Hizb ut-Tahrir in all four Central Asian states, the movement's potential in the region must be addressed. Based on the fact that the Hizb ut-Tahrir's constituency has been transforming to encompass segments of the moderate and unemployed populations, it appears that the movement's attraction as an alternative to the current regime is growing. As with the IRP and the IMU, the regions of HT support are generally those which have suffered under government efforts to maintain control, and although "residents of these areas do not necessarily sympathize with the objectives to establish a Caliphate. . . many are searching for the key to open a closed political system".<sup>167</sup>

Because of similarities between the ideologies of Hizb ut-Tahrir and other Islamist groups in Central Asia, particularly the IMU, there is concern about the potential for these groups to

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provinces of Osh and Jalal-Abad are the centres of HT activity; finally, southern Kazakhstan has witnessed a recent increase in HT presence.

<sup>164</sup> "Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir," *International Crisis Group* (2003) 19.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.* 19.

<sup>166</sup> Rashid, *Jihad* (2002) 123.

<sup>167</sup> "Is Radical Islam Inevitable?" *International Crisis Group* (2003) 8.

coordinate activities. This threat may be exaggerated by the security forces of Central Asia, which would like to attach the same stigma to Hizb ut-Tahrir that the IMU has;<sup>168</sup> Central Asian governments have been quick to equate the HT with other, more militant extremist groups, and reports of rising non-violent HT membership have been interpreted as a terrorist threat to state security.<sup>169</sup> The Kyrgyz government, for example, recently warned that radical Islamist groups pose an increasing threat to national security, citing Hizb ut-Tahrir in particular. Uzbekistan has also strived to link the movement with terrorist tactics; following an unsuccessful attempt to relate the group to suicide bombings that took place in the spring of 2004,<sup>170</sup> the government has ignored existing evidence to insist that subsequent attacks in July were committed by HT.<sup>171</sup> Although the movement's objectives are unquestionably radical, it has never been conclusively linked to terrorist activity, and has repeatedly and explicitly affirmed its commitment to nonviolent change.

Such state attempts to militarize and correlate the various political Islamic movements within their borders create concern among international observers, who fear the polarization of some members of HT. Indeed, the fundamental difference between the IMU and Hizb ut-Tahrir – the use of violence in the pursuit of an Islamic state – is itself ambiguous.<sup>172</sup> The International Crisis Group points out that “there is obviously a danger of frustration building in the organization if it makes no impact on the political system”,<sup>173</sup> and some experts predict a split within the party, with one of the derivatives possibly abandoning peaceful tactics in favour of armed struggle.<sup>174</sup>

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## Conclusion

Despite wide, and unsubstantiated reports of the rabid growth of Islamism, the political Islamic groups in Central Asia face a number of common obstacles. First, and perhaps most

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<sup>168</sup> There have been accusations of security forces planting HT literature on the bodies of slain IMU militants in order to suggest some crossover. However, there has been little concrete evidence that indicates such cooperation at this point [Rostor, “The Hizb ut-Tahrir Party,” (2001)].

<sup>169</sup> The Kyrgyz government, for example, recently warned that radical Islamist groups pose an increasing threat to national security, citing Hizb ut-Tahrir in particular.

<sup>170</sup> These attacks will be discussed as part of the final analysis.

<sup>171</sup> ITAR-TASS. 1 August 2004. Also, Dmitri Glumskov and Boris Volkhonsky, “Tashkent Facing Terrorism,” Kommersant (31 March 2004) 9. HT has denied any involvement in the attacks.

<sup>172</sup> In its explanation of HT methodology, the official website asserts that, “the members of Hizb ut-Tahrir in that country are a part of the Muslims and it is obligatory upon them as it is upon other Muslims, in their capacity as Muslims, to fight the enemy and repel them”. ([www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org](http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org))

<sup>173</sup> “Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir,” International Crisis Group (2003) 24

<sup>174</sup> See Saodat Olimova, “Antiterrorist Campaign in Afghanistan and its Impact on Central Asian Neighbors,” Central Asia and the Caucasus, 4.16 (2002) 44.

fundamentally, the ideologies of groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Hizb ut-Tahrir are not based on the indigenous Islam of Central Asia. As Rashid points out, such “hard line beliefs, consistent with Wahhabism, have little to do with mainstream Central Asian Islam, which has always been extremely tolerant of other ideas and religious minorities”.<sup>175</sup> This is certain to limit the general potential of political Islam; although there may be an increase in popular sympathy for such groups, they do not have the ideological commitment necessary for the lasting fulfillment of their objectives.

Second, there is very little internal cohesion within these groups. While they remain clear on the creation of an Islamic state, there is little debate within the movement as to how the acute economic and social problems of Central Asia will be resolved and reconciled with this concept. Political Islam in Central Asia, it could be said, does not have the political credibility to make it a viable counterweight to the existing system.

Moreover, the general disorganization of the Islamist movement is a further impediment to its role in Central Asia. As Malashenko points out, Islamism in Central Asia is of an enclave nature, and “the activities of political Islam are hampered by the absence of a single guiding or coordinating center in individual countries, let alone in Central Asia as a whole”.<sup>176</sup> Although there are signs of limited communication, there is no unified political Islamic movement in the region; the deeply entrenched regional and clan loyalties<sup>177</sup> prevent the Islamists from creating an overarching identity and appeal.

Clearly, the threat of Islamism in Central Asia must be taken seriously – one need only look at the violence and turmoil caused in the past decade by Islamic militancy. But the states’ accounts of the Islamist threat seem to greatly exaggerate the reality of the situation; in order to come to a better understanding of this unbalance, one must consider the state responses to Islamism in Central Asia, and how they have actually contributed to the movement.

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<sup>175</sup> Rashid, *Jihad* (2002) 123.

<sup>176</sup> Malashenko, “Islam and Politics,” (1999).

<sup>177</sup> The group identity factor has always played an important role in the political history of the region, fostering loyalties and creating coalitions of clans around a khan in nomadic areas or retinues to emirs in the oases. Despite the vastness of Central Asia, the commonality of a shared socio-historical legacy is frequently evident and is often stressed by Central Asian leaders [Helene Perrin Wagner, “Social and Political Collective Identities in Central Asia: the Balance between National and Transnational Integration,” *Harvard Asia Quarterly*, 3.4 (February 1999) <[www.fas.harvard.edu/~asiactr/haq/199904/index.htm](http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~asiactr/haq/199904/index.htm)>].

*The perception of a threat to the state from Islamist groups has . . . influenced wider government policies, promoting political authoritarianism, economic stagnation, and bad relations with neighbours.<sup>178</sup>*

## **State Responses**

State responses to Central Asian Islamism have ranged from cautious control to strict suppression, with the more severe measures appearing actually to incite greater Islamic activity. Although Islamism does exist in Central Asia, the brutality with which some of the governments have responded to it has been unwarranted and ultimately self-defeating, as it merely contributes to the appeal of the Islamist groups, while reducing the states' capacity to address the problem.

Since independence, state responses to Islamism have involved severe religious and social repression, as well as alarming military actions that have aggravated tensions throughout the republic and caused injury and death to the already depressed general population. Deeper consequences of state responses have included serious economic and political ramifications, which create severe conditions of deprivation among the population and eliminate the possibility for improvement within the existing framework. Through their own actions, the Central Asian states have done more to destabilize the region than any Islamist groups are capable of themselves.

With state responses to Islamism ranging from full-scale repression in Uzbekistan to subjective interference in Kazakhstan, it is worthwhile to compare the severity of state controls with the degree of Islamist activity. It could be argued, as the states do, that harsh repression is a necessary response to Islamist aggression; others, however, argue that these severe reactions are superfluous to the actual threat posed by Islamist groups, and that the states are planting the seeds of extremism with their controls.

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## **Responses**

### **Social Controls**

In a retrospective analysis of the turbulent time of Central Asian transition, Ahmed Rashid has observed that, "the speed of the Islamic resurgence caught the elite by surprise,

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<sup>178</sup> Saodat Olimova, "Political Islam and Conflict in Tajikistan". In Lena Jonson, Muran Esenov (Eds.) Political Islam and Conflicts in Russia and Central Asia. Conference Papers 24. The Swedish Institute of International Affairs. 1999. <[www.ca-c.org/dataeng/11.olimova.shtml](http://www.ca-c.org/dataeng/11.olimova.shtml)>.

increasing the gulf between the leaders and the people".<sup>179</sup> This led to an attempt within the official structure to harness the energy of this Islamic renaissance as a source of legitimacy for their regimes. Religious cooptation took the form of state-controlled religious boards, state-appointed clergy, and controls over the message provided by the official religious structure. Such control was not considered sufficient, and in an increasing attempt to consolidate power in their state, those leaders engaged in a programme of strict repression against all forms of unofficial Islamic worship. This led to a dual attitude towards Islam in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, in particular, and to lesser degrees in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan: an attempt at cooperation, combined with a fierce struggle against religion. As Martin explains, "the Central Asian leaders, and especially President Karimov of Uzbekistan, have been attempting a very important but dangerous balancing act: emphasizing their personal commitment to Islam and their states' connectedness with the Islamic world while suppressing and undermining any elements of 'political' Islam that might be outside their control".<sup>180</sup>

And so, "in the early years of independence, there was an attempt to co-opt the symbolism of Islam as a form of legitimization of the regime",<sup>181</sup> and the new elites began to embrace Islam, albeit in a token way, emphasizing the language and symbolism of Islam in support of their administration.<sup>182</sup> According to Aleksei Malashenko, the states' turn to Islam was an attempt, first, to capitalize on nationalist sentiments in the final years of the Soviet Union and legitimize their office among indigenous Central Asian Muslims, and second, to "seize the initiative of using Islam from their opponents, whose increasing criticism of the authorities stems precisely from religious positions".<sup>183</sup> Indeed, in the wake of the developing Tajik civil war in the early 1990s, the desire to monopolize Islam emerged as one of the main tendencies in Central Asia.<sup>184</sup> In each of the Central Asian states, a government body responsible for religious affairs was created to intervene in the internal affairs of religious organizations. These include Kyrgyzstan's Interdepartmental Council for Religious Affairs, Uzbekistan's Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA), Kazakhstan's Council for Religious Affairs, and Tajikistan's Council of Ulama (clergy), each of which controls the

<sup>179</sup> Rashid, *Jihad* (2002) 54.

<sup>180</sup> Martin, "Whither Central Asia's Radicals?" (1999).

<sup>181</sup> "Islam and the State," *International Crisis Group* (2003) 5.

<sup>182</sup> In Uzbekistan, President Islam Karimov's government staged several lavish jubilees that marked the anniversaries of Islamic figures like al-Bukhari, al-Marghinani, and al-Maturidi, each of whom are claimed as Uzbek national figures. Kazakhstan, one of the region's most secular states, invested heavily to profile the mausoleum of Ahmet Yesevi in the city of Turkistan as part of an attempt to create a focus of reverence for all Turkic people.

<sup>183</sup> Malashenko, "Islam and Politics," (1999).

<sup>184</sup> Malashenko, "Islam and Politics," (1999).

traditional Muslim Spiritual Board (the Muftiate).<sup>185</sup> Even today, religious organizations must be registered with these bodies, and in Uzbekistan, religious activity without registration is considered a criminal act.<sup>186</sup>

The attraction of religion as a political tool is not surprising in a situation like that of Central Asia, where religion is an obvious potential means for impacting public opinion. State efforts to control religion as an official mouthpiece to the public involve control over the Muftiate, which implies two important facets of influence, the first being the appointment of imams and Islamic clergy, which is carried out in informal consultation with local authorities, the security services and the Council on Religious Affairs (CRA). Appointments tend to depend more on the imams' political views and conformity to the state, rather than their religious knowledge, and corruption is also widely reported, further undermining the image of the official clergy.<sup>187</sup> The second aspect of Muftiate control is through the message that official Islam conveys, official *fatwas*, public statements, and control of the themes of sermons (*khutba*), traditionally delivered after Friday prayers.<sup>188</sup>

Consequently, following independence, the official Islamic clergy was co-opted by the ruling Central Asian regimes in much the same way that it was under late Soviet Rule, and it effectively became an extension of their respective government. This cooptation proved counterproductive, however, as official religion, due to its subservience to the ruling elite, failed to develop any form of social relevance that might have extended its function into the daily lives of ordinary people. Not only was the official clergy unable to raise its voice against the social injustice of rising levels of inequality and dissatisfaction, but it also failed to follow the example set by Adolat of initiating a system of social security to compensate for the failures of the secular authorities.<sup>189</sup> Moreover, with levels of religious education and knowledge of Islam generally low within the ranks of the official clergy, the Muftiate has little authority with the general population. As the International Crisis Group has observed,

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<sup>185</sup> With the exception of Tajikistan, which abolished the Muftiate and replaced it with the Council of Ulama, each of the Central Asian states has created its own, separate Muftiate. Under Soviet rule, they were joined under a single muftiate.

<sup>186</sup> Registration of religious groups and restrictions limiting registration will be explained later.

<sup>187</sup> Rashid, *Jihad* (2002) 7.

<sup>188</sup> "Islam and the State," *International Crisis Group* (2003) 7-8.

<sup>189</sup> While Adolat established local law-enforcement and funded the construction of Islamic institutions, examples of the traditional clergy establishing social security institutions are available outside of Central Asia, including pre-revolutionary Iran or present-day Algeria.

“poorly educated clergy who parrot state ideology and refuse to stand up to the authorities have none of the respect informal leaders can gain”.<sup>190</sup>

When attempts to create a unifying, state-legitimizing concept of Islam failed, and the Tajik civil war created an ominous illustration of Islamism as an opposition, the Central Asian governments entrenched the line between official and unofficial Islam. Within the state religious structures, Islam was further subjugated by the state, and any opportunities for the creation of independent religious groups were suppressed. The result was the promotion of a weak and transparently dependent state Islamic system, and the marginalization of unsanctioned alternatives. “The destruction of the institutionalized clergy followed by tough state ideological control and atheist campaigns drove Islam into hiding”,<sup>191</sup> and ultimately reinforced Islamist structures.

Uzbekistan has been the most extreme of the Central Asian states in its assault on Islam, and, “Islamists and generally all those who occupy the positions of non-conformist Islam are being systematically harassed”.<sup>192</sup> Most experts have defined the 1991 events of Namangan (between Karimov and Adolat) and the subsequent backlash as the turning point in Uzbek policy towards Islamists. Observers have noted that, from 1992 onward, the state response in Uzbekistan has been marked by repression of opposition, whether Islamic or secular, and increasing control over official Islam.<sup>193</sup> These policies were reinforced by each series of terrorist attacks, which provided the government with the justification it needed to continue its controls. Mosques were shut down on charges of being centres of anti-government propaganda, and individuals became targets of criminal trials: many clergymen who left to join the opposition have been imprisoned or have ‘disappeared’,<sup>194</sup> while thousands of other people have been jailed for treason or sedition, or for little more than wearing ‘Islamic’ clothing, having a beard, or protesting the arrest of a relative.<sup>195</sup> As a result, at least six thousand political prisoners were reportedly being held in Uzbekistan in 2003,<sup>196</sup> and “these prisoners also include, again untold numbers of people who have had evidence of religious

<sup>190</sup> “Islam and the State,” International Crisis Group (2003) ii.

<sup>191</sup> Olimova, “Conflict in Tajikistan,” (1999).

<sup>192</sup> Malashenko, “Islam and Politics,” (1999).

<sup>193</sup> “Islam and the State,” International Crisis Group (2003) 5.

<sup>194</sup> Malashenko, “Islam and Politics,” (1999).

<sup>195</sup> Martha Brill Olcott, “Central Asia: Terrorism, Religious Extremism, and Regional Stability,” Testimony before the US House of Representatives, Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia (29 October 2003) 56, <[www.house.gov/international\\_relations/108/90361.pdf](http://www.house.gov/international_relations/108/90361.pdf)>.

<sup>196</sup> “Islam and the State,” International Crisis Group (2003) i.

extremism planted on them by corrupt police or security officials seeking bribes, and then were jailed for refusing to buy their way out of trouble".<sup>197</sup>

The states' overemphasis on the threat of Islamism was clearly depicted in a survey of leaders in Uzbekistan, in which an overwhelming ninety five percent of central leaders and ninety seven percent of regional leaders asserted that the greatest threat to Uzbek security is the spread of Islamic fundamentalism.<sup>198</sup> As an expression of this bias, in 1998, Uzbekistan's Parliament (Oliy Majilis) passed the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations, which imposed several additional restrictions on Islamic worship that violated international standards of law.<sup>199</sup> As a result of the Law, unregistered communal religious activity was criminalized, with stricter punishments for violations of rules against the propagation of ideas concerning religious extremism. All private religious instruction became proscribed, as did missionary activity and the wearing of religious clothing or attributes in public, with the exception of clerics. Imported religious literature became subject to state censorship, and the existence of 'religious political parties and public movements' was made illegal.<sup>200</sup> Following the adoption of the 1998 law, thousands of mosques were closed by the authorities for having failed to meet registration requirements,<sup>201</sup> and the number of mosques in Uzbekistan fell from over five thousand in 1998 to just over 1,800 in 2003.<sup>202</sup>

Through the Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA), the official Uzbek Muftiate has continued to exert control over the clergy, directing the Islamic hierarchy and appointing officials, dictating the content of sermons, and censoring the publication of Islamic material.<sup>203</sup> The overwhelming political restrictions on imams and the attempts to use them

<sup>197</sup> Olcott, "Terrorism, Religious Extremism, and Regional Stability," (2003) 56.

<sup>198</sup> Respondents from the central and regional administrations were asked "What is the greatest threat to Uzbekistan's stability" [Pauline Jones-Luong, *Institutional Change and Political Continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Power, Perceptions and Pacts*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 195].

<sup>199</sup> Corley, Felix. "Uzbekistan's New Legislation on Religion: An Assessment". ODIHR Religion and Law Research Consortium Documentary Library. <[www.osce.org/odihhr](http://www.osce.org/odihhr)>.

<sup>200</sup> "Islam and the State," *International Crisis Group* (2003) 5-6.

<sup>201</sup> Requirements for registration include: submission of an application with at least 100 signatures of Uzbek citizens, a protocol for the founding meeting, rules and regulations, certification of an address, and payment of a registration fee. Documents are submitted to the Committee on Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Justice at the national level, as well as to any corresponding units at the regional levels where the organization wishes to practice. The application may be blocked at any of these levels [Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations. *Article II: Registration of Religious Organizations*. Cited in "Islam and the State," *International Crisis Group* (2003) 6]

<sup>202</sup> "Islam and the State," *International Crisis Group* (2003) 6.

<sup>203</sup> Appointments are dependent on imam's political views, rather than their political knowledge, and corruption also plays a role, further diminishing the image of imams in the eyes of their believers. Imams are not permitted

as tools of government propaganda have severely damaged their authority in society; accordingly, alternative informal leaders from outside the official system are gaining credibility among the population.

The consequences of religious repression extend far beyond the level of legislation; as the International Crisis Group explains, “beyond the levels of control and interference in religious life laid down by the law, there is a wide range of interference in the religious sphere by officials who generally treat their administrative territory as their fiefdom, with little regard to the law”.<sup>204</sup> Because of state attitudes toward Islam in Uzbekistan, local leaders are able to dismiss or appoint imams as they wish, often on the basis of kinship ties or because it gives them access to financial benefits. A cause of further division are the neighborhood councils (*mahalla*), which are expected to report to the government on activities in the mosques and neighborhood in general.<sup>205</sup> This causes serious problems of credibility that extend to the leadership of the country, as corrupt local officials wield their influence in order to entrench their authority.

The problems of police brutality and the corruption of the state continue to grow in many of the Central Asian regions. In many cases this is directly related to the response to Islamism, as officers are not only encouraged to seek out potential Islamists but are also essentially unrestricted in their hunt. Particularly in Uzbekistan, though also in other Central Asian republics, local police forces play an important role in the suppression of religious activism. For many police officers, having a free rein in the battle against Islamism has become a source of income, and demands for bribes are not uncommon. In addition, several cases have been reported where officers allegedly planted illegal leaflets, drugs or weapons on suspects. The International Crisis Group reports that, “in a situation where the police are outside any real control, they can arrest people for almost any slight personal grievance. The campaign against Islamists merely provides the necessary grounds for arrest”.<sup>206</sup>

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to deliver sermons on subjects of their own choosing, but are provided with themes for each weekly sermon by the Muftiate, with full CRA knowledge [“Islam and the State,” *International Crisis Group* (2003) 6].

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.* 7.

<sup>205</sup> In addition to neighborhood policing, in each *mahalla* there are one or more ‘*pasbon*’, which are essentially officials responsible for reporting any suspicious activity. These informants receive a state salary of approximately US\$25 per month, and are often former police officers, further aggravating distrust between the population and the police. The *mahalla* and other overseeing organs rely heavily on ordinary people who provide information on their neighbors, making the system vulnerable to abuse (*Ibid.* 7, 10-11).

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.* 11.

Once suspects have been arrested, there is no independent judicial system, and widespread use of torture ensures that confessions are generally supplied and always accepted by the courts.<sup>207</sup> The frequency and severity of police brutality and corruption has drawn the attention of international human rights organizations, which have released scathing reports on Uzbekistan's human rights record. In 2000, Acacia Shields of Human Rights Watch reported that:

Uzbek police and security forces have arrested thousands of pious Muslims. These arrests are illegal and discriminatory, they target people who belong to unregistered Islamic groups, who practice outside state-controlled mosques, or who possess Islamic literature... Trials are grossly unfair, as judges systematically punish independent Muslims with lengthy terms in prison of their religious beliefs and affiliations, ignoring allegations of torture and allowing coerced self-incriminating statements as evidence, often the only offered evidence, to convict.<sup>208</sup>

Human Rights Watch reports that arrests in Uzbekistan increased significantly after the mobilization of local *mahalla* (neighbourhood watch) committees to monitor the activities of 'suspicious' people. One of the more long-term effects of these policies has been increasing divisions between the state and the population, which regards the security forces as representatives of state corruption and brutality. As Olcott explains, "one of the major messages of Islamic fundamentalist groups is the corruption of the state, and in the police states of Central Asia there is all too frequent demonstrations of this",<sup>209</sup> resulting in increasing public sympathy for groups targeted by state persecution.

In another effort to control the practice of Islam in the country, in 1992 the Uzbek government began to label anyone perceived to be an adherent of radical Islam, or who held anti-government sentiments as part of Islamic beliefs, a Wahhabi. This indicated a shift back to old, Soviet methods of social control, as the term 'Wahhabi' had been used by Soviet leaders and their successors "as term for any Muslim who was more devoted to an Islamic vision of society that the government wished them to be – and links with the actual Wahhabi movement (with its origins in Saudi Arabia) were undemonstrated, and indeed, quite often absent".<sup>210</sup> This practice intensified to the point where "today the government uses *Wahhabi* to undermine all Muslim believers by associating them with the Wahhabis' record of

<sup>207</sup> "Islam and the State," *International Crisis Group* (2003) 11.

<sup>208</sup> Acacia Shields, *Statement to the US House of Representatives Committee for International Relations*, 5 September 2000. [www.hrw.org/campaigns/cenasia/uzbekistan0905.htm](http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/cenasia/uzbekistan0905.htm)

<sup>209</sup> Olcott, "Central Asia: Terrorism, Religious Extremism, and Regional Stability," (2003) 56.

<sup>210</sup> Schoeberlain, "Ferghana Valley," (2001) 340.

extremism”,<sup>211</sup> which allows the state to suppress all Islamic activity simply by labeling it ‘Wahhabi’. Counterproductively, however, this practice has also endowed the movement with a popular mystique, allowing Muslims to regard Wahhabis as a persecuted movement of faithful Muslims.<sup>212</sup> Consequently, although the movement has not grown appreciably in Central Asia<sup>213</sup>, sympathy for it has, and in an environment of constructed conflict between the state and its fabricated Wahhabi opponents, public opinion is often in support of the latter. As Olcott remarks, “many believers see the state as an opponent of the faith, rather than its protector, a perception which often works against the encouragement of moderate trends within Islam, and serves the goals of radical Islamic groups”.<sup>214</sup>

Although not as repressive as Uzbekistan, religious policies in Tajikistan have also involved constant state pressure against religion and widespread corruption within state structures, creating an environment of simmering discontent. While Tajikistan’s law on religion is relatively liberal in comparison with that of Uzbekistan, it is similar in its restrictions on political activism by religious leaders and the leniency with which it controls local administrations. In particular, the Tajik administration has targeted the official opposition, the Islamic Renaissance Party, for repression and elimination.

This policy of restriction and amputation of the IRP has accelerated since the onset of the US-led War on Terror and Tajikistan’s subsequent rise in strategic prominence. In 2002, following the arrest of three Tajik citizens from the northern town of Isfara by coalition forces in Afghanistan, Rakhmonov seized the opportunity to attack the IRP by accusing the group of being “engaged in indoctrinating people in a spirit of extremism, which may lead to a split in society”, and by claiming that ‘extremism’ is being propagated in mosques where IRP members work as clergy.<sup>215</sup> State actions have increasingly mirrored rhetoric. Following Rakhmonov’s 2002 speech in Isfara,<sup>216</sup> there was a significant clampdown on religious

<sup>211</sup> Rashid, *Jihad* (2002) 46.

<sup>212</sup> This potential was forecast in 1989, by the Soviet Central Asian Mufti Mamayusupov, who argued that, as people were repeatedly labeled as Wahhabis, they would become accustomed to the term and embrace it, claiming the title and calling themselves Wahhabi and identifying with the movement of the same name [cited in Critchlow, *Nationalism in Uzbekistan*, (1991) 181].

<sup>213</sup> This statement is open to debate. Some researchers, like Critchlow, argue that the Wahhabism is growing rapidly throughout the Ferghana Valley [Critchlow, *Nationalism in Uzbekistan*, (1991) 180]; however, other experts argue that while *sympathy* and *support* for the movement, as for other Islamist movements in Central Asia, are growing, the numbers of actual adherents are not.

<sup>214</sup> Olcott, “Terrorism, Religious Extremism, and Regional Stability,” (2003) 56.

<sup>215</sup> These statements were made during a significant speech made by President Rakhmonov in July 2002, in the northern town of Isfara, following the arrests. That speech marked a shift in government policies on relations with Islam [“Islam and the State,” *International Crisis Group* (2003) 14].

<sup>216</sup> Specifically, during the speech Rakhmonov denounced the existence of 152 mosques in Isfara alone, servicing a population of 200,000. Because many of these mosques were unregistered, it was considered a

activity, as dozens of mosques were closed, imams dismissed, and the local madrassah shut down.<sup>217</sup> More dangerous than the actions themselves is the perception that “many of the actions and allegations seem to be spurious, more an attempt to root out political oppositions than seriously to prevent the growth of religious extremism”.<sup>218</sup>

Along with the castration of the IRP as opposition, Tajikistan has increased state controls over all levels of the official Islamic structure. The *Muftiate* in Tajikistan has been abolished and replaced with the Council of Ulama, which is subordinate to the government and the Committee for Religious Affairs. This has served to reinforce the clergy’s dependency on local authorities, who have final approval on the election of imams. All religious institutions must be registered with the state,<sup>219</sup> and an amendment in 1998 made the establishment of political and military-political organizations by mosques and madrassahs illegal.<sup>220</sup>

In its current form, the registration process in Tajikistan is fairly arbitrary, and much of the outcome is dependent on the relationship of the leadership of the mosque to the local administration. One of the most disputed aspects of the registration process is the legal requirement that a Friday mosque should serve a population of at least 15,000. This rule applies regardless of whether or not there are large numbers of non-Muslims in the area, and is widely regarded by Muslims as discriminatory, as there is no such rule for institutions of other faiths.<sup>221</sup> Frustration over this law, and the capriciousness of its application led to unrest in the northern districts of Chorku and Isfara in 2002, when the closure of three major mosques sparked protest and demonstrations. Although the unrest did not incite wider conflict as many had feared it would, the Chorku events demonstrated the potential for tensions to develop as a result of heavy-handed state intervention.<sup>222</sup>

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violation of the law on religious organization, which allows only one mosque for 15,000 people [“Tajikistan’s Politics,” *International Crisis Group* (2004) 8-9].

<sup>217</sup> By the October after the July 2002 speech, 33 of the Soghd Province’s 156 mosques had been closed for lack of registration [“Islam and the State,” *International Crisis Group* (2003) 15], and in November 2002, it was reported that 63 clergymen were facing charges of violating laws on political parties and religious organizations. In another, more recent event, a reported 1,000 young women from Isfara were refused internal passports in April 2004 for refusing to be photographed without headscarves [“Islam and the State,” *International Crisis Group* (2003) 9].

<sup>218</sup> “Islam and the State,” *International Crisis Group* (2003) 14.

<sup>219</sup> By 2003 there were 251 major mosques in the country for Friday prayers, with an additional 3,000 everyday mosques registered with the CRA [“Islam and the State,” *International Crisis Group* (2003) 15]

<sup>220</sup> The amendment was made as Article 4 on 13 November 1998, during the 10<sup>th</sup> session of parliament (*Majlisi Oliy*), cited in Olimova, “Conflict in Tajikistan” (1999).

<sup>221</sup> “Islam and the State,” *International Crisis Group* (2003) 15.

<sup>222</sup> Among the mosques closures that followed Rakhmonov’s October 2002 speech, the authorities controversially closed a Friday mosque in the town of Chorku, which has three major mosques serving a population of approximately 30,000 in a heavily Muslim area [“Islam and the State,” *International Crisis Group* (2003) 15-16].

In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Islamist movements have thus far been more limited, and state controls have been less severe. In both countries, conservative religious observance has been focused in the southern territories and among the large pockets of ethnic Uzbeks, as well as Dungans and Uighurs,<sup>223</sup> which have provided the main source of support for political Islamic groups in the two countries. However, recent developments indicate that the relative stability that has marked the transition in these two countries is fragile, as on-going retreat from policies of tolerance and democracy by the Kyrgyz state suggests that the trajectory of both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan could come to resemble that of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan under greater state controls.

Early after independence, Kyrgyz President Askar Akaev allowed Muslim activists in the south considerably more freedom than in other Central Asian states. Until 1995, in fact, there was very little significant consideration of religion by the Kyrgyz state. It wasn't until the appearance of foreign Islamic missionaries and the practice of more radical forms of Islam in the Ferghana Valley region in the late 1990s that Kyrgyzstan's tolerant position towards Islam began to change. Observers have remarked that, "as repression mounted in Uzbekistan, many members of radical groups sought refuge in Kyrgyzstan and began to have an influence on the local population",<sup>224</sup> by 1997, Kyrgyz officials were becoming concerned.

Nevertheless, the Kyrgyz official position on religion has been ambiguous, and there remains no coherent government policy. In law and public statements, the Kyrgyzstan government conforms to freedom of belief, but particularly when the security services are involved, the specter of Islamic extremism is invoked as a major security threat. Although the state seeks to control religious organizations through direct interference with the Muftiate and mosques, many of these efforts have been ineffective due to a lack of resources, specialists, and political will. In the late 1990s, efforts were made to control Islamic missionary activity, and since 1999, foreign Islamic missionaries have been effectively banned,<sup>225</sup> with a particular emphasis on emissaries from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Privately, however, many Islamic missionaries are still able to come under

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<sup>223</sup> The Dungans and Uighurs are both Muslim minority groups which currently reside across the Central Asian states. Uighurs compose the majority population in the Chinese region of Xinjiang.

<sup>224</sup> "Islam and the State," International Crisis Group (2003) 24.

<sup>225</sup> As a result of the Islamic bias in these policies, of the 677 missionaries that came to Kyrgyzstan between 1990 and 2000, the majority (480) came from Christian organizations, while only 176 were Islamic ["Islam and the State," International Crisis Group (2003) 25].

different titles, such as teachers or business people, and there are still Arab teachers in universities who will also teach Islam to students on a private basis.

Another main aspect of state control has been the registration of religious organizations, which was first implemented in November 1996.<sup>226</sup> Application of registration laws, however, is muddled and unclear,<sup>227</sup> and has had very little effect: by 1997, Kyrgyz officials claimed that of six hundred mosques in Osh province, only sixty were registered.<sup>228</sup> Despite renewed efforts and official claims of an eighty five percent registration rate, in May 2003 only twenty of Osh city's fifty one mosques were registered.<sup>229</sup> Many observers suggest that the reluctance of Kyrgyz authorities to close Muslim institutions may be due to the fact that they are overwhelmingly attended by ethnic Uzbeks, and that the Kyrgyz government may be unwilling to foment greater dissent and inter-ethnic tension in southern Kyrgyzstan, which is seen as an 'ethnic tinderbox'.<sup>230</sup>

The Kyrgyz state's reluctance to impose consistent regulations has provided too much latitude for informal methods of control, and as a consequence, "in much of Kyrgyzstan, and particularly in the south, informal methods of control are often more relevant than legal restrictions".<sup>231</sup> Much like in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, local authorities in some areas act independently, with little regard for central laws or regulations; for example, in early May 2003, the head of Karadarya district reportedly closed down six of the district's nine mosques, replacing the imam of the central mosque with his own candidate. According to the International Crisis Group, "this type of interference is fairly widespread, with local officials and informal leaders appointing their own people as imams in mosques and opposing appointments that do not suit them".<sup>232</sup> This alienates the people from the state through its representatives, and reinforces perceptions of regime corruption on which Islamist groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir thrive.

<sup>226</sup> The State Commission on Religious Affairs is the main governing body responsible for registration of religious organizations.

<sup>227</sup> For example, religious organizations can sometimes register as NGOs, and there is no clear policy of reprisal against organizations if they do refuse to register.

<sup>228</sup> Figures similar to these were reported in Jalal-Abad, where sixty eight out of 157 were registered; no mosques were registered in Naryn province. Many official figures are contradictory, because local officials currently keep no exact figures on numbers of religious organizations ["Islam and the State," *International Crisis Group* (2003) 25].

<sup>229</sup> Islam and the State," *International Crisis Group* (2003) 25

<sup>230</sup> Martin, "Whither Central Asia's Radicals?" (1999). Border tensions in Central Asia will be discussed in further detail later in this section.

<sup>231</sup> "Islam and the State," *International Crisis Group* (2003) 25.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid. 26.

Kazakhstan occupies the other end of the spectrum from Uzbekistan in terms of state controls. Kazakhstan's policies on religious affairs are the most liberal of all the Central Asian states. As in Kyrgyzstan, Islam plays only a minor role in the lives of most ethnic Kazakhs, factoring as a significant cultural feature but having little impact on everyday life. Despite considerable regional variation, external religious observance is relatively rare, particularly in the large cities. In the south, however, religious observance has been much greater than in the north and west,<sup>233</sup> and some observers indicate that the tendency towards political Islam is becoming more and more evident in the south of the country.<sup>234</sup>

State response to Islam in Kazakhstan has also been somewhat inconsistent. Until the late 1990s, most officials saw little reason to instill strict controls, and the general attitude of the state seems to be minimal interference, unless a real threat to state security is posed. Events of recent years and the rise in support for Hizb ut-Tahrir in the south of the country have prompted a debate among officials over 'new approaches' to the 'Islamist threat'. Nevertheless, there is little repression of religious activists, and no legislation that criminalizes the distribution of literature or the following of non-traditional Islamic tendencies. Registration of religious organizations, which is carried out by the Ministry of Justice and not the Council on Religious Affairs, is a technical requirement, rather than an assessment of the doctrine of the organizations. This is not to say that there are not considerable informal methods of control and monitoring; instead of direct state supervision, religious organizations at the local level are monitored by *akimats* (local government bodies); in areas where ethnic Uzbeks predominate, the traditional practice of *mahalla* communities are the informal monitors of activities in the local mosques.<sup>235</sup> As demonstrated by the cases of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, overreaction by authorities to a perceived Islamist threat would likely prove counterproductive.

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<sup>233</sup> The Russian population in Kazakhstan, which is almost as numerous as the ethnic Kazakhs, is concentrated in the north of the country, providing a further impediment to Islamic consolidation in that region. In the south, ethnic Uzbeks have formed the main support for Islamic activity, and some suggest that there has been a growth in 'Wahhabi' communities, consisting mainly of people escaping from oppression in Uzbekistan [*"Islam and the State," International Crisis Group (2003) 31*]

<sup>234</sup> Malashenko, "Islam and Politics," (1999).

<sup>235</sup> "Islam and the State," *International Crisis Group (2003) 32*.

**Security/ Military**

Beyond the realm of social responses, Central Asian states have often applied military responses to the problem of Islamism, a practice that is affecting the region's borders, interstate relations, and the health and welfare of the republic's populations.

Border tensions have become a ubiquitous component of interstate relations in Central Asia, as conflicts over state responses to extremism have flared. Uzbekistan, in particular, has felt itself vulnerable to incursion through the relatively porous Central Asian borders. Following the Islamist incursions into Uzbekistan from neighbouring Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and 2000, the Uzbek government initiated a programme of accelerated delimitation and demarcation of its borders; in general, border disputes have been settled unilaterally, contributing to the personal animosities that exist between state leaders, and limiting the potential for cohesive anti-terror solutions. Despite protests from the Kazakh government, Uzbekistan deployed military garrisons to its northern border with Kazakhstan in January 2000, ostensibly in response to the incursions of the previous year.<sup>236</sup> The resentment caused by these actions was apparent in the new military doctrine of Kazakhstan, signed shortly afterward on 10 February 2000, which said that "Kazakhstan considers its main foreign threats to include: the existing and potential zones of military conflicts near its borders, the possibility of extremists and terrorists penetrating the republic, and excessive build up of the military power by some countries of the region";<sup>237</sup> the comments were made in clear reference to Uzbekistan, which by then had doubled the strength of its troops deployed in its territory.<sup>238</sup>

Tensions between Uzbekistan and its eastern neighbours, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, are even more hostile, due in large part to the intense border demarcation that took place in the wake of the 1999 Tashkent bombings. Following the Batken uprising, the Uzbek authorities began to lay mines along its borders with both countries, and in Kyrgyzstan mines have sometimes been set across the territorial line.<sup>239</sup> The Kyrgyz government has regarded the mining, conducted without Kyrgyz consent, as an act of military intervention,<sup>240</sup> and in

<sup>236</sup> Pavel Pushkin, "Central Asian Republics Prepare Further Separation," WPS-Defense and Security (21 February 2000).

<sup>237</sup> Cited in Pushkin, "Central Asian Republics" (2000).

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Uzbek mine fields were set up around the Sokh enclave, effectively Kyrgyz territory.

<sup>240</sup> Dmitriy Trofimov, "Ethnic/ Territorial and Border Problems in Central Asia". Central Asia and the Caucasus 1.13 (2002) 58.

December 2000, gunfire was exchanged between Kyrgyz authorities and Uzbek border guards, who were closing off sections of Kyrgyz highways that crossed into Uzbekistan. In retaliation, the Kyrgyz side sealed off the Uzbek enclaves of Sokh and Shakhimardan.<sup>241</sup>

Relations between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have been even worse: since independence, Uzbekistan has conducted affairs with Tajikistan under two alternative policy models: the first, which was in place throughout most of the 1990s, involved a Tajik stabilization scenario. Under this policy, Tashkent sought to control the volatile situation in Tajikistan by exerting pressure on Dushanbe; this strategy backfired, however, and “in the end, Tashkent utterly antagonized the traditionally dependent neighbour, bringing about strong anti-Uzbek sentiments and a mood for ethnic/political revenge there”.<sup>242</sup>

Some observers, and especially the Uzbek government, believe that one outcome of this resentment was the covert use by the Tajik government of units of the IMU, based in the country. Tajik officials have consistently denied such accusations, but the fact remains that with little ability to control its territory, much less the border with Afghanistan, the fragile Tajik government has been unable to manage the Islamist groups that found refuge within the republic. Consequently, following the incursions in 1999 and 2000, the second policy model for Uzbek-Tajik relations was implemented, as “Uzbekistan effectively recognized the collapse of its strategy, and had to close the border. It began unilateral delimitation and demarcation, in some especially risky (above all, from the point of view of possible breakthroughs by units of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) sections, digging ditches and setting up barbed wire fences”.<sup>243</sup> In 2000, Uzbekistan began laying minefields, despite numerous protests from the Tajik government. In response, Tajikistan’s permanent representative at the OSCE Council openly accused Uzbekistan of seeking domination in the region in April 2001, and officially announced its refusal to cooperate with Uzbekistan in fighting against the IMU.<sup>244</sup> Following the example of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan has also laid mines along its border with Tajikistan, claiming the need to protect itself against Islamist movements, as well.

These approaches to border security as a response to Islamism are logically flawed and ultimately damaging. Instead of coordinating their security efforts, each state has tried to

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<sup>241</sup> Trofimov, “Border Problems in Central Asia” (2002) 58

<sup>242</sup> Ibid. 59-60

<sup>243</sup> Ibid. 60

<sup>244</sup> Ibid. 60

create its own bastion, expending effort and resources while neglecting the very areas these governments ought to be developing in order to win the support of their populations, such as economic stability and social liberalization. More than this, the actual victims of such 'border security' have been the very populations the governments are obligated to protect, as civilians have been killed by land mines and border guards.<sup>245</sup> In addition, by promoting a thriving business in smuggling, the border closures have further benefited the Islamist groups, which are able to bypass border controls through their extensive networks of supply and support bases. Consequently, while the border security measures enacted in response to Islamism prevent the effective coordination of official anti-terror structures, they provide Islamist groups with logistical and sympathetic support.

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## **Implications**

### **Political Centralization**

A major factor in the post-independence development of the Central Asian states has been their experiences with democratic rule, and the degrees to which such ideals and practices have been implemented into state policy. The spectrum of democratization in Central Asia varies from Uzbekistan, which has been criticized by the international community for its failure to deviate from its authoritarian structure, to Kyrgyzstan, which at one point was praised as the democratic model in Central Asia. However, within the programme of state responses to Islamism, even the exemplar of Central Asian democracy has shown signs of retreat from these objectives, as leaders increasingly tighten central control in their republics. The effect of this can be observed in a comparison between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which to varying degrees have avoided the requirements of responsible government by pleading the threat of Islamism, and Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, which have in the past experienced little in the way of religious extremism and have demonstrated greater commitment to democratic reforms. Kyrgyzstan, however, has recently been following the example of its southern neighbours and is increasingly citing Islamism as justification for tightened state controls. Although the degree of these threats is often overstated, the situation created by fearful state control has proven itself conducive to the spread of Islamist sympathies.

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<sup>245</sup> In 2002, it was reported that a total of fifty three Tajik citizens had been killed by land mines, including women, children, and the elderly [Olimova, "Antiterrorist Campaign," (2002) 42], and in 2004 it was estimated that over ninety civilians had been killed as a result of Uzbek land mines on the Kyrgyz and Tajik borders ["Uzbekistan to Remove Land Mines From Tajik, Kyrgyz Borders," UN Wire (25 June 2004). <[www.unwire.org/UNWire/20040625/449\\_25220.asp](http://www.unwire.org/UNWire/20040625/449_25220.asp)>].

Internally, the Central Asian states have been using the threat of Islamism against their political opponents, thereby preventing the establishment of a legitimate opposition to their regimes. Observers note that the Central Asian regimes are deliberately mistaking internal opposition groups for terrorists, using the threat of Islamism as a smokescreen to fight internal opposition and dissent.<sup>246</sup> Elements of this strategy include the following practices: first, as evidenced by the wide application of the term 'Wahhabi', all and any political opposition is defined as 'radical Islamists' or 'terrorists'; second, the thesis that forms the basis of state policies emphasizes the existence of some common terrorist front and a general plot of 'Islamic extremists', despite lack of information to substantiate such claims; and third, increasingly harsh methods of control against individuals who dare to challenge the official authorities.<sup>247</sup>

Of all of the Central Asian states, Uzbekistan has been the most consistent in its rejection of open government. Since independence, the regime has habitually used the risk of destabilization from external Islamist enemies as justification for its gradualist and guarded approach to reform, and the features of its 'democratization' have included the banning, arrest, and/ or exile of all opposition politicians, tight control of the press, and severely limited scope for the activities of human rights organizations.<sup>248</sup> Following a brief flirtation with legitimate opposition in the early 1990's, the Uzbek government initiated a crackdown on all opposition parties, accusing party leaders of Islamist activity.<sup>249</sup> Observers such as Keith Martin note that,

In perhaps a counter-intuitive way, Karimov has himself provided a push for moderate, secular oppositionists to join the camp of the Islamic groups, however reluctantly: after all, the Uzbek regime, particularly since the assassination attempt on President Karimov, has steadfastly accused even moderate members of the opposition of being part of what might be termed a 'vast Wahhabi conspiracy'.<sup>250</sup>

The level of paranoia with which the state has responded to potential opposition is illuminated by the example of Ibrohim Normatov, Chairman of Uzbek television and radio,

<sup>246</sup> Nikita Nikolayev, "Are the Threats Facing Central Asia Located Within?" *Rossiiskie Vesti* (21-27 November 2002) 10 (translated by WPS-Defense and Security).

<sup>247</sup> Nikolayev, "Threats Facing Central Asia," (2002) 10.

<sup>248</sup> Schoeberlain, "Ferghana Valley," (2001) 332.

<sup>249</sup> For example, in 1999, the leader of the Erk Democratic Party, Muhammed Solih, was tried and convicted in absentia for the Tashkent bomb attacks of that year, along with IMU leaders Juma Namangani and Tohir Yuldashev. Solih was also charged with having recruited the would-be assassins and training them in Chechnya, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. The trial and proceedings were widely regarded as biased and unsubstantiated (*RFE/RL Newswire*, 15 April 1999).

<sup>250</sup> Martin, "Whither Central Asia's Radicals?" (1999)

who responded to the Batken uprising in 1999 by speaking as a 'political commentator' on Uzbekistan Television<sup>251</sup> and describing BBC Radio as one of the conspirators in the international Islamist conspiracy.<sup>252</sup>

Unless there is a change in this dilapidated political environment, analyst groups predict that the elections due in December 2004 for a new bicameral parliament will be a farce, with staged contestation by state-sanctioned opposition parties. According to analysts, "they will be neither free nor fair, will further consolidate a small ruling elite, and [will] ensure that there are no legal channels for citizens opposed to present government policies to express themselves".<sup>253</sup> The implications of this are explained by Martin, who has noted that,

By withdrawing any possibility of legitimacy for a moderate, secular opposition, these groups will, in the long run, only have a choice between being marginalized and organizing under an Islamic umbrella, much in the way that, during and after the Tajik civil war, the opposition became increasingly organized and dominated by the Islamic Renaissance Party.<sup>254</sup>

In Tajikistan, the battle between the government and opposition has been more convoluted, as the distinction between Islamists and opposition is one of degrees of Islamization. As in Uzbekistan, the Tajikistan government uses the spectre of Islamist extremism and the remembered violence of the civil war to avoid turning the governing process over to the people, who may in their ignorance be tricked into abandoning a secular path.<sup>255</sup>

As a result of the Peace Accord which ended the Tajik civil war in 1997, Tajikistan became the only Central Asian state with an official Islamic Party in the government. Implementation of the peace accords, however, and the subsequent influence exerted by the new Islamic opposition has been limited; the IRP actually only received positions in the lower ranks of government, and was represented well below the targeted quota. Since then, President Rakhmonov has steadily strived to reduce its representation, and ongoing efforts at increasing the centralization of power around the President's office seem to indicate further marginalization of the IRP and other opposition groups in the future.<sup>256</sup>

<sup>251</sup> The network is a closely controlled official medium.

<sup>252</sup> Uzbekistan Television First Channel Network (Tashkent, 8 September 1999). Cited in Schoeberlain, "Ferghana Valley," (2001) 331.

<sup>253</sup> "The Failure of Reform in Uzbekistan: Ways Forward for the International Community," International Crisis Group Asia Report No. 76 (Osh/ Brussels, 11 March 2004) 4.

<sup>254</sup> Martin, "Whither Central Asia's Radicals?" (1999).

<sup>255</sup> Olcott, "Terrorism, Religious Extremism, and Regional Stability," (2003) 59.

<sup>256</sup> "Islam and the State," International Crisis Group (2003) 15.

However, by exerting increasing pressure on the Islamic Renaissance Party, and by failing to distinguish between it and more radical Islamist groups, the government is potentially threatening the basis of peace in the republic; since the signing of the peace agreement in 1997, Tajik President Rakhmonov has sought to consolidate his power, turning more and more to an increasingly narrow elite, often from his home region of Danghara. The ramifications of this policy are far-reaching, as “not only does narrowing the elite exclude competent professionals from state service, [but] it also raises discontent in other regional elites, thus exacerbating what was one of the major causes of the civil war”.<sup>257</sup> Tajikistan’s trend towards democratic façade is viewed with concern by many political analysts, and the 2000 parliamentary elections, which resulted in sweeping victories for Rakhmonov’s People’s Democratic Party of Tajikistan (PDPT), were widely condemned by international observers as neither free nor fair.<sup>258</sup> As parliamentary elections approach in early 2005, the presidency seems intent on continuing the consolidation of power at the expense of legal opposition groups. However, by emasculating and co-opting the legitimate opposition forces in Tajikistan, the increasingly centralized regime is creating the basis for more radical Islamist forces to find sympathy and support among a population disappointed by democracy.

Growing disillusionment with the promises of democratization run highest in Kyrgyzstan, which has been called the possible next battleground in the struggle with religious extremism.<sup>259</sup> Kyrgyzstan, it may be argued, is in particular peril, as it has more to lose in the event of a reversal of state policy, a threat which is appearing to be increasingly likely. In recent years, the Kyrgyz state has curtailed civil liberties and used a variety of methods to crack down on opposition and criticism. As recently as 1 July 2004, National Security Service Deputy Chairman Tokov Mamytov addressed the Kyrgyz parliament with reports that Islamist groups were escalating their activities in the republic, and that Hizb ut-Tahrir membership, in particular, had swelled by 1,800 in the past year. He warned of integration between al-Qaeda and local extremist groups and of potential terrorist strikes “against Western diplomatic missions and military sites of the antiterrorist coalition in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan”.<sup>260</sup> The following day, ten reportedly high-ranking officials were arrested

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<sup>257</sup>“Tajikistan’s Politics,” *International Crisis Group* (2004) 5.

<sup>258</sup> Marie Struthers, “Tajik Parliamentary Elections: One Step Forward, One Step Back”. *Eurasia Insight* (28 February 2000) <[www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/hrr022800.shtml](http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/hrr022800.shtml)>

<sup>259</sup> *RFE/RL Central Asia Report* 4.26 (6 July 2004)

<sup>260</sup> *RFE/RL Central Asia Report* 4.26 (6 July 2004)

on suspicion of espionage and collaboration with foreign countries and international terrorist organizations.<sup>261</sup>

This news has been met with suspicion and dismay by many observers, who wonder whether “Kyrgyz authorities [are] using the threat of terrorism as a pretext to tighten the screws and crank down on domestic opposition”.<sup>262</sup> The reasons for such concerns are clear, especially in light of recent gestures on the part of the Kyrgyz authorities that illustrate its retreat from earlier democratic advances. For example, on 8 June 2004, President Akaev inauspiciously compared Western efforts to export democracy to the Bolshevik export of revolution.<sup>263</sup> Also in early June, Kyrgyzstan’s official *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* followed the lead from Uzbekistan and suggested that the United States might be using NGO groups like the National Democratic Institute, Freedom House, and George Soros’ Open Society to foment a revolution in Kyrgyzstan like that which took place in Georgia.

Such growing tendencies have led to the suggestion that Kyrgyzstan’s social and political stability is under threat, and its hard-won democratic achievements are being eroded. Experts maintain that the greatest threat to Kyrgyzstan remains public discontent, and they fear that “if ordinary citizens come to feel that there is diminishing commitment to or chances for democracy, they may look elsewhere to address their grievances”,<sup>264</sup> in an environment where all legitimate opposition has been suppressed or co-opted, Islamist forces may increasingly become the mouthpiece for such public discontent, making the Kyrgyz authorities’ prophecies self-fulfilling.

In Kazakhstan, restrictions on political freedom and censorship of the media have thus far remained comparably light, and public opinion is still generally supportive of the present regime. The Kazakh authorities have been reluctant to follow the example of Kyrgyzstan and justify intensified state controls with the threat of Islamist groups. As a result, although the religious traditions of the two nomadic countries has historically been similar, Kazakhstan has not witnessed the increase in Islamist activity that has been reported in Kyrgyzstan.

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<sup>261</sup> Information on the arrests has not been forthcoming, and on 3 July 2004, *Rossiskaya gazeta* reported that the SNB’s press center had announced no information about the individuals arrested or the crimes there were being held for [Vladimir Berezovski, “Arrests in Kyrgyzstan: Extremists’ Spies?” *Rossiskaya gazeta* (3 July 2004)]

<sup>262</sup> RFE/RL Central Asia Report. (6 July 2004)

<sup>263</sup> Askar Akaev, “‘Export of Democracy’ = ‘Export of Revolution’: Eurasia and the Challenge of the New Century,” *Rossiskaya gazeta* (8 June 2004)

<sup>264</sup> “Is Radical Islam Inevitable?” *International Crisis Group*. (2003) i.

The Central Asian republics, although different in the degrees of their responses to Islamism, share a number of political characteristics that make reform problematic. The Central Asian regimes are composed of a type of hybrid 'clan-nomenklatura' structure of rule that has developed over many decades,<sup>265</sup> and the general political beliefs of the elite have consistently shown the view that state control in all spheres is the only way to ensure social stability and the preservation of their power.<sup>266</sup>

The continued emphasis on clan relations, in combination with the concentration of power on the person of the president throughout Central Asia, makes policy application more arbitrary, and impedes the establishment of institution building and the establishment of the rule of law. This inheritance, however, is not inescapable; as the example of Kazakhstan has clearly shown, determined commitment on the part of state leaders to implement elements of reform can have significant effect.

Such efforts are even more necessary in the remaining Central Asian states, where, since independence, the centralization of power has been intensified, rather than relinquished.<sup>267</sup> This political environment in turn shapes the manner in which grievances are expressed, and in the context of these republics, with their increasingly powerful presidencies and trends of diminishing human rights and freedom of the press, Islamist groups are increasingly becoming an effective means of mobilizing political opposition.

### **Regional Tensions**

The implications of state activities and their varying responses to Islamism are far from limited to internal affairs. In fact, one of the most significant ramifications of the state-led assault against Islamism has been the deterioration of inter-state relations in Central Asia. The failure of the republics to form an effective coalition against Islamism has led to the development of tensions and blockages that threaten to throw the fragile region deeper into economic crisis and exacerbate the conditions currently feeding into Islamist support.

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<sup>265</sup> Boris Rumer, "Economic Crisis and Growing Intra-regional Tensions", Central Asia and the New Global Economy, ed. Boris Rumer (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2000) 39.

<sup>266</sup> "Islam and the State," International Crisis Group (2003) 6.

<sup>267</sup> "Calming the Ferghana Valley: Development and Dialogue in the Heart of Central Asia," The Center for Preventative Action's Preventative Reports (Vol. 4). (New York: The Century Foundation Press, 1999)

Although international efforts at encouraging regional cooperation have found limited success,<sup>268</sup> attempts to instigate self-sustaining regional coalitions have thus far proven largely unsuccessful. Furthermore, the heightened border regimes which have been a characteristic of national responses to Islamism have further undermined the potential for such cooperation to take place, as states continue throw accusations at one another from within their garrison-like system of national lines.

### **Economic Degradation**

The first half of the 1990s was characterized by the general belief that the basic dynamics of change in post-Soviet Central Asia would consist of two key processes: the establishment of political democracy and the transition from the Soviet command-mobilization economy to a market-based system. However, since acquiring independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the countries of Central Asia have responded to the need for economic reform with varying degrees of alacrity, ranging from general commitment to full resistance. As a result, while the consolidation of authoritarian regimes bears little resemblance to democracy, some of Central Asian states have also undergone economic degradation, precipitous declines in the standard of living, and a dismantling of the social infrastructure. As the optimism that accompanied early independence has been terribly disappointed, the actual living conditions of the populations have grown increasingly divergent from their expectations. This is creating wide sentiments of deprivation and feelings of resentment towards the states. Delegitimization of state authority also leads to rising support for alternative regime, including political Islam.

In Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, economic reforms have been weakly implemented, if at all, largely as a result of state allegations of an Islamist threat.<sup>269</sup> Uzbekistan has consistently been the most reluctant to engage in reform, and after a promising start in 1995 and 1996, attempts at restructuring were abandoned. Instead, President Karimov developed his own economic philosophy that stressed social stability over market reforms, and effectively preserved many elements of central planning and state control.<sup>270</sup> In Tajikistan, meanwhile, a

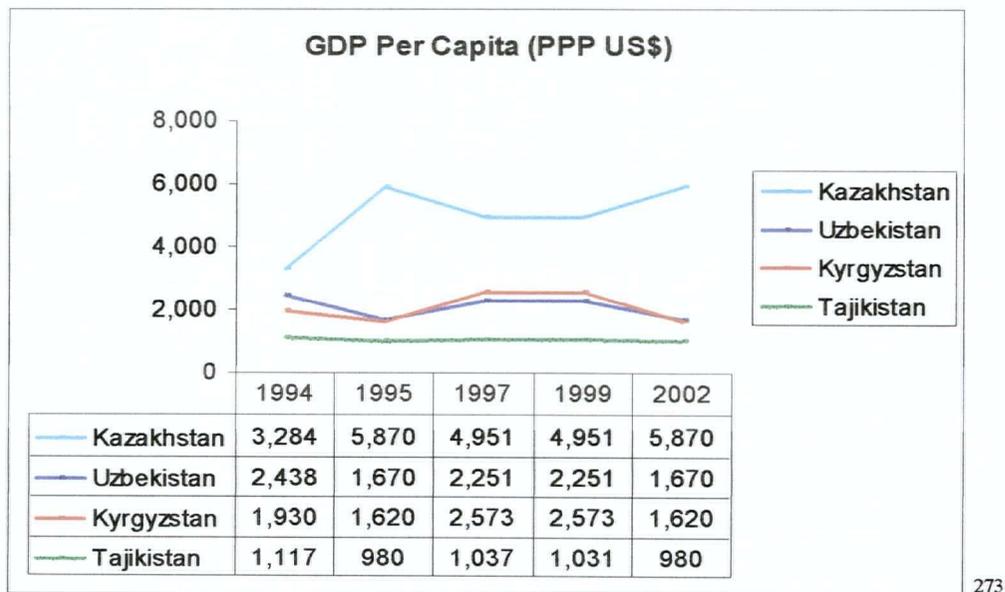
<sup>268</sup> Three lines of collaboration in the field of security and antiterrorism have been established: the CIS Antiterrorist Center and the Collective Rapid Deployment Forces, the Shanghai Cooperative Organization (SCO), as well as bilateral military ties with India, China and Turkey.

<sup>269</sup> There are, of course, other reasons for the obstruction of reform, including bureaucratic corruption and state reluctance to disperse its power. However, in the case of Central Asia, many of these reasons have been masked by the states' threat that Islamist destabilization would result from the process of reform.

<sup>270</sup> "The Failure of Reform," International Crisis Group (2004) 1.

lack of political will has resulted in essentially the same level of reform as Uzbekistan, for “while significant economic reforms exist on paper in Tajikistan, the government’s ineffectual and overriding concern for its own security has assured that little state-sponsored transformation has taken place”.<sup>271</sup>

The states have frequently attributed this refusal to embrace economic reform to the fear of Islamism, as it was warned that societies with little experience in democracy and privatization would be easily tempted from the secular path.<sup>272</sup> In contrast, although Uzbekistan’s policies allowed it to avoid the short term economic declines that affected the other Central Asian republics after independence, in the longer term, this ‘slow transition’ has dragged on, effectively stagnating the economies of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Subsequently, the economy of Uzbekistan has actually begun to decline.



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While the failure of economic reform in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan has resulted in stagnation and depression, the contrasting experiences of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have proven the assumption of social instability as a consequence of reform wrong. Olcott reports that, “for the last ten years two Central Asian states, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, have been way ahead of the other post-Soviet states according to many macro-economic indicators, or at least keeping quite close to Russia”,<sup>274</sup> proving that restructuring does not cause Islamic

<sup>271</sup>“Tensions and Reforms,” *Ferghana Valley Working Group* (1999) 83

<sup>272</sup> Olcott, “Terrorism, Religious Extremism, and Regional Stability,” (2003) 59.

<sup>273</sup> *Human Development Report*, (United Nations Development Programme, 1996-2004).

<sup>274</sup> Olcott, “Terrorism, Religious Extremism, and Regional Stability,” (2003) 58.

turmoil; indeed, judging by the relative conditions of the states today, the opposite appears to be true.<sup>275</sup>

The implications of this reluctance to engage in reforms reach well beyond the local economic sector, and they affect Central Asia as a whole. In Uzbekistan, the government has relied on foreign lending to support domestic production. However, because of the state's refusal to engage in political, social and economic reforms, particularly in terms of its stance on Islamism,<sup>276</sup> important foreign lending is dwindling, with many international donors withdrawing aid from the country.<sup>277</sup> In addition, citing its fear of uncontrolled migration and the movement of Islamic militants, Tashkent has tightened its border, customs, and migration control.<sup>278</sup> As a result of these heightened security measures, trade across the formerly porous Central Asian borders has come to a virtual halt; particularly in the volatile Ferghana Valley, the increasing barriers have had a devastating impact on the natural economic and social integrity of the region.<sup>279</sup> The markets in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which used to draw buyers and sellers from across the region, have been virtually shut down, as "Uzbek custom official are tasked with the protection of Uzbekistan's unreformed monetary policy, and in effect, serve as robber barons, extracting bribes from merchants from all sides".<sup>280</sup> As a result of the changed transit routes in all three countries, the society and economy in the valley are in a state of turmoil: while industry is disappearing and people are leaving the cities, there is a relative or even absolute contraction of the educational, medical and scientific potential,<sup>281</sup> effectively limiting the chances for short-term recovery.

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<sup>275</sup> Regarding the states' relative suitability for reform, the argument that Uzbekistan was less prepared for restructuring rings hollow: "in fact Uzbekistan, much like Azerbaijan and Georgia, seemed better prepared for the transition to a market economy than countries like Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, because in Uzbekistan (and in these other states) there was capital accumulation in the Soviet period, through the functioning of the gray economy" [Olcott, "Terrorism, Religious Extremism, and Regional Stability," (2003) 59].

<sup>276</sup> For example, recommendations set out by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) for political and economic reform have not been met, nor have any of the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture's twenty two recommendations have been fully implemented ["The Failure of Reform In Uzbekistan," *International Crisis Group* (2004) i].

<sup>277</sup> These include the EBRD, which pulled aid to Uzbekistan in April 2004, citing slow reform and the country's poor human rights record ["EBRD Withdraws Aid to Uzbekistan," *BBC News*, (6 April 2004) <[news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/3605181.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/3605181.stm)>]; in July 2004, the United States announced its decision to freeze aid to Uzbekistan as a result of a "lack of progress on democratic reform" [*RFE/RL Central Asia Report*, 4.28 (21 July 2004)].

<sup>278</sup> Olimova, "Antiterrorist Campaign in Afghanistan," (2002) 42.

<sup>279</sup> Schoeberlain, "Ferghana Valley," (2001) 325.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.* 325.

<sup>281</sup> Olimova, "Antiterrorist Campaign in Afghanistan," (2002) 39.

The effects of these state policies are clear: poverty is spreading across the Ferghana Valley republics. As Boris Rumer explains, “the incessant demographic growth, given the simultaneous process of rapid economic decline (...) has had the effect of concentrating an ever greater proportion of the labour force in agriculture and in the urban service sphere”.<sup>282</sup> Both sectors, and agriculture especially, had already been overburdened with labour, leading to dramatic declines in labour productivity across sectors. Ironically, Uzbeks have suffered more in relative terms; according to the EBRD, Uzbek workers are now worse off than many of their neighbours, earning an average real income of approximately forty US dollars per month, as opposed to fifty five dollars in Kyrgyzstan and one hundred and twenty dollars in Kazakhstan.<sup>283</sup> According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Uzbek economy grew by only 0.3 percent in 2003, and the GDP per capita has been falling every year since 1998, reaching just three hundred and fifty US dollars per capita in 2003.<sup>284</sup> In relative terms, indicators in the Ferghana Valley are deteriorating faster than in the rest of their respective countries. The Soghd region, for example, was one of the richest areas in Tajikistan under Soviet power, but since independence has seen its economy fall than the rest of the country in the past few years.<sup>285</sup> In Tajikistan as a whole, an astonishing eighty percent of people live below the poverty line, and close to thirty percent are unemployed.<sup>286</sup> Throughout the region, poverty is concentrated in the rural areas, precisely the regions that have engendered the most radical Islamist support. As Olimova observes, “poverty is spreading together with contracted possibilities for many people. They can no longer afford good education, medical help and wholesome food – this means that they have no choice and cannot control their lives”.<sup>287</sup>

The economic failure that has so characterized such large portions of Central Asia has already provoked social discontent, and as many experts argue, “this deteriorating socio-economic environment is provoking a rising tide of popular frustration which in some regions fosters support for Islamist groups”.<sup>288</sup> Particularly in the three countries of the Ferghana Valley, the combination of a rapidly growing population and a sharply declining economy has meant that employment, especially of the youth, is one of the most explosive

<sup>282</sup> Rumer, “Economic Crisis,” (2000) 4.

<sup>283</sup> EBRD figures cited in “The Failure of Reform In Uzbekistan,” *International Crisis* (2004) 1.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.* (2004) i.

<sup>285</sup> In 2002, the economic situation in the Soghd region worsened for thirty two percent of families, while that figure for the rest of the republic was twenty nine percent [Olimova, “Antiterrorist Campaign in Afghanistan,” (2002) 40].

<sup>286</sup> “Tajikistan: An Uncertain Peace,” *International Crisis Group Asia Report No. 30*. (24 December 2001) ii.

<sup>287</sup> Olimova, “Antiterrorist Campaign in Afghanistan,” (2002) 40.

<sup>288</sup> “The Failure of Reform In Uzbekistan (2004) ii.

social issues, and observers note that “young people form groups that see no future for themselves – they are open to asocial influences, totalitarian religious teachings, extremism, and drug pushing”.<sup>289</sup> Although the revival of Islamic social and cultural traditions in post-Soviet Central Asia did not dictate a social willingness to accept Islamic fundamentalism as a way of life, “the reality is that the declining economic condition (which, for many, is tantamount to the direst impoverishment) helps to make the ideas of Islamic radicalism more acceptable, especially among the mass of unemployed youth”. In addition, as Rumer explains, “it also enables Muslim militants, whether home-grown or foreign volunteers, to recruit supporters and mobilize them for the struggle against Karimov’s secular state system and for the ‘establishment of the law of sharia’”.<sup>290</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In their efforts to control religion and prevent the rise of political Islam, Central Asian leaders have often created the very conditions of instability that are attributed to Islamists. Social controls in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have weakened the official clergy to the point where they are little more than government appendages, and are unable to contribute to the development of a moderate and reformed religion. The vacuum created by their suppression has allowed underground Islamist groups, operating beyond the scope of state controls, to flourish and provide a counterbalance to the extreme passivity of state religion. As part of the attempt to prevent the creation of alternative sources of authority, the Central Asian states have also worked to centralize power in their own hands, and in Kyrgyzstan, officials have actually retreated from earlier democratic achievements and are becoming increasingly authoritarian. In many instances, the threat of Islamism has been cited as justification for such practices.

The effects of these responses to Islamism have extended far beyond state borders and have had an impact on the entire region. Increased militarization and the use of threats in interstate negotiations have significantly limited the states’ capacity to coordinate their anti-terrorist activity. As a result, Islamists are able to move illegally across borders with little impediment, while legitimate commerce and innocent civilians are falling victim to aggressive security measures. Finally, the added weight of these policies on the region’s fragile economies is proving overwhelming, and without the restructuring needed for

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<sup>289</sup> Olimova, “Antiterrorist Campaign in Afghanistan,” (2002) 40.

<sup>290</sup> Rumer, “Economic Crisis,” (2000) 38.

survival, the heavily interdependent economies of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are plummeting, along with the living conditions of the population.

In this atmosphere of falling expectations and increasing discontent, the underground Islamist groups capitalize on sentiments of deprivation and dissatisfaction, offering hope for future improvements, something which the state officials seem unable to provide. Although Central Asians are reluctant to accept the strict codes of Islamic law that these groups promote, for many people the reality of their current conditions makes them more likely to identify with these movements and support them as the only available source of opposition against a government that has neglected its obligations to its people in its overzealous assault against Islamism.

Although Islamism in Central Asia is a factor that must be addressed, the brutality with which some of the governments have responded to it have been unwarranted and self-defeating, as they merely contribute to the appeal of the Islamist groups while reducing the states' capacities to address the problem.

*The greater the violence used against people who believe they are in the right, the greater the likelihood of their resistance, to the extent of their capacities.*<sup>291</sup>

### **Analysis**

Despite its relatively secular nature and traditionally non-challenging relationship with the state, Central Asian Islam has nevertheless produced political manifestations in regional opposition groups today. Why has this happened? Clearly, the reasons behind this development are multi-faceted and complex, involving both internal and external pressures, and it would be overly simplistic to assert that any one factor has acted in isolation. Based on the analysis of the first chapter, however, the argument that Islamism is a natural and inevitable outgrowth of Islam can be discarded as an explanation.<sup>292</sup> Instead, the argument of this thesis is that, both directly and indirectly, state responses to Islamism have created a self-perpetuating cycle in which excessive government controls have created an environment of social frustration that is conducive to the rise of unofficial opposition groups, while simultaneously reducing the states' capacity to oppose the movement. In this context, where there are no moderate authority alternatives and little opportunity to achieve change within existing state structures, Islamism has emerged as the main mobilization of opposition forces, providing an alternative system based on the failures of the state and the symbols of a common and persecuted ideology.

Although Central Asia faces considerable obstacles in its development, the effect of political Islam has served to intensify these problems. The state has contributed to the development of political Islam in Central Asia in a number of ways: indirectly, the states have exaggerated the claims of an Islamist threat, justifying state policies that have led to economic, political and social deterioration. This has resulted in widespread social dissatisfaction with the regime, while also effectively publicizing Islamism in the media and ensuring that the movement maintains relevance as the prime force of state opposition; combined, these effects have encouraged popular sympathy and support for the alternative regime proposed by the Islamists. Directly, state persecution of Islam has created a common sense of victimization that is based on a shared and deeply-held feature of Central Asian identity. Harsh suppression of moderate Islamic structures have also created an ideological void that has facilitated the spread of radical Islamist groups; in their effort to prevent the establishment of an independent religious authority, these regimes have eliminated the

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<sup>291</sup> Ted Gurr, "The Revolution-Social-Change Nexus: Some Old Theories and New Hypotheses," *Comparative Politics*, 5.3 Special Issue on Revolution and Social Change (April 1973) 386.

<sup>292</sup> For more details on this, refer to pages 9-11 in the Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework.

structures which normally would have opposed the extremism of the region's political Islamist groups while actually publicizing the capacity of the Islamist opposition.

In search of a deeper understanding of these processes, the central questions of this research will be broken down into three sections of analysis. One, the development and activation of social opposition; two, the politicization of Islam and the mobilization of opposition around it; and three, the potential of political Islam in Central Asia.

The role of the state in shaping underlying state-social tensions has been emphasized by a number of theorists, including Ted Gurr, James Davies, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly. In their analyses, they underline that in an environment of declining social standards, such as the southern states of Central Asia, the failed expectations of the population are targeted at the state, which has proven unable to fulfill its obligations to the people. Gurr submits a label for this state of frustrated expectation: relative deprivation, which is the perception of the difference between actors' value expectations and their value capabilities.<sup>293</sup> Such has been the experience in Central Asia, as gains in the Soviet era that were expected to increase under independence were instead sacrificed, largely as a result of state responses to Islamism. As Gurr and others stress, this sense of frustration is the basic precondition for civil aggression.<sup>294</sup>

In order to more fully apply this concept of deprivation to Central Asia, it is useful to apply three of Gurr's conditions that cause pervasive and intense deprivation to the Central Asian model. These include, 1) economic discrimination, or the systemic exclusion of social groups from higher value positions; 2) political discrimination, which, similarly, is the systematic limitation in form, norm or practice of a social group's opportunities to participate in political activities or to attain elite positions; and, 3) the presence of a significant separatist regional or ethnic group.<sup>295</sup>

The perception of economic discrimination is acute in Central Asia, where state controls have created an economic crisis in the region, one that is being borne directly by the 'losers'

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<sup>293</sup> For more information on this, refer back to page 12 of Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework, or see Gurr, "Civil Strife," (1968) 1104.

<sup>294</sup> Gurr, "Civil Strife," (1968) 1104.

<sup>295</sup> Gurr, "Civil Strife," (1968) 1109-10. In his analysis, Gurr assesses the intensity of each factor with sets of indicators that are not readily available in the case of Central Asia. This does not invalidate the application of the theory, however, as it can still be used as a general framework for assessing civil strife in Central Asia. Even without the concrete data, it is clear that these factors are relevant to this case study, making retention of the theory valuable for a later point when indicators may become reliable and available.

of transition. While both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan embarked on early economic reform, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have consistently cited security concerns and a looming Islamist threat for their failure to implement effective economic reforms. However, the years since independence have demonstrated the tragic fallacy of such convictions, as not only have Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan avoided much of the insurgency that has pocked Uzbekistan and Tajikistan's recent history, but both have also enjoyed comparative economic growth. In contrast, the economic situations in both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are deteriorating as commerce is obstructed and development stagnates. The situation is likely to worsen, especially in Uzbekistan as a result of its strategy of dependence on foreign assistance. By refusing to implement any foreign-advised strategies and suggestions for human rights reform, Uzbekistan has effectively alienated most of its major donors, losing significant funding from the EBRD in April 2004 and US assistance in July 2004.

Such disappointed expectations are particularly potent among societies that had, under Soviet rule, enjoyed some measure of privilege, such as the Soghd region of Tajikistan and the Ferghana Valley communities, which, since independence, have seen their standards of living plummet farther and faster than other social groups in the region. This is in contrast to the vastly improved living conditions of the ruling elites, which are primarily centralized within particular ethnic or regional groups. Not only does this create clear images of economic discrepancy, but it also emphasizes the discriminatory element of privilege in the new Central Asian regimes.

The second element in the construction of deprivation – political discrimination – also has particular relevance in Central Asia. The centralization of power within the Central Asian regimes has become an escalating trend, particularly in the states of the Ferghana Valley. States are withdrawing from their early promises of democratization – sometimes backstepping over previous accomplishments – to promote uncontested, authoritarian rule. Elections have been widely criticized as being unfair and undemocratic, and many of the leaders have manipulated the system to entrench their rule, lengthening office terms and creating self-serving ‘opposition’ groups that merely promote the leaders’ own authority. While these controls erode state infrastructure by limiting the participation of skilled experts, the centralization of power in the clan- and region-based system of associations also has deeper meaning for expectations of future improvements: while governments focus influence and wealth on members of their own group, those that have been excluded from power see not only the reduction in their own capacity and social status, but the corroded democratic

processes also guarantee little hope for improving the situation within the existing political framework. As Schoerberlein observes, "if governments fail to allow political participation, then Islam will serve as an effective means of mobilizing political opposition, which can take an extremist form".<sup>296</sup> The irony is that while political pluralism is obstructed through claims of an Islamist threat to state stability, the resultant disappointment of expectations and the bitterness of a stagnant political and social hierarchy have done more to create conditions of conflict. As a result, hostilities simmer below the surface and encourage the transfer of social loyalty from the unresponsive state to the promises of the opposition.

Another factor in the simmering discontent is the ethnic and regional tensions of Central Asia, which make the presence of large minority groups in each republic a concern in the maintenance of state authority. This is especially true in regard to ethnic Uzbeks, many of whom have fled repression against Muslims within their own country and have settled in the neighbouring republics. Today, Uzbeks form a significant percentage of the population in each of the Central Asian states, constituting approximately one fourth of Tajikistan's population, as well as large numbers in southern Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.<sup>297</sup> Because support for Islamist ideals has traditionally been strongest among these Uzbek communities,<sup>298</sup> state security measures have focused primarily on these groups, augmenting dangerous ethnic tensions and creating sentiments of solidarity and opposition among the persecuted groups. At the same time, Uzbekistan, while persecuting suspected Wahhabites into exile and demanding harsher security measures from its neighbours, has declared its intention to intervene in the sovereignty of other states in order to protect Uzbeks living outside its borders.<sup>299</sup> These tensions are solidifying sentiments of persecution and isolation within the state, and they also build upon the inter-state tensions that continue to prevent effective counter-terrorist coordination. Furthermore, the possibility of ethnic violence, focused around religious mobilization, continues to grow.

Beyond Gurr's three conditions, the anti-Islamist actions of the states have done more to create conditions of intense discontent. The irresponsibility that the states have shown in their anti-Islamist offensive has incited further distain from their societies. Indeed, the

<sup>296</sup> Schoerberlain, "Ferghana Valley," (2001) 338.

<sup>297</sup> CIA World Factbook (Updated 11 May 2004) <[www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/](http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/)>.

<sup>298</sup> This trend is beginning to change, however, as growing numbers of Kyrgyz have been associated with Hizb ut-Tahrir.

<sup>299</sup> See William D Shingleton and John McConnell, "From Tamerlane to Terrorism: The Shifting Basis of Uzbek Foreign Policy," Harvard Asia Quarterly (22 March 2001) <[www.fas.harvard.edu/~asiactr/haq/200101/0101a004.htm](http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~asiactr/haq/200101/0101a004.htm)>.

victimization of the population has become a defining characteristic of the assault on political Islam, thus creating a vicious cycle in which state repression - itself a response to Islamist activity - only strengthens the movement. Each of the Central Asian states recently reaffirmed the secondary nature of human rights by co-signing a Russia-initiated statement of harsh criticism of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) for allegedly politicizing fixating on human rights to the exclusion of security concerns.<sup>300</sup> Uzbekistan has failed to fully implement any of the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture's twenty two recommendations,<sup>301</sup> and thousands of prisoners remain incarcerated on the basis of political accusations. NGO activities have been strictly curtailed in the republics of the Ferghana Valley (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan), under claims that such pluralism would lead to the establishment of an Islamic state. Uzbek President Karimov has steadfastly refused pressure for constitutional reforms, arguing,

By what means do they want to get rid of the constitution.... Just like what happened in Georgia, the rose revolution, like that? They will come with roses, and the president and the government will say the constitution should be abolished. Then we will suddenly become an Islamic state.<sup>302</sup>

Olcott, however, observes the serious error of such agendas, noting that,

It is one thing to target individuals with known terrorist links, and quite another to repress an entire nation, because there is a risk that ordinary citizens might decide at some point to cast their lot in with extremist groups because their living conditions are becoming so dire that they have nothing to lose.<sup>303</sup>

As we have seen, these policies have been extremely effective in victimizing the population and alienating it from the state, thereby forming the foundation for social unrest. In addition to the indirect contributions of the state, however, official measures have also directly promoted the specific growth of Islamism. The failures and corruption of the state, which operate under tenuous pretence of democracy, have served to delegitimize the regimes and the democratic system. At the same time, the determined and targeted repression of religious authorities has created an environment of ideological void which the moderate official clergy has been unable to fill, particularly as Central Asians turned to Islam during the nationalism

<sup>300</sup> See *RFE/RL Central Asia Report*, 4.27 (13 July 2004).

<sup>301</sup> "The Failure of Reform in Uzbekistan: Ways Forward for the International Community," *International Crisis Group Asia Report No. 76* (Osh/ Brussels, 11 March 2004) i.

<sup>302</sup> *RFE/RL Central Asia Report*, 4.18 (3 May 2004). Georgia's "Rose Revolution" took place in November, 2003, when mass protests against alleged irregularities in the election resulted in the bloodless coup that ousted President Shevardnadze from government and established Saakashvili as the new leader. Observers predict that the same could take place in any of the Central Asian states. For more information, see "Profile: Eduard Shevardnadze," *BBC News* (23 November 2003). Also, *RFE/RL Central Asia Report*, 4.27 (13 July 2004).

<sup>303</sup> Olcott, "Terrorism, Religious Extremism, and Regional Stability," (2003) 59.

of the early 1990s. Unofficial Islamist structures, therefore, have been able to benefit from this and the state's inadvertent promotion of Islamism as an effective political opposition tool.

Corruption has become a ubiquitous syndrome of the security obsession in Central Asia, and the more freedom states have granted security forces in their pursuit of potential Islamists, the more the populations have suffered from systemic brutality and injustice. Reports of police officers planting evidence and extorting money are common within the countries of the Ferghana Valley, while tales of torture and show trials have garnered the outrage of the international community and have destroyed people's faith in the regime. The degeneration of state propriety is especially dangerous in Kyrgyzstan, where people are becoming increasingly disillusioned by the failures of democracy and may begin to abandon their stabilizing secularization for an alternative approach. Recently, the ramifications of a predatorial police force were made chillingly clear in Uzbekistan in the spring of 2004, when a series of suicide bombings and shootouts targeting police officers took place in Bukhara and Tashkent between 28 March and 1 April 2004, killing close to fifty people.<sup>304</sup> This was followed by another set of attacks on 30 June 2004, which killed four people.<sup>305</sup> While the unrest was localized in Uzbekistan, many experts fear that future violence, once ignited, could rapidly spread into the other Ferghana Valley states and the Central Asian region.<sup>306</sup> This fear has been ratified by the states themselves, which, following the violence in Uzbekistan, have scrambled to tighten their border security.<sup>307</sup> However, by enabling a powerful, yet corrupt security force to represent the state to its people, the regimes are eroding the support that they would require for stabilization and recovery following conflict.

In general, it may be said that the overwhelming militarization of the Islamist issue – to the exclusion of social responses – has allowed the regions to perceive political Islam as a threat in itself, instead of as a symptom of wider failings. The emphasis on military responses and the subsequent deterioration of inter-state relations, such as the Uzbek and Kyrgyz bombing

<sup>304</sup> Uzbek Prosecutor-General Rashid Qodirov said that the violence claimed the lives of 33 terrorists, 10 policemen, and 4 civilians [*RFE/RL Central Asia Report*, 4.18 (3 May 2004)].

<sup>305</sup> The attacks came within days of the opening of trials for those accused of the March/April bombings. According to official reports, the bombings appeared to target the Israeli and US embassies, as well as the prosecutor general's office. Although the IMU has claimed responsibility for the second set of attacks, President Karimov has asserted that the non-violent Hizb ut-Tahrir stands behind the attacks [*ITAR-TASS*, (1 August 2004)]. The Uzbek state had tried to hold HT responsible for the March/April bombings, but was eventually forced to consider alternatives due to lack of evidence [Dmitri Glumskov and Boris Volkhonsky, "Tashkent Facing Terrorism," *Kommersant* (31 March 2004) 9]. Hizb ut-Tahrir has denied involvement in either of the attacks.

<sup>306</sup> See, for example, Rumer, "Economic Crisis," (2000) 52.

<sup>307</sup> For more information, see *ITAR-TASS*, (2 August 2004).

of Tajik territory in 1999 and the mining of border territories, have ultimately benefited Islamist operations. The fortification of border and militaries, along with the refusal to engage in region-wide capacity-building, has prevented the formation of any effective regional coordinated anti-terrorist organization. Islamist groups are well aware of these divisions, and have been able to effectively orchestrate attacks to maximize inter-state tensions, prevent coordinated state responses, and encourage extreme military responses, which have proven to be the most conducive to creating sympathy to the Islamist movement.

Particularly in terms of militarization, however, it would be naïve to assume that Central Asian leaders are making and enforcing those security decisions in the absence of international influence and input. Particularly since 11 September 2001, there has been intense international attention focused on the region, and despite the world communities' rhetorical critiques of human rights and political abuses, international assistance to the region has reflected a clear shift to the promotion of military capability and ideals in the region. Although the United States, for example, has acknowledged that, "in Central Asia, poor economic and social conditions and widespread corruption strengthen the appeal of extremist Islam",<sup>308</sup> US financial assistance has reflected the changing priorities of US interests in Central Asia: prior to the War on Terror, Kazakhstan received considerably more money than did its neighbours,<sup>309</sup> illustrating the focus on promoting ongoing democratic and market reforms (as well as the oil reserves of the Caspian Sea basin). In 2002, however, spending on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan suddenly jumped, surpassing expenditures on Kazakhstan.<sup>310</sup> Laumulin argues that, "the United States has obviously shifted its priorities under an impact of geopolitical change caused by the antiterrorist campaign in Afghanistan that boosted the strategic importance of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan".<sup>311</sup>

<sup>308</sup> Elizabeth A Jones, "Central Asia: Development and the Administration's Policy," Testimony Before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asian House International Relations Committee (29 October 2003) <[www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2003/25798.htm](http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2003/25798.htm)>.

<sup>309</sup> In 2001, Kazakhstan received \$71.5 million, while Tajikistan and Uzbekistan received \$56.4 million and \$55.9 million, respectively [Murat Laumulin, "Central Asia," *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 4.16 (2002) 32].

<sup>310</sup> While Kazakhstan received \$81.6 million in 2002, up from \$71.5 million in 2001, Tajikistan's aid jumped from \$56.4 million in 2001 to \$85.3 million in 2002; Uzbekistan received \$55.9 million in 2001 and \$161.8 million in 2002 [Laumulin, "Central Asia," (2002) 32].

<sup>311</sup> Laumulin, "Central Asia," (2002) 32. Recently, the deeper consequences of international support for these regimes has become more apparent, as the United States and the EBRD were both forced to freeze support for Uzbekistan as a result of its failure to engage in reform. This now means that the reinforced military has lost a significant part of its funding, which may contribute to corruption among the security forces. In addition, Uzbekistan does not seem prepared to reduce its forces, which are now the largest in Central Asia. Instead, it has been turning increasingly to relations with Russia and China, which are less demanding in their associations. The security culture and strategies of regional security actors in the region is an interesting topic that bears future research.

Such messages undermine the themes and ideals promoted in the foreign push for democracy in Central Asia, and represent the apparent support of the world community for the region's authoritarian regimes. This has created domestic perceptions of Western complicity in the support of corrupt regimes, and broad sections of society are becoming disillusioned with the promises of democracy and are sympathetic to alternative directions, including Islamist variants.

Therefore, despite the quiescent nature of the Islam that predominates in Central Asia, the transformative effects of ongoing state controls cannot be ignored. Indeed, the nature of Islam in the region has been altered by seventy years of Soviet rule, where the theoretical development of the religion was stifled, leaving the traditional practices largely intact. Under Soviet and subsequent state controls, Islamic observance was pushed underground, consolidating the role of Islam as a defining ideological and cultural characteristic that has withstood generations of state suppression. As a result, it became an important factor in the nationalism of independence. However, because of its bifurcation, Central Asian Islam lacked the doctrinal strength with which to oppose the influx of foreign Islamic ideologies, including extremist and militant manifestations. And since independence, the Central Asian governments have continued the process of suppression and co-optation of the official religious structures. Had these religious representatives been allowed to redevelop and reestablish the moderate Islamic reform that had been cut off with the Jadids in the early 1900s, official Islam in the region might have been able to provide the population with the theological guidance that Central Asian Muslims craved during the unsettling period of transition. Instead, by forcing the Islam clergy into a position of subordination and dependence to the state, to be used only as a tool of power and propaganda, the official clergy was made to embody the corruption and inertia exhibited by the state. As a result, the clergy failed to develop any social relevance for those struggling in the new post-Soviet environment, and could offer little in the way of effective rebuttal against the unrestrained unofficial Islamist movements. While political Islam does deserve attention and concern, it is the state, through its responses to Islamism, that has engendered an Islamic "threat".

What, then, is the future of Central Asia under this dynamic? Based on the analysis of this research, three possibilities for the Central Asian region can be assessed. The first, and least likely, is a holding pattern and the maintenance of the current status quo. The second is the implementation of effective reforms and liberation, and the third, most dangerous possibility, is the outbreak of violence and massive civil upheaval. Although changes are required in

each of the Central Asian states, significant renovation is most likely to take place in the states of the Ferghana Valley, where state responses to Islamism have been most severe and living conditions most dire. Kyrgyzstan is being watched with especially close attention, as its ongoing withdrawal from democratic reform creates conditions of great instability and social discontent.

Of foremost certainty, the situation in Central Asia cannot remain in its current state. Conditions in the region are too volatile, with too much in the way of military and economic stability existence dependant on declining outside sources. The states of the Ferghana Valley, in particular, have neither the resources nor the public support for the maintenance of the status quo. The specter of Georgia's Rose Revolution is looming over the Central Asian regimes; as observers clamour to predict which state will be the next to go, the region's governments have been incited into reflexive action. In the respect that Islamism has been one of the driving rationalizations of destabilizing state policy up to this point, it may be said that, indirectly, Islamism will inevitably play a role in the transformation of Central Asia, if only through the responses it has engendered from the states. However, it remains to be seen what kind of change this will be.

The most optimistic possible trajectory for Central Asia may resemble that of Kazakhstan, which has maintained relatively liberal state-clergy relations and has not implemented strict controls on religious activity. As a result, religion in Kazakhstan has become less of a radicalizing political force than it has under the repression of other states. Moreover, because the Kazakh government has not used the Islamist threat as a reason to avoid reform, the economic situation is slowly improving, along with living conditions for the population. Although Kazakhstan has been criticized for its lack of political pluralism, it has responded to warnings from the international community with relative alacrity, implementing small reforms such as appointing the co-chairman of the moderate opposition party Minister of Information.<sup>312</sup> This is not to say that Kazakhstan is the epitome of development; however, a realistic model for positive change in Central Asia will not require chaotic transformation. It is possible that change might involve a number of well-timed, minor concessions that might be enough to satisfy the population – or at least maintain sufficient hope for the realization of expectations. Karimov himself has acknowledged that “it would be fair to recognize that upheavals of religious fanaticism are not originated only and exclusively by religious

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<sup>312</sup> Co-chairman of the party Ak Zhol, Altynbek Sarsenbaev, was appointed to the position on 12 July 2004. RFE/RL Central Asia Report, 4.28 (21 July 2004).

contradictions in themselves, but predominantly are originated due to unsolved social, political and economic problems".<sup>313</sup> However, these rhetorical acknowledgements have not yet been translated into action, and with Uzbekistan and its Ferghana Valley neighbours increasingly withdrawing from the demands of the West and turning instead to relations with the more lenient Russia and China, reform seems less likely than ever.

What, then, is the third, and worst outcome? For many analysts, this has been the fulfillment of the Islamist objective and the establishment of an Islamic state under Sharia law across the territory of Central Asia. But how likely is this to occur? Is the fear of an Islamic revolution justified? According to theorists such as Skocpol and Handelman, it would certainly seem so, as the conditions of economic depression and declining standards of living are clearly in effect in much of Central Asia. However, an Islamic revolution is nevertheless unlikely, a conclusion that can be justified by the application of Tilly's three conditions for revolution. First, none of the Islamist movements in Central Asia have established themselves as an 'alternative sovereignty'; they have no governing mandate, other than the imposition of Sharia, and present no plans for economic reform or social development. Moreover, leadership of these groups is fragmented, with insufficient organization to mount a coordinated coup or alternative governing strategy. Second, despite growing numbers of sympathizers and collaborators, supporters for the ideologies and methods of these movements continue to be in the minority. Islamism's inability to include the history and traditions of the people it purports to represent will limit its power beyond the volatile Ferghana Valley, and further prevent it from mounting an effective revolutionary movement. Finally, although their capacity may be decreasing, the Central Asian states have thus far been able to suppress outbursts of extremist opposition, and particularly after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, they have gained international assistance to do so. The recent violence in Uzbekistan, however, underlines that this is a temporary suppression, and one that is likely to break down unless significant reforms are adopted. Nevertheless, based on this analysis, it seems clear that the potential of a successful Islamic revolution, and the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate in Central Asia, remains implausible.

What does this mean, then, for the future of Central Asia? With no other means through which to voice dissatisfaction with the state, the development of political Islam as an opposition movement is a growing threat in the environment of rising economic destitution and plummeting standards of living. The preservation of current state policies in response to

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<sup>313</sup> Islam Karimov, cited in Rashid, *Jihad* (2002) 180.

Islam will lead to further deterioration of inter-state cooperation, which will subsequently decrease commerce and industry even more and broaden existing social and economic depression. Although political Islam is not a part of the popular mainstream, nor is it likely to become so, conflict over resources or underlying tensions is increasingly likely. With a movement such as Islamism already established and widely recognized as the primary vehicle for dissent, opposition groups have a preexisting rallying point, much as they did during the Tajik civil war. Furthermore, the lack of popular commitment to the ideological objective of Islamism condemns any uprising under Islamist mobilization to be aimless, protracted and devastating to the region and its people. If internal decay has been the breeding ground for political Islam in the past, its malignant legacy may be the disintegration of Central Asian society in the future.

### **Conclusion**

Clearly, the case of Central Asia demonstrates the potency of repression in the creation and sustenance of political Islamism. Despite determined opposition by the state, and little in the way of popular ideological commitment to the religious and political mandate of Islamism, the movement has taken root in parts of the region, and through the responses it engenders from the state, its impact is growing. It seems ominously apparent that the current situation is brewing into potential upheaval which would spill over into neighbouring Central Asian republics, and likely beyond.

The lessons of Central Asia, however, can still be applied, and remain relevant beyond the region, and in movements other than Islamism. With an understanding of the factors behind the movement, local and international governments have the capacity to target radical opposition at its root, addressing the deprivation and social dysfunction from which it stems and diffusing social opposition to create a more open system. Also, and perhaps more significantly, governments understand how *not* to react, particularly in situations where the means of mobilization is a key component of cultural identity in their region. While the problem itself remains complex, it is clear from the model of Central Asia that social repression as a response to Islamism can no longer be justified.

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Map of Ferghana Valley

