

convicted of involvement in terrorism and were key instigators in a global terrorist network operating from the internet in the United Kingdom.<sup>16</sup> Other individuals such as Nicky Reilly<sup>17</sup> and Isa Ibrahim<sup>18</sup> were instead apparently drawn in by material they found online and tried to build explosive devices on their own. Ibrahim was interdicted before he could execute his plot, but Reilly was only prevented by his own incompetence when his bomb failed to detonate properly in the middle of a restaurant in Exeter in May 2008.

It is also on the internet that security services are increasingly concentrating their efforts, attempting to identify threats through the internet or finding legal ways of charging people who step beyond the boundary with online extremism. These include individuals such as Krenar Lusha, who was identified through a network of online extremists and later convicted while in possession of an assortment of radical material as well as 71.8 liters of petrol and potassium nitrate,<sup>19</sup> or Bilal Mohammed and Rizwan Ditta who both pled guilty to charges of distributing extremist material obtained online.<sup>20</sup> Other cases have proved more difficult, however, with a group of cases linked to the internet in Lancashire largely dropping off the radar for legal reasons.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, part of the case against Mohammed Atif Siddique that stated he was involved in actual terrorist planning was overturned and he was released from prison, although other charges against him stood.<sup>22</sup>

16 For more on this network, please see Evan Kohlmann, "Anatomy of a Modern Homegrown Terror Cell: Aabid Khan et al," NEFA Foundation, September 2008; Raffaello Pantucci, "Operation Praline: The Realization of Al-Suri's Nizam la Tanzim?" *Perspectives on Terrorism* 2:12 (2008).

17 Adam Fresno, "Nicky Reilly, Muslim Convert, Jailed for 18 Years for Exeter Bomb Attack," *Times*, January 31, 2009.

18 Raffaello Pantucci, "Britain Jails 'Lone Wolf' Terrorist Isa Ibrahim," *Terrorism Monitor* 7:23 (2009).

19 "Man Sentenced to Seven Years for Terrorism Offences," *Derbyshire Constabulary*, December 15, 2009.

20 "Muslim Man Who Sold DVDs Glorifying the 9/11 Atrocities Jailed Under New Terror Laws," *Daily Mail*, March 20, 2008.

21 "PM Death Plot Suspects in Court," *Derby Evening Telegraph*, October 4, 2008; "Jury in Blackburn Terrorist Trial Discharged," *Lancashire Telegraph*, July 27, 2009.

22 The charges that held include spreading extremist

material online, as he was linked into the broader Khan/Tsouli network. See "Siddique Terrorism Charges in Detail," BBC, February 9, 2010.

### Conclusion

Radicalization remains an issue in the United Kingdom, although the threat has evolved away from the old structures that used to make up the infamous Londonistan. Radicalization today is more difficult for policymakers to legislate against. Dangerous extremist activities online are hard to distinguish from the vast mass of meaningless extremism on the internet, while parts of the real-world portion have melded into the mainstream of British political discourse. This makes it difficult to craft legislation that targets groups specifically that does not also catch harmless and legitimate forms of political discourse.

Physical jihad continues to hold sway, with events in Afghanistan and East Africa drawing young men into their thrall,<sup>24</sup> but the networks and extremist rhetoric that were previously responsible for the stream of individuals going to training camps have been forced into a less prominent position. Unfortunately, however, a hardcore of jihadist thinking remains, making what happens in the United Kingdom still relevant for the global fight against terrorism.

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material online, as he was linked into the broader Khan/Tsouli network. See "Siddique Terrorism Charges in Detail," BBC, February 9, 2010.

23 "Man Charged With Sending Terrorist Material by Email," *Daily Mail*, February 24, 2009.

24 The case of Mohammed Abushamma is instructive in the case of Afghanistan. See "Student Jailed for Trying to Fight British in Afghanistan," *London Evening Standard*, June 18, 2009. The Somali case is increasingly a concern. See Richard Kerbaj, "UK Students Recruited for Somali Jihad," *Sunday Times*, January 24, 2010.

## Political Islam in Central Asia: The Role of Hizb al-Tahrir

By Emmanuel Karagiannis

ONE OF THE fastest growing global, Sunni Islamic political organizations is Hizb al-Tahrir (the Islamic Liberation Party, HT).<sup>1</sup> HT often escapes in-depth analysis because the group itself does not use violence to seek political change. As a result, it is not on the U.S. government's list of terrorist organizations. Nevertheless, HT is pursuing an agenda at odds with the West, and eventually the group could pose an active threat to the United States and its allies.

Profiling HT is important as the group is one of the most popular pan-Islamic organizations, counting tens of thousands of members.<sup>2</sup> While it rejects violence at this time, it is open to waging jihad once a proper Islamic state is established with the purpose of creating a global Islamic caliphate. To establish this initial Islamic state, HT is pursuing an agenda to make society more "Islamist" so that such a state can be established peacefully. Nevertheless, the group ascribes to a little discussed strategy called *nusra*, which means it could support a coup d'état by an armed force if that force is pursuing an Islamist agenda.

This article will provide background on HT, including its strategy to establish an Islamic caliphate. It will then profile HT's role in Central Asia, the region in which it is most active.

### Background on Hizb al-Tahrir

HT was founded in East Jerusalem in 1953 by Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani, an Islamic scholar of Palestinian origin. In the decades since its establishment, HT

1 Hizb al-Tahrir is more commonly transliterated as Hizb ut-Tahrir.

2 HT's total numbers in Central Asia are not known because the group operates clandestinely. There are, however, some 6,000 HT members and sympathizers serving time in Uzbek, Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Tajik prisons. The U.S. State Department claims, for example, that as many as 4,500 HT members are currently jailed in Uzbekistan alone. See the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Uzbekistan - International Religious Freedom Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, 2007).

has become an international movement<sup>3</sup> with tens of thousands of followers worldwide. Although the group is primarily active in Central Asia, it also has a large following in a number of Western countries, including in the United States. Today, HT is led by Ata Abu Rashta, a Palestinian civil engineer who studied in Cairo and previously served as the party's spokesman in Jordan.

HT does not view itself as a religious organization, but as a political party based on Islamic values. HT's political doctrine is founded on two principles. The first is the need for Islamic law, or Shari`a, to regulate all aspects of human life—politics, economics, science and ethics. The second principle is the need for an authentic Islamic state, which would pave the way for the re-establishment of the Islamic caliphate. According to HT, a “just” society can only be achieved within such a political entity.

HT's goal is to create an Islamic state that will first absorb all Muslim-populated territories into its borders to establish a caliphate, and then spread Islam worldwide through jihad. For instance, al-Nabhani wrote in Article 183 of his proposed constitution for the future Islamic state that “conveying the Islamic da'wah [to the world] is the axis around which the foreign policy revolves, and the basis upon which the relation between the [Islamic] state and other states is built.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, “this policy is implemented by a defined method that never changes, which is jihad, regardless of who is in authority. Jihad is the call to Islam which involves fighting or the contribution of money, opinions, or literature towards the fighting.”<sup>5</sup> To achieve these goals, HT envisages a three-stage program of action, modeled after the three stages that the Prophet Muhammad experienced on his path to establishing the first Islamic state:

Stage One: Recruitment of members.  
Stage Two: Islamization of society.  
Stage Three: Takeover of the state and jihad against non-believers.<sup>6</sup>

3 The terms group, party, organization and movement are used interchangeably in this article.

4 Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani, *The Islamic State* (London: al-Khilafah Publications, 1998), p. 275.

5 Ibid., pp. 143-144.

6 Members of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Britain, *The Method to*

To achieve this strategy, HT does not want to seize control of the state by force and coerce society into accepting its political agenda. Rather, HT wants to persuade society to accept its ideas willingly, which would then inevitably lead to a regime change. Yet even in these circumstances, it is likely that HT would use some form of pressure to remove recalcitrant regimes; party ideologues have often implied that regimes could be overthrown by acts of civil disobedience, such as demonstrations and strikes. For example, the media representative of HT in Britain, Imran Waheed, once wrote:

a day will come when the Muslims will take revenge against all those who participated in their oppression [i.e. the Karimov regime in Uzbekistan]. Hizb ut-Tahrir does not use weapons or resort to violence, nor uses any physical means in its call...However, do not expect, that these rulers and their regimes will collapse all by themselves. On the contrary, patient believers are required to shake these regimes and uproot them.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, HT has also developed the concept of seeking outside support (*nusra*) to remove a regime from power. HT compares this strategy to how the Prophet Muhammad received support from Arab tribes in his conquest of Medina after he fled Mecca for fear of persecution by the pagan leaders.<sup>8</sup> HT has interpreted the conquest of Medina as a coup d'état orchestrated by the Prophet Muhammad and his allies that took their local opponents by surprise. According to the group's literature,

if the land was a land of Kufr and the rules of Islam were not put in implementation, then removing the ruler who governs over the Muslims would be through using the method of Nusrah, i.e. seeking [military]<sup>9</sup>

*Re-establish the Khilafah and Resume the Islamic Way of Life* (London: al-Khilafah Publications, 2000), p. 32.

7 Imrad Waheed, “Who Killed Farhad Usmanov?” *Caliphate*, July 2002.

8 Hizb ut-Tahrir, *The Methodology of Hizb ut-Tahrir for Change* (London: al-Khilafah Publications, 1999), p. 22.

9 HT refers to the “people of support” (ahl un-Nusra) who were physically powerful enough not only to help establish the first Islamic state, but also to defend it against enemies. They were the equivalent of an army. By definition, those who now can help in re-establishing the

help. This is the method that the Prophet Muhammad adopted to establish the State of Islam and to implement the Islamic rules.<sup>10</sup>

In practice, this means that HT could support a coup organized by a military that would have first embraced Islamism as its ideology. For example, HT encouraged elements within the Jordanian armed forces to overthrow the Jordanian government in 1968 and 1969. Moreover, there are indications that some members of HT were linked to a failed coup attempt in Egypt in 1974.<sup>11</sup> The objectives of seeking *nusra* for the re-establishment of the caliphate are twofold: first, to enable HT to continue its political struggle without risking a military confrontation with authorities; second, to propagate its ideology to the security forces so that they overthrow existing regimes and establish an Islamic state.

It is important to note, however, that HT never developed a paramilitary wing and its members did not provide military support for the coup attempts in Jordan and Egypt, although these coups were aimed at establishing an Islamic state. Moreover, HT has not been involved in any other violent or velvet coups in the Muslim world since the mid-1970s.

#### HT's Role in Central Asia

Although HT has influence globally—including in the United States and in the West—it is most active in Central Asia because it has faced little competition from other Islamist groups in this region. There are a number of factors that led to HT's rise in Central Asia, not least of which is the fact that Central Asia is predominately Muslim.<sup>12</sup> Poor economic conditions in post-Soviet Central Asia provided fertile soil for Islamist groups to achieve support in changing the

caliphate must be armed. On more than one occasion, HT has openly asked the armed forces of Muslim countries to intervene in certain states. Therefore, it must be emphasized that HT is interested in those who are militarily (not politically) capable.

10 *The Methodology of Hizb ut-Tahrir for Change*, p. 22.

11 S. Tajj-Farouk, *A Fundamental Quest: Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Search for the Islamic Caliphate* (London: Grey Seal, 1996), pp. 27, 168.

12 According to the CIA World Factbook, the Muslim populations in the four Central Asian republics are: Tajikistan (90%), Uzbekistan (88%), Kazakhstan (47%), and Kyrgyzstan (75%).

current social order. Governments in Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan exclude Uzbek minorities, which has allowed HT to recruit among this class in these countries. Furthermore, many in the population are attracted to the prospect of an Islamic government, primarily due to the lack of legitimate channels for protest against the region's authoritarian governments.

Moreover, the collapse of communism produced an ideological vacuum in Central Asia, which HT has attempted to fill with religious rhetoric. The group appeals to individuals who want to believe in a coherent ideology that provides ready answers not only for spiritual questions, but also practical issues. HT's vision of a universal Islamic state also appeals to Central Asians who feel nostalgia for the loss of Soviet society, which theoretically promoted values of "solidarity" and "justice." There are widespread feelings of mistrust in the capability of Central Asian governments to cater to the citizens' needs. The application of Shari'a, propagated by HT, promises to a fraction of the population a legitimate blueprint for a "just" society. Its radical calls to overthrow regimes through peaceful measures are well received by many people who, while rejecting violence as a method for political change, have lost hope in the Central Asian regimes' ability to reform themselves.

HT's emergence in Central Asia was initially an "Uzbek phenomenon." The early development of a mosque-centered faith in Uzbek-populated areas means that the local population is accustomed to thinking that Islam can provide solutions to problems. Since the late 1990s, however, HT succeeded in spreading its message throughout Central Asia. As a result, HT is the leading Islamist group in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, with thousands of members in each country.<sup>13</sup> These governments

<sup>13</sup> Based on interviews with security officials and group members, as well as extrapolating from the number of arrested members in the country, the author estimates that there are around 10,000-15,000 members and many more sympathizers in Uzbekistan. In Uzbekistan, the majority of HT members appear to be from the Ferghana Valley and Tashkent—as assessed by the number of arrested members from these areas. In Tajikistan, despite the existence of a legal Islamic party, the Islamic Revival

have responded to the emergence of HT with repressive measures against its members and supporters. These punitive measures, however, are having the opposite effect: HT is growing in popularity, as can be measured by its ability to recruit across broad swathes of society, including students, businessmen, intellectuals and women. Only in Turkmenistan does HT have a minimal presence, which is probably due to severe state repression.

HT differs considerably from other clandestine Islamist groups when it comes to recruitment. The group welcomes as members both men and women. HT is more likely to use its female members for demonstrations and protests in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, based on the belief that security services in these countries are less likely to abuse them physically or arrest them. Also, HT has been active in recruiting prisoners in Central Asia. Jailed HT members propagate their ideology to fellow convicts who, due to the harsh prison conditions, are susceptible to Islamist messaging. This has become such a problem that in Uzbekistan, for example, authorities tend to isolate HT members from common prisoners.<sup>14</sup>

Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), HT has managed to establish a presence in the country. The first HT cells in Tajikistan were established by Uzbek citizens who moved into northern Tajikistan in the late 1990s. A rough estimate of HT membership in Tajikistan is about 3,000 members. In Kazakhstan, the first HT members appeared in 1998. As in Tajikistan, the first generation of members in southern Kazakhstan were ethnic Uzbeks. In recent years, however, a large number of members are ethnic Kazakhs. HT likely has about 2,000 members in Kazakhstan, mostly active in the south in areas such as Shymkent and Kentau. In Kyrgyzstan, HT is strong in the southern provinces of Osh, Jalal-Abad and Batken. According to security sources, there are around 4,000 HT members in Kyrgyzstan. These details are based on: "Hizb ut-Tahrir: Extremistskaya Organizatsiya," *Shyt* [Dushanbe], January 27, 2005; Personal interview, Igor Savin, director of NGO Dialogue, Shymkent, Kazakhstan, February 2004; Personal interview, Kazakh diplomat, Washington, D.C., September 2009; Personal interview, Kazakh security official, Astana, Kazakhstan, February 2009; Personal interview, Sadykdzhan Mahmoudov, director of NGO Rays of Solomon, Osh, Kyrgyzstan, May 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Personal interview, member of Hizb al-Tahrir, name withheld at request, Namangan, Uzbekistan, August 2005.

HT pursues a different strategy in each Central Asian country where it is active. In Uzbekistan, HT spreads its message clandestinely. In Kyrgyzstan, it takes advantage of the country's relatively relaxed political atmosphere to launch public relations campaigns. In Kazakhstan, HT is still growing its cadres while avoiding a confrontation with the authorities. In Tajikistan, HT chooses to confront both the authorities and the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan, its main political competitor. While maintaining a coherent and concrete agenda, HT has tactically focused on each country's unique problems.

### Prospects for the Future

HT does not constitute an immediate threat to the security of Central Asian states. Nevertheless, HT may in the medium- to long-term ally itself with radical elements within the security services or armed forces to overthrow one or more governments in the Central Asian region in line with the group's *nusra* strategy. HT's rejection of political violence is conditional on the prevailing political circumstances: when *nusra* is not an option, the group aims at the Islamization of society and the eventual peaceful overthrow of the regime.

Although HT cannot be classified as a terrorist organization, the political implications of its growing influence in the region are serious. The group constitutes an obstacle to the emergence of democracy in Central Asia, since its growing popularity has allowed regional leaders to solidify their positions and resist Western calls for political and economic reforms. Moreover, if HT were to collaborate with an armed force to establish an Islamic state in a country, its next goal would be to re-establish the Islamic caliphate, which would clearly set this new state up for conflict with its regional neighbors.

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