

Three Perspectives on Political Islam in Central Asia

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Eric McGlinchey

George Mason University

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Introduction

This memo explores political Islam in Central Asia from three perspectives: that of (1) U.S. government analysts; (2) Central Asian government leaders; and (3) everyday Central Asian Muslims. Drawing on public statements and field research, I demonstrate that these three perceptions of political Islam in Central Asia differ markedly. U.S. government analysts consistently identify two groups, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), as Islamist organizations. Central Asian leaders have a more expansive conceptualization of political Islam and identify Tablighi Jamaat and the variously named reformist/conservative/Salafi movement as co-travelers of the IMU and HT. Everyday Central Asian believers, in contrast, rarely dwell on the political Islamist tendencies of any of these groups. Paradoxically, ordinary believers do perceive the state muftiates (the closely controlled institutions of “official” Muslim belief) as highly politicized. Table 1 summarizes these differing U.S. and Central Asian state and society perspectives (see below). I explore the views of each of these groups in turn and conclude with a brief discussion of the implications of these diverging views for U.S. policy toward Central Asia.

The Perspective of U.S. Government Analysts

The U.S. Department of State’s *Annual Report on Religious Freedom* consistently identifies two Central Asian groups, the IMU and HT, as Islamist. The IMU, as group leader Tohir Yoldosh explained in a March 1999 interview, seeks:

- 1) The release of religious scholars and Muslim youth from Uzbek jails;
- 2) The safe return of Uzbek religious scholars currently in exile;

3) The replacement of secular-authoritarian rule with an Islamic polity.

Yoldosh emphasized that the IMU preferred to achieve these goals through negotiation rather than armed struggle. “It is not too late,” Yoldosh suggested, “to settle the problem without bloodshed and by peaceful means.” At the same time, the IMU leader did not rule out the use of force if the Uzbek government’s “present oppressive policy toward Muslim people continues.” State Department analysts believe the IMU is responsible for a series of bombings in Tashkent in 1999 and 2004. Across the Uzbek border in Afghanistan, the IMU has also fought with al Qaeda and the Taliban against U.S. and coalition forces.

Table 1: Central Asian Muslim Groups and Who Perceives Them as Islamist

	U.S. Government Analysts	Central Asian Leaders	Central Asian Society
Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan	✓	✓	
Hizb ut-Tahrir	✓	✓	
Reformist / Conservative/Salafi		✓	
Tablighi Jamaat		✓	
Muftiate			✓

While the IMU is predominantly focused on Central Asia and, more specifically, Uzbekistan, HT is a transnational Islamist organization active not only in Central Asia, but also in Europe, South Asia, and the Middle East. HT’s stated Central Asian ambition is to peacefully overthrow the region’s secular autocracies and replace them with a Muslim Caliphate. The organization’s rhetoric is anti-U.S., anti-Western, and anti-Semitic. In Central Asia, prominent HT members such as Ayub Khan Mashrabov, the self-styled press secretary in southern Kyrgyzstan, openly seek confrontation with the state. Not all Central Asian states, however, respond to HT’s challenge. HT leaders in southern Kyrgyzstan, for example, have lamented that the Kyrgyz government, unlike the Uzbek government, rarely tortures HT activists. Torture, these leaders explained, helps HT demonstrate the political illegitimacy of Central Asian states.

The literature, pamphlets, and DVDs circulated by the IMU and HT provide solid grounds for labeling these groups as Islamist. However, the U.S. government’s additional identification of the IMU as a “foreign terror organization,” because of the group’s purported role in the 1999 Tashkent bombings, is problematic. At the time, the State Department initially noted that it was the Uzbek, not U.S., government that believed the IMU was responsible. In September 2000, however, it definitively linked the IMU to the 1999 Tashkent bombings.

A few months prior, the Uzbek government, under President Islam Karimov, granted the United States permission to launch Predator drones from Uzbek airfields.

Some U.S. government analysts have suggested that the September 2000 designation of the IMU as a terrorist organization was Washington's attempt to "throw Karimov a bone" in return for the Uzbek leader's blessing of the Predator operation.

The Perspective of Central Asian Leaders

Central Asian governments perceive all Muslim groups other than the state muftiates as Islamist. This perception, though it may appear strange to someone living in a democratic society, makes sense within the context of an autocratic regime. Post-Soviet autocracies are predicated on patronage politics, or the top-down distribution of economic rents. Leaders provide regional and local appointees with either direct cash payments or licenses to skim revenues from economic enterprises. These appointees, in turn, carry out the directives of the central government.

Religion presents a challenge to this kind of patronage-based autocratic politics on two levels. First, Islam provides a normative framework that exposes the pathologies of state-sponsored corruption. At the same time, on the level of local civil society, Islam also builds interpersonal trust, which, in turn, encourages people to form business partnerships. When these partnerships succeed, the autocratic state's economic comparative advantage weakens. Regional and local bureaucrats break away from the top-down patronage system and, instead, shift their allegiance to regional and local economic and religious elites.

The IMU and HT are part of this state, society, and religion dynamic. As such, the U.S. designation of the IMU as a terrorist group was indeed a boon to President Karimov and his struggle to maintain legitimacy.

At the same time, Karimov and other Central Asian leaders target more than just the IMU and HT. Other groups, most notably Tablighi Jamaat and the variously labeled "reformist," "conservative," and "Salafi" movement, are equally identified as radical and deserving of repression. Tablighi Jamaat is a transnational revivalist movement, the goal of which is to teach Islamic beliefs and practices to those who, for whatever reason, have had limited access to religious education. Central Asia's growing reformist/conservative/Salafi movement seeks to restore "true" Islam and supplant the "distorted practices" that the muftiates perpetuate, practices such as birth, death, and wedding rituals, pilgrimages to locally-designated religious sites, and the annual pay-to-pray Hajj visa racket run by muftiates and ministries of foreign affairs. Both Tablighi Jamaat and the reformist movement are notable, and thus threatening to Central Asian leaders, because rather than extort believers they organize local charities, build local businesses, and provide local alternatives to the centralized muftiates.

The Perspective of Central Asian Society

Rediscovering faith is difficult in post-Soviet societies where religion, particularly Islam, was portrayed in a negative light. Adding to this challenge, Muslims in post-Soviet Central Asia have been inundated by groups seeking to capitalize on the widespread popular discontent with the existing muftiates. The lines of divergence and convergence among these differing groups, however, are far from clear.

Imam Muhammadrafik Kamalov and his mosque in Kara Suu in southern Kyrgyzstan illustrate this point well. The charismatic and popular Kamalov faced frequent government censure for allowing all Muslims, including members of HT and the IMU, to pray at his mosque. Kamalov was shot and killed by Kyrgyz security forces in August 2006. The Kyrgyz government's initial explanation of the imam's death was that Kamalov was shot while he was attempting to drive two Islamist militants across the border to Uzbekistan. In the face of public outrage, the Kyrgyz government revised its explanation and claimed that the two militants were holding Kamalov hostage and that the imam was accidentally shot as Kyrgyz forces tried to free him. What is most revealing about this story is not the Kyrgyz government's about-face in explaining Kamalov's death, but the roster of attendees at this purportedly "radical" imam's funeral: prominent members of HT, the clerical elite of Kyrgyzstan's conservative Salafi movement, and the official representative of state Islam, Kyrgyz mufti Murataly Jumanov.

Kamalov's funeral demonstrates the complex and often bewildering environment within which ordinary Central Asians form their Muslim identities and beliefs. Was a mourner at Kamalov's funeral to conclude that the imam was an Islamist because he welcomed HT members into his mosque? If so, what would this same mourner make of Mufti Jumanov, the state's public voice against radical Islam, who praised the deceased imam? Is the mufti an HT sympathizer because he stood alongside HT's spokesman at Kamalov's funeral?

The reality for most Central Asians is that these categorizations, to the extent that they exist at all, exist only in the minds of the narrow religious elite, who claim to lead these amorphous groups, and those of government and academic analysts, who study the rhetoric of this narrow religious elite. There is no denying that this rhetoric can be reprehensible; however, it is important to note that this rhetoric is largely absent at the local level.

Policy Implications

Why might an ordinary Central Asian gravitate to a group like the IMU, a group he may well understand to be Islamist and militant? Clifford Bond, acting principal deputy of the Office of the Special Adviser to the Secretary of State, answered this question before the House International Relations Committee in June 2001.

We do not see Islamic fundamentalism right now as a threat to the states of Central Asia, but the policies that are being pursued by the governments now are driving the young, particularly because there is a lack of economic opportunity, into the arms of extremists. And that's a message which we have to make and continue to make with the leadership in Central Asia.

Ambassador Bond's analysis is powerful and applies not just to Islamist groups like the IMU but to the diverse range of overlapping Islamic organizations in Central Asia. Rarely are Central Asians attracted to any of these groups because they want to cultivate radical, militant Islamist identities. They are attracted because they are struggling to make sense of and survive the economic and political wasteland that

constitutes much of post-Soviet Central Asia. Perhaps the best way to limit the potential for religious militancy and extremism in Central Asia, then, is not to fixate on Islam, but on the pervasive graft and corruption that serve the interests of Central Asian government elites at the expense of Central Asian societies.

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