

CENTRAL ASIA: TERROR AND MILITANT ISLAM



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5 July 2004

www.world-ice.com

ABSTRACT

"Central Asia: Terror and Militant Islam" looks at the internal and external influences giving rise to neo-traditional Islam and militant Islam in Central Asia. After examining definitions and core influences motivating neo-traditionalist and militant Islam, a conclusion can be drawn that whilst Central Asia is not a jihadi-time-bomb on the verge of detonation, there is a medium term threat posed by militant Islam in Central Asia. For as other schisms are resolved in Central Asia, militant Islam will attempt to divide and conquer through destabilising foreign investment in Central Asia, through drug production and through offering safe havens to terrorist organizations.

Ultimately a dialogue with the Hizb-e Tahrir (HT), a neo-traditionalist Islamic movement, may provide the potential for an alliance or 'non-violent front' between Central Asian governments and the HT, this may serve to repel militant Islam. Yet ultimately, the international community will need promote peace and stability in Afghanistan to quell the external incursions of militant Islamists into the neighbouring lands of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan.

INTRODUCTION

Islam was introduced to Central Asia by Arab invaders in the seventh century.¹ Central Asia was at that time known as Transoxiana, part of the Turco-Persian civilisation which stretched from modern day Iran in the west to Xianjiang province in the east, and Afghanistan, Pakistan, and parts of India.² West Asia borders the East Mediterranean and in the East, Afghanistan.

For most of last century, the five countries of Central Asia which are now comprised of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan were subordinate to Moscow and were subsumed into the USSR. The USSR was largely accepted as legitimate by both the Central Asians and international community. Since 1991, the USSR no longer exists and the region faces new ideological influences and subsequent challenges.

Foremost in much of the contemporary Central and West Asian security debate is the concern over the influence of *neo-traditional Islam* and *militant Islam* in the region of Central and West Asia, the importance and regional promotion of which is the core focus of this article. To this end, I will develop a juxtaposition of *Uzbekistan* and *Kazakhstan* in order to illustrate and compare the factors promoting neo-traditional and militant Islam in each country. Internal factors like economic mismanagement, regulation of religion and rule of law are considered. External factors like globalisation and migrating terrorism are also considered. Ultimately, the decision to juxtapose Uzbekistan with Kazakhstan is motivated by a *geostrategic* rationale of ‘proximity to Afghanistan’. Uzbekistan’s geography shares a border with Afghanistan, whereas Kazakhstan does not.

¹ Edward W. Walker, *Roots of Rage: Militant Islam in Central Asia*, Panel Discussion, http://ist-socrates.berkeley.edu/~bsp/caucasus/articles/walker_2001-1029.pdf, at 6 June 2004, p. 3.

(I) DEFINING NEO-TRADITIONALIST ISLAM

Neo-traditional Islam, sometimes awkwardly referred to as *fundamentalist Islam*, advocates a *literalist* interpretation of the *Quran* and *Hadith* as practiced at the time of Muhammed and/or the caliphates. Neo-traditional Islamists, of which the Hizb-e Tahrir (HT) is a useful example, oppose the move towards secular social values. Neo-traditional Islam preaches of a perfect moment for Muslims and they endeavor to recover that moment. This aspiration involves reacting to that which is seen as a threat to realising the Islamic ideal - even if in practice that ideal never actually existed.

Neo-traditional Islam cannot be understood as being solely a religious ideology, for in practice neo-traditionalism operates as a political ideology. Neo-traditional Islam holds that the problems of the world stem from modern influences, and that salvation lies in a return to the original message of the faith. As such, neo-traditionalism staunchly rejects many post-prophet innovations and outside traditions. Thereby, neo-traditional Islam seeks to change the laws of nations to conform strictly to a select interpretation of the Quran and Hadith. To discern neo-traditionalist Islamic activism from militant Islam it is crucial to recognise that neo-traditional Islam does not of itself challenge a state's authenticity, for it seeks to passively advocate change from within the state structure rather than overthrow the state or its government, unlike militant Islam.³

² Walker, as above n1, p. 2.

³ Hizb ut-Tahrir, "*The Method of Hizb ut-Tahrir*", <http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/english/>, at 1 June 2004.

Extract from the Hizb ut-Tahrir website: The collective culturing of the masses of the Ummah with the thoughts and the rules of Islam which the Hizb had adopted, through lessons, lectures, and talks in the mosques, centres and common gathering places, and through the press, books and leaflets. This was done to create a common awareness within the Ummah and to interact with her.

(II) DEFINING MILITANT ISLAM

A significant dimension of militant Islam is its use of violence to impose its form of Islam on others. Militant Islam writes its own rules, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)⁴ for example, does not operate within the auspices of recognising state authenticity.

In the 1950s-60s, Sayyid Qutb had become a philosophical protagonist for militant Islam, and is said to have inspired Osama Bin Laden⁵ by Qutb's reinterpretation of the concept of 'jihad' (Holy War).⁶ According and subsequent to Qutb, 'Qutbism', dictates that the concept of 'jihad' no longer means 'personal spiritual effort' of the faithful on the way toward Allah; it has become an idea of 'armed struggle against the infidels and, more specifically, against Muslims who do not accept Qutb's teachings. Qutb spoke of a revolution against Muslim regimes that had been alien to righteous Sunni Islam. Qutb spread the *taqfir* (accusation of lack of faith) "*to the rulers of Islamic states, ... and those of the Muslims who by refusing to help the Salafis make themselves apostates.*"⁷

⁴ Walker, as above n1, p. 7.

- Western sources estimates the number of IMU fighters at between 2,000 and 3,000, Russian intelligence estimates 5,000 to 6,000.

⁵ Haneef James Oliver, *The 'Wahhabi' Myth: Dispelling Prevalent Fallacies and the Factitious Link With Bin Laden*, <http://www.thewahhabimyth.com/files/thewahhabimyth.pdf>, p.9.

⁶ Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones*, Cedar Rapids, U.S., The Mother Mosque Foundation, p. 54.

⁷ Qutb pointed the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood toward militantancy and resolutely rejected the policy of compromises with the Egyptian authorities. Qutb insisted upon jihad as the only logic path toward political power. In 1965 he was arrested, sentenced to death, and executed in 1966.

(III) CASE STUDIES – JUXTAPOSING UZBEKISTAN WITH KAZAKHSTAN

Regardless of whether a movement pursues a ‘neo-traditionalist’ or the ‘militant’ Islamic approach to Islam, many of the same preconditions motivate the rise of both movements. Shared external motivations include the dominance of external powers in the region, most notably the U.S., who are seen as polluting Islamic culture. Internal influences include corruption and poor economic management by domestic governments and also oppressive regulating of religious freedom.

There are also significant geo-political issues which reflect the greater influence of neo-traditional and militant Islam in Uzbekistan rather than Kazakhstan. Foremost in discernable geo-political factors for Uzbekistan is Uzbekistan’s shared border with Afghanistan. A shared border with Afghanistan seems to be a significant factor in distinguishing Uzbekistan’s struggles with neo-traditional and militant Islam from the comparatively limited impact of such ideological influences on the peoples of Kazakhstan. For Kazakhstan does not share a border with Afghanistan.

(IV) EXTERNAL INFLUENCES - NEO-TRADITIONAL & MILITANT ISLAM

EXTERNAL INFLUENCES TO THE RISE OF NEO-TRADITIONALIST ISLAM

Political interpretations of Islam gained greater influence in Central Asia via the external influences of Muslim missionaries from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Egypt and Turkey around the early 1990s, upon the dissolution of the USSR.⁸ Globalisation is arguably another external factor influencing the rise of neo-traditional Islam. Yet, globalisation should not be understood as a root cause of neo-

traditionalism conversion. For instance, the foreign policies of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have been based on a neo-liberal economic logic for decades. Kazakhstan's president Nursiltan Nazarbaev was an early supporter of the transition to international standards and was among the most articulate of post-Soviet leaders to endorse regional engagement in liberalised trade, international law and IMF advice.⁹ In Uzbekistan, President Islam Karimov agreed in 2001 to allow U.S. troops to deploy at the Hanabad Air Base, in return for \$162 million in U.S. aid.¹⁰ Whilst Uzbeks may be irritated that the U.S. did not impose some good governance conditionality on the aid, the U.S. presence in Uzbekistan is generally tolerated by the populus and is unlikely to cause many conversions to political Islam.

EXTERNAL INFLUENCES TO 'MILITANT' ISLAM

A useful example of an external influence giving rise to militant Islam is Osama Bin Laden's Al-Qaeda network. Al-Qaeda have established influence in Uzbekistan. This incursion has led to the creation of a militant anti-Uzbek government movement, the IMU. The IMU can be understood as a coalition of militant Islamists from Uzbekistan and other Central Asian states who oppose the current Uzbek regime. Both Al-Qaeda and the IMU qualify as 'militant' given their taking of hostages, targeted assassinations, and suicide bombings that promote terror and gain influence through fear.

External influences giving rise to militant Islam in Uzbekistan can be sourced in part to the Taliban's provision of safe-havens to between two thousand five hundred to three thousand moderates and militants from Uzbekistan. The Taliban support included; access to terrorist and guerilla training camps in Afghanistan; funding from wealthy individuals and charitable organisations; and the provision of weapons and supplies by Al-Qaeda. The IMU's area of operation, is primarily in

⁸ International Crisis Group, "*Is Radical Islam Inevitable in Central Asia? Priorities for Engagement*", Asia Report No.72, December 2003, p. 9.

⁹ Gregory Gleason, "Foreign Policy and Domestic Reform in Central Asia", *Central Asian Survey* (2001), 20(2), p. 167.
- See Nazarbaev's speech to the Kazak SSR Supreme Soviet, 10 December 1991, 'Vybor-Tsivilizovannoe demokraticeskoe Obshchestvo', Pyat' let nezavisimosti (Almaty: Kazakhstan, 1996), pp. 19-24.

Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. There is a noticeable absence of substantial IMU influence in Kazakhstan. This observation allows a parallel to be drawn between the Taliban and Uzbekistan's geographical proximity to Afghanistan, and the rise of the IMU in Uzbekistan *per* the distinct lack of significant IMU influence in Kazakhstan.

The claim that militant Islam grows out of social impoverishment cannot however be supported with the necessary evidence to prove or validate such a lofty claim. By analogy, impoverished states like Bangladesh and Iraq (at least in the pre-2004 invasion period) are not hotbeds of militant Islam.¹¹ Furthermore, militant Islam has often surged in countries experiencing rapid economic growth. Saudi Arabian and Pakistani connections with militant Islam are comparatively wealthy, militant examples. Furthermore, the economic conditions and standard of living in Uzbekistan is not drastically lower than Kazakhstan. There are other motivations that provides the fuel on which militant Islam feeds.

The real agenda behind militant Islam is in its usefulness as the vehicle of counter-elites. Those who, by virtue of tribal connections, education, and wealth are potential members of the elite, but who for some reason do not enjoy the power they believe they are entitled to. By implication such people harbour a grievance. Militant Islamism serves a useful voice in such circumstances through which to recruit militia, acquire funds and pursue a *coup d'état*, whilst enjoying some legitimacy.

¹⁰ Alec Rasizade, "The Specter of a New "Great Game" in Central Asia", *Foreign Service Journal*, November 2002, p. 48.

¹¹ Daniel Pipes, "Does Poverty Cause Militant Islam?", *Capitalism Magazine*, (January 19, 2002), <http://www.capmag.com/article.asp?ID=1362>, at 6 June 2004.

(V) INTERNAL INFLUENCES TO NEO-TRADITIONAL AND MILITANT ISLAM

INTERNAL INFLUENCES IN THE RISE OF NEO-TRADITIONAL ISLAM

The citizens in Uzbekistan are increasingly disillusioned with the unrepresentative governance, economic dysfunction, social dislocation and corruption by Uzbekistan's Karimov regime. Given that such disillusionment is with the political structures in Uzbekistan, it is logical to expect a more political form of Islam to take rise in Uzbekistan. Neo-traditional Islam as a result, will be seen by some as the most likely instrument to overcome corruption and provide political expression.

As stated previously, Hizb-e Tahrir (HT) is a useful case in point to illustrate the rise of neo-traditionalist Islam as HT effectively operate like a political opposition party. This is despite recent reports that HT admires the Taliban movement in Afghanistan and two thousand five hundred to three thousand HT members have fled to Afghanistan to seek sanctuary.¹² Some reports claim that the HT also admire Al-Qaeda. Although it must be stated that amongst such reports circulating, any reliable connection between HT and Al-Qaeda is yet to be established. Therefore, recent commentary suggesting that the HT *in toto* have made the ideological shift to militant Islam seems premature.¹³ The HT claim they should be distinguished from the IMU as the HT have denounced the IMU's guerrilla war. The HT should *currently* be categorised as a neo-traditionalist Islamic movement.

¹² Ahmed Rashid, Confrontation Brews Among Islamic Militants in Central Asia, *Central Asia - Caucasus Analyst*, Wednesday / November 22, 2000 http://www.cacianalyst.org/view_article.php?articleid=113 at 14 June 2004.

INTERNAL INFLUENCES TO THE RISE OF MILITANT ISLAM

Like the Soviet government before it, Uzbekistan's Karimov regime has engaged in covert surveillance of, and clandestine infiltration into the activities of the Spiritual Board of Muslims in Tashkent, as well as officially-sanctioned mosques and mullahs.¹⁴ Thereby it can be concluded that Karimov is at least partially responsible for the rise in militant Islam, as followers of both folk and neo-traditionalist Islam perceive their affiliations to have failed in securing adequate political participation. Karimov's policies have driven many neo-traditional Islamists underground or into Afghanistan and into the arms of opportunist militant Islamists. For the rise of the IMU and its recruiting methods are an example of militant counter-elites that grew out of Karimov's oppressive approach to religious freedom and political corruption.¹⁵

Harsh policies towards religious freedom are also occurring in Kazakhstan. On 2 March 2004 a Kazak court sentenced Nurzhan Zhakipov to three years in prison for HT activities.¹⁶ Yet Kazakhstan's economic governance is more sophisticated and transparent than is the case in Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan as a result has better prospects for economic development than any other newly independent Central Asian state. In 2000, Kazakhstan paid off its IMF debt years ahead of schedule, and the IMF withdrew from Astana, not anticipating the need for further financial assistance. In 2004, Horst Köhler, the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, congratulated President Nursultan Nazarbayev for Kazakhstan's economic progress over the past 10 years, which has seen rapid growth and increases in living standards, thanks to the country's oil wealth, implementation of structural reforms and prudent macroeconomic management. Kazakhstan,

¹³ Harout Semerdjian, *Kazakhstan Journalists Gather Information on War Against Terrorism*, <http://www.isop.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=4637>, at 14 June 2004.

¹⁴ Walker, as above n1, p. 7.

¹⁵ Walker, as above n1, p. 7. - Tashkent was also the site of Central Asia's most significant terrorist attack when six bombs went off in February 1999 that killed 13 people and wounded many more, and very nearly killed Karimov himself. Uzbek officials blame the attack on the IMU, a claim that is given additional credence by the fact that the Uzbek government, and Karimov, have been the focus for the IMU, at least until the beginning of the U.S. campaign against Afghanistan.

¹⁶ Daniel Kimmage, Central Asia: "The Week at a Glance", *The Central Asia Report*, 8 March 2004, Vol. 4, Number 10,

says Köhler is now well advanced in its transition to a market economy.¹⁷ This is clearly a meritorious effort at Kazak economic management, and will invite foreign investment. Yet such meritorious behaviour has developed in a milieu of geographical separation from Afghanistan, a luxury that was arguably not available to Uzbekistan.

(VI) WILL NEO-TRADITIONALIST OR MILITANT ISLAM CONTROL CENTRAL ASIA?

The Quranic verse in Sura 13:11. states that "God does not change the condition of a people unless they change what is in their heart."¹⁸ As is often the case, such divine instruction can be interpreted in many ways. The neo-traditionalist and militant Islamic interpretation of what 'should' be in their hearts is motivated by complex external and internal influences which must be clearly understood to develop nation building initiatives and for effective anti-terrorism and counter-terrorism strategies.

Uzbekistan shares a geographical border with the neo-traditional and militant Islamic influenced country of Afghanistan. The Uzbek government as a result is more directly threatened by staunch positions on Islam, like those of the literalist neo-traditionalists and militant Islamists than occurs in Kazakhstan. This does not however lead to the inexorable conclusion that neo-traditionalist or militant Islam will trump the more moderate 'folk' Islam in Central and West Asia and gain control.

For neo-traditionalism or Islamic militancy to take control in Central Asia, these ideologies must compete for priority with many other national, ethnic, clan and regional schisms in the region.

<http://www.rferl.org/reports/centralasia/2004/03/10-080304.asp> , at 14 June 2004.

¹⁷ IMF External Relations Department, *IMF Managing Director Horst Köhler's Statement at the Conclusion of His Visit to the Republic of Kazakhstan*, Press Release No. 03/193, November 14, 2003.

¹⁸ The Koran (Translated with notes by N.J. Dawood), 2003, Camberwell Victoria, Penguin Classics, Sura 13:11, p. 176.

In Uzbekistan, religion seems to be the dominant means to achieve political influence. In Kyrgyzstan, the dominant influence is ethnicity, while in Tajikistan it is regionalism. Central Asia, unlike Afghanistan and Chechnya, has managed to avoid, with the partial exception of Tajikistan, a complete breakdown of internal order, and subsequent civil war. As such, the preconditions for neo-traditional or Islamic militancy of a 'failing or a failed state' are not present in Central Asia. Arguably, the closest contender for the status of a 'failing state' is Tajikistan or Uzbekistan. Both share a border with Afghanistan, are targeted by the IMU and suffer political corruption and economic mismanagement.

Broad regional analysis also reflects that Central Asians generally find the methods and motivation of neo-traditional and militant Islam difficult to accept. There is a tendency to view Wahhabi style fundamentalism as a non-indigenous "Arabic" form of Islam that is alien to Central Asia's Turko-Persian traditions. Especially so, as Wahhabism rejects much of the Central Asia's popular *Sufi* form of Islam, which is neither puritanical nor fundamentalist.

Where civil and political rights are concerned, Kazakhstan are authoritarian, whereas Uzbekistan are worse, and can well be categorised as a totalitarian state. Yet Uzbekistan cannot choose its neighbours, and Uzbekistan's proximity to Afghanistan is unfortunate to say the least. For this reason, the juxtaposition of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan can serve only as a tool for debate and broad analysis rather than serving as an empirical model to base Uzbekistan's policy and security reforms. It can be concluded that economic mismanagement, the oppressive regulation of non-violent religion, and poor rule of law are all significant in influencing the rise of militant Islam. Whilst Central Asia is not a jihadi-time-bomb on the verge of detonation, there is a medium term threat posed by militant Islam in Central Asia. For as other schisms are resolved in Central Asia, militant Islam will attempt to divide and conquer through Central Asia, and through offering safe havens to terrorists.

CONCLUSION

Tackling the rise of militant Islam in Central Asia requires systemic 'rule of law' reform in both Central and West Asia, particularly so in Afghanistan. Domestically, 'rule of law' as an anti-terrorism strategy is necessary to build respect for governmental institutions by building confidence in the possibility of pluralised political participation. Inevitably this initiative will require some tolerance of neo-traditional Islam as a necessary compromise.

Dialogue with the HT provides the potential for an alliance or 'non-violent front' between Central Asian governments and the HT to repel militant Islam. Ultimately however, the international community will need to promote peace and stability in Afghanistan to quell the external incursions of militant Islamists into the neighbouring lands of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan.

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