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Islamism in Central Asia is a new phenomenon. For 70 years the region was part of the Soviet Union, cut off from the Muslim world. That experience had major ramifications for the development of Islam in society and politics. Central Asia’s disconnection from the Muslim world protected it from the radical trajectory that has now become widely documented in the Middle East. The Arab–Israeli wars, which galvanized Muslim opinion in the Middle East and gave force to the politicization of Islam, did not register in Central Asia. This separation, and Soviet efforts to remove all traits of Islam from public life, contributed to the evolution of Islam as an apolitical force. Islam was central to the cultural and communal life of Central Asians but had next to no presence in the public life of the region except in controlled settings when the Soviet authorities deemed it useful to project an image of tolerance to the Middle East. As a consequence, there was little potential for Islam to become a political ideology under Soviet rule.

However, the other side of this coin was that at the time of the Soviet collapse, Central Asian Muslims were yearning to reunite with their brethren in the Middle East and learn more about their faith. This led to an Islamic revival, one that the leadership tried to harness for its own ends. The growing interest in Islam also opened the region to radical ideas about the role of Islam in politics and the relationship between secular and Islamic rule. The introduction of post-Soviet Central Asia to Islamism was a gradual process, only accelerated by the increasingly intolerant attitude of incumbent regimes towards their opponents. The general slide of the region towards authoritarianism and the adoption of judicial and extra-judicial measures to suppress dissent have created an environment conducive to radicalism. The emergence of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Central Asia is signaling a qualitative shift, one that is dragging the region into the Middle East fold and mars its politics with the familiar traits of authoritarianism and anti-American Islamism (Walker 2003).

First impressions
The Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) was Central Asia’s first experience of Islamism. The IRP emerged on the eve of the Soviet collapse, holding its first convention in Russia (June 1990) and then establishing a presence in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, although the authorities refused its application for formal registration. This decision was justified with reference to the separation of
religion from politics – a principle that survived the Soviet collapse and transition to independence. The IRP in Central Asia was concerned with local issues and evolved into distinct national organizations in the two republics. Attempts at forming IRP branches in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan did not go very far as the population showed little interest in the idea of mixing Islam with politics. In addition, the ruling regime in Turkmenistan was extremely intolerant of any dissent and made no effort to put up even a façade of political openness, as did the neighboring Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Greater interest in Islam in the latter two republics may have reflected the historical links between the traditionally sedentary Tajik and Uzbek population and Islamic center of learning in Samarkand and Bukhara, in contrast with the nomadic traditions of Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and Turkmens.

The stated objective of the IRP was the establishment of an Islamic state. This made it utterly intolerable for the ruling regimes, but it was unclear what this vision entailed. The IRP leadership had difficulty articulating the contours of its vision. They rejected the Iranian and the Saudi model of Islamism, yet had no alternatives. Instead they emphasized the national character of their Islamic vision, and were content with the formation of an Islamic state within the existing boundaries and on democratic principles. This vision was in conformity with the wave of nationalist excitement that was sweeping across Central Asia. The IRP vision, to the extent that it was formulated, was consistent with the consolidation of independent republics with a clear commitment to upholding Islamic principles that was at the heart of Central Asian identities. The IRP in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were more like religiously inclined nationalist groups than Islamists in the strict meaning of the term, one that implies the imposition of a normative Islamic agenda on social and political practices. In addition, the IRP was also careful to avoid conflict and violence in order to work within the existing political boundaries, although this strategy was abandoned in Tajikistan when tensions boiled over in May 1992. Despite this deviation, the IRP in Tajikistan appears to have returned to its original mould, as will be discussed below.

The IRP has been effectively sidelined by developments in Uzbekistan. A number of smaller, local Islamist groups emerged in the densely populated Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan on the eve of independence. They remained active and visible throughout 1992, but their reach was limited and they faced the wrath of the security forces. Some chose exile over detention and torture by the Uzbek regime, and fled to Tajikistan. The growing assertiveness of the IRP in Tajikistan in the face of a worsening civil war proved a magnet for some Uzbek Islamists who felt that they could make a difference. Led by Juma Namagani, a group of Uzbek Islamists who had been training and fighting with the Tajik opposition movement between 1992 and 1997, formed the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) to take the fight to President Islam Karimov. As discussed below, however, the life span of IMU was very short and failed to present a political challenge to the Uzbek regime. The initial experience of Central Asia with Islamism was brief and inconsequential. Forces that are generally dubbed Islamist often acted as religious nationalists or criminal bandits. The Soviet collapse and the immediate post–Soviet era exposed Central Asia to unprecedented factors, and the ruling regimes had little time to adjust to them.

State attitude

The Central Asia leadership was not prepared for independence – even less so for negotiating with contending political actors. The leadership had operated in a rigid hierarchy of authority under Soviet rule and was more attuned to the political climate in Moscow than the political aspirations of the local population. The impact of the reform agenda that was initiated by Mikhail
Gorbachev was minimal. As the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1985–91), Gorbachev launched far-reaching reforms and targeted corruption and nepotism in Central Asia. This led to the appointment of new first secretaries at republican levels of the Communist Party. The move to purge corrupt officials and place the leadership in ‘clean hands’ was aimed at restoring confidence in the ruling Communist Party and minimizing waste and corruption. The introduction of the post of presidency was a further step to bring a degree of accountability to the system, although it was by no means expected to undermine the supremacy of the Communist Party. Taking advantage of the new opportunity, the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic made history by electing a non-Communist Party leader as president. Despite the immense symbolism of this move, the authoritarian style of leadership in Central Asia survived the Soviet collapse.

To say that the incumbent leaders in Central Asia were not Democrats and had no desire to institutionalize a system of popular accountability is not to say that they were completely blind to the international tide. The opening up of the post-Soviet space to the West meant that ideas and expectations of a democratic overhaul were permeating to Central Asia. Numerous initiatives on democratic transition in the region were sponsored by the United States and the European Union (EU). Central Asia’s rich gas and oil reserves added a further reason for Western interests in integrating the region into the global economy. The push for the liberalization of the economy and democratization of politics were consistent with that trend. Sensing the growing tide, the Central Asian leadership tried to position themselves to take advantage of the pressure for transition to democracy – some more successfully than others – but this flirtation with democracy was little more than political theater.

The leadership in Uzbekistan tolerated the emergence of political parties and movements in 1991 and 1992. This was consistent with the mood of euphoria at the time. This relative political openness, however, was not expected to undermine the dominance of the ruling party. This experiment was simply meant to project an image of ‘democratic transition’, mostly for the benefit of the West. Some of the players, however, were overstepping their bounds and presenting a real challenge to the incumbent regime through their grass-roots activities and publications. By early 1993 it was clear that the democratic experiment was getting out of hand and the ruling regime had to rein it in. The retreat from substantive political reform was marked by enforcing the ban on three novice independent political parties: Birlik, Erk (two nationalist parties), and the Islamic Renaissance Party. However, the facade of the multi-party system was maintained as the regime orchestrated elections and maintained the veneer of democracy. The regime dismissed its critics, often in the West, as wanting too much too fast, arguing that transition to democracy cannot be achieved overnight.

The post-Soviet experience throughout the region was a variation on the same theme: initial flirtation with political openness followed by a rapid retreat to authoritarianism. The executive arm of the state continued the Soviet convention of dominating the state machinery, whereby the legislative body and the judiciary operate as extensions of the government. In this model the office of the president has been elevated above all and placed beyond accountability. The Central Asian presidential system turned the state into the personal fiefdom of the incumbent. Presidents Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan and Nursultan Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan continue in office 20 years after the fall of the Soviet Union. President Akaev of Kyrgyzstan was removed from office only after widespread social unrest in 2005. President Saparmurat Niyazov of Turkmenistan died in office in 2006, but Niyazov left a doubtful legacy as he took the presidential model to an extreme by constructing a cult of personality that elevated him, for all intents and purposes, to sainthood. Only Tajikistan differed in its post-Soviet path (explored below).
For all their authoritarian tendencies, the incumbent regimes possessed enough political acumen to know what could be useful for their continued rule. It was clear that nationalism was a necessary feature of the post-Soviet landscape, especially because the incumbent leaders had to emphasize a break with their Soviet track record. In the rush to embrace local nationalisms, the leadership had to make a choice about Islam. What was the place of Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia and what was its relationship with secularism? The answer to this key question set Central Asia on a trajectory similar to the rest of the Middle East. Learning from the Soviet experience, the Central Asian leadership, with the obvious exception of Tajikistan, was attuned to the cultural value of Islam. Soviet policy-makers had tried to eliminate Islam through a range of educational and indoctrination mechanisms, but their approach had failed because Islam is much more than an ideology. It is the cultural glue that keeps local communities together through rituals and traditions. It provides a sense of continuity that is essential for local identities, linking the present to the past. No amount of atheistic education and propaganda could remove the need for that emotional link to the past. Soviet planners had grudgingly accepted the failure of their policy and moved to minimize the risks that Islam could pose by institutionalizing an elaborate hierarchy of control. This was an important legacy for the post-Soviet leadership (Olcott 1995).

Inheriting an Islamic hierarchy that organized the religious activity of the local imams under the spiritual directorate of the Mufti (located in Tashkent) had two immediate benefits for the incumbent leadership. It offered a ready-made tool to exert authority and control over Islamic activity, while also allowing the ruling regimes to claim patronage of Islam. The republican leadership moved quickly to exert control over the Islamic hierarchy, splitting the Central Asia-wide institution of the Muftiyat into separate republic-centered institutions. Now each newly independent republic had its own official Islamic hierarchy that was accountable to its own government, not to the Mufti in Tashkent. This satisfied the leadership’s urge for control, but it also put the Islamic leadership at loggerheads with the regime in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The regime’s authoritarian aspirations, which translated into direct intervention in the appointment of imams and monitoring of sermons, was challenged in these republics by heads of the newly established Islamic hierarchies, but the growing tension only convinced the republican leadership of the urgency of consolidating control and managing Islam’s public role. In Uzbekistan this was achieved in January 1993 with the removal of the sitting Mufti Muhammad Yusuf and the appointment of a more docile one, who was in turn replaced with an even more loyal Mufti in 1997 (Melvin 2000: 54). However, the Tajikistan case proved more complicated, as Qazi Kalon Akbar Turajonzoda, the head of the official Islamic hierarchy, openly sided with the opposition and was embroiled in the civil war that engulfed the republic between 1992 and 1997.

Before discussing the specifics of the Tajik experience, there is the second generic aspect to consider: Islam as a source of legitimacy. Given the unsavory history of the Soviet rule and its anti-Islamic policies, the incumbent regimes felt the need to take extraordinary measures to distance themselves from the past and recast their image as champions of their nation and its cultural values. Promoting Islam was an important component of the post-Soviet nation-building project that saw the Communist Party elite transform themselves overnight into nationalist leaders. The construction of new mosques and the freeing of the local population to perform pilgrimage to Mecca served an important purpose. They presented the leadership as respectful of Islam and in tune with the cultural heritage of their citizens. This message was reinforced when the presidents of Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan placed a hand on the holy book of Qur’an at their inaugural ceremonies (Tazmini 2001). The reinvention of the leadership was complete. Such a dramatic shift pointed to an acute political calculation. Islam
was seen as conferring legitimacy and credibility and the incumbent leadership was desperate for that affirmation.

Playing with Islam as a political tool, however, was fraught with risks. The descent of Tajikistan into civil war was widely seen by neighboring political elite as a consequence of Islamic militancy. This assessment put the leadership in a difficult situation. While the ruling elite, especially in Uzbekistan, was eager to benefit from the air of legitimacy that Islam conferred, it was very anxious about Islam’s potential to be used as a rallying cry for dissidents and opponents of the regime. This practical dilemma led to the rise of an elaborate policy to compartmentalize Islam into good and bad. Islamic activities taking place outside the domain of the state were viewed with suspicion and any political activity that sought to bring Islam into the public domain was rejected as ‘fundamentalist’, ‘extremist’ or ‘Wahhabist’. These terms conveyed a poignant message to their Central Asian audience. ‘Fundamentalist’ and ‘extremist’ were often the labels used to describe Iran and its imposition of shari’a law on society, just as Wahhabism referred to Saudi Arabia’s draconian penal code. Neither country enjoyed a positive image in Central Asia for their harsh Islamic rule and the incumbent regimes worked systematically to encourage suspicion and distrust of the ‘extremist’ version of Islam. This approach was also consistent with the Soviet-era coverage of ‘Wahhabism’ and ‘Islamic fundamentalism’, which used the Iranian and Saudi models to warn its Muslim citizens of what could befall them if Islamic activism was allowed to prosper. Reinforcing this pattern, all post-Soviet Central Asian republics adopted constitutions that banned the formation of political parties inspired by religion. The ultimate message was simple. Independent Islamic political activity put Central Asia at a grave risk: it threatened to import a foreign Islamic model of intolerance and violence and undermine the indigenous, peaceful version of Islam. The incumbent regimes took it upon themselves to protect and promote their favored version against the disruptive and alien form of Islam. This framework allowed the imprisonment and torture of those suspected of affiliation with Islamic political groups, while sanctioning the construction of new mosques.

**Tajikistan – an exceptional case?**

If there was one clear case that highlighted the risks Islam posed to the established regimes in Central Asia, it was the devastating civil war in Tajikistan which lasted for five years. The deterioration of the political situation in Tajikistan had as much to do with the assertiveness of the Islamic Renaissance Party, which managed to secure the backing of the head of the official Islamic establishment, as with the profound disconnect between the ruling elite and the changing reality of the post-Soviet landscape. The first warning sign was when Rahman Nabiev, who was purged as the First Secretary of the Communist Party in Tajikistan in 1985 as Gorbachev launched his campaign against corruption and mismanagement, staged a comeback. In September 1991 Nabiev secured the newly created position of President with the support of the powerful Leninabad regional group that dominated top posts in the republic. Nabiev was no more ready for the Soviet collapse than were his counterparts in the neighboring republics, but unlike them, Nabiev made no effort to grasp the possibilities that independence offered. While in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, for example, the republican parliaments adopted Islamic festivals of Id-Kurban and Id-Fitr as national holidays and endorsed the moral significance of Islam in charting their post-Soviet path, the leadership in Tajikistan refused to make any conciliatory gestures towards Islam. President Nabiev was adamant that Tajikistan should remain a secular state. For him, secularism made no allowance for Islamic symbolism, even if that meant denying a pillar of national identity. He further argued that Tajikistan was not ready for independence – instead a revived Soviet Union would offer the best option for its future prosperity and development.
Nabiev’s position alienated large segments of Tajik society at a time when winds of nationalism were blowing across the Central Asian plains. Qazi Kalon Akbar Turajonzoda, head of the Islamic establishment in Tajikistan and an elected Member of Parliament, gave voice to popular frustration at the failure of the regime to represent popular sentiments.

Responding to growing public displays of dissent in the capital city and calls for the resignation of the government, President Nabiev declared a state of emergency to clear the streets of Dushanbe of protestors. However, this move added fuel to an already tense situation. His opponents viewed with suspicion the formation of a presidential guard by forces loyal to Nabiev, seeing it as a preparatory move for a coup. Open conflict soon ensued. Despite an effort to prevent the escalation of tensions by forming a coalition government, Tajikistan descended into a civil war in May 1992. The protagonists in the civil war represented two broad forces. Forces loyal to President Nabiev came to be known as the Popular Front and mobilized in the southern province of Kulob. Popular Front forces managed to capture Dushanbe in November 1992 - a victory that furnished the appointment of their nominee and the present President of Tajikistan Emomali Rakhmanov as the head of state at an extraordinary session of the Parliament held in Leninabad. The opposition to Nabiev and his successor was a coalition of parties that included the Islamic Renaissance Party, the Democratic Party of Tajikistan and La’li Badakhshan. The political ideologies of these forces ranged from Islamism to nationalism to those seeking local autonomy, but their common denominator was their opposition to the unrepresentative rule of the Communist Party (Roy 1995).

Most academic commentators on Tajikistan have overwhelmingly identified an undercurrent of sub-regional rivalries as a critical factor in the civil war. In the post-World War II era Tajikistan was run by leaders from the northern province of Leninabad. At the time of independence in 1991 the ruling Communist Party formed an alliance with loyal forces in the southern province of Kulyab to respond to the growing challenge of the opposition. A competing sub-regional affiliation was evident in the support base of the IRP and the DPT as they drew support from the central, southern and south-eastern provinces. La’li Badakhshan was a purely local organization, focused on greater political autonomy for the Badakhshan mountainous region. In the heat of the civil war, however, it was easier to explain the conflict as an ideological battle between Islamism and secularism (Akbarzadeh 1996). This was how the Rakhmanov regime presented the case, as did the ruling elite in other Central Asia states. This perspective served an important purpose in justifying the salient turn to authoritarianism and suppression of dissent – brushing all opponents with the broad brush of fundamentalism and extremism.

In spite of the bloody civil war, Tajikistan emerged as the only Central Asian republic to allow the participation of the IRP in the formal political process. This was made possible through a peace accord in 1997, which put in place a transitional proportional system of representation. This allowed 30 percent of government posts at the republican and local levels to be offered to the coalition of the opposition forces. Despite the failure of the regime to implement this commitment fully, the peace accord allowed the IRP to operate within the legal framework and field candidates for parliamentary elections. This new-found opportunity had a profound impact on the political position of the IRP. It seriously mellowed its rhetoric and committed it to upholding the rule of law and democratic principles. The IRP leadership showed an acute awareness of the limited appeal of Islamism to the public electorate in Tajikistan and fashioned itself as an Islamic political party that was committed to working within the system, not uprooting it. This was partly a consequence of a growing awareness of its shrinking popular appeal, and partly due to a growing schism between the IRP leadership and Turajonzoda, who distanced himself from the party and argued in 2000 that the IRP does not represent the only voice of Islam (Olimova 2004: 261).
The combination of internal and external pressures, as well as a generational shift in the leadership, have helped the IRP take a more centrist position in Tajikistan. The current IRP leader, Muhiddin Kabiri, has noted that 'it is impossible to set up an Islamic state or republic in Tajikistan in the foreseeable future [ ... ] Our ultimate goal is to create a free, democratic, and secular state' (Collins 2007: 87–88). This position is rejected by the critics as duplicitous; the IRP's commitment to democracy isrejected as a tactical ploy to gain power. The behavior of the IRP since the end of the civil war, however, suggests deep rethinking on the role of Islam in politics, which goes beyond tactical machination. The IRP has not performed well at parliamentary elections, consistently securing only two seats in three successive elections. This is to some extent due to bullying and electoral fraud by the ruling party of President Rakhmanov (International Crisis Group 2009; Crosston 2008). A recent report by Freedom House recorded a steady decline in the rule of law and political openness in Tajikistan (Foroughi 2010).

Despite the deteriorating political environment for the IRP, the party has maintained a commitment to working within the system. The IRP has identified an open and functioning multi-party system as its best option and has concentrated its efforts towards that goal. In this vein, the IRP participated in a US-funded program in February 2006 on the role and structure of political parties in a multi-party system (National Democratic Institute 2008). The program was held in Poland, drawing lessons from the Polish experience of transition to democracy.

**Alternative Islamists**

The IRP may be argued to represent a traditional form of Islam in Central Asia, one that accommodates local traditions and the separation of Islam from politics, even though all its political positions are couched in Islamic terms. To this extent, the IRP is inspired by Islam—not governed by a strict interpretation of Islam. This distinction allows the IRP to pursue a national democratic agenda under the cloak of Islam, putting it on a similar plain as the ruling regimes that seek legitimacy for their rule by invoking Islam. Here Islam is at the service of political actors, albeit diametrically different: one pursuing national-democratic rule, the other authoritarian rule. However, Central Asia is also experiencing a more radical version of Islamism that is less accommodating of local traditions. Writing in 2003, Pauline Jones Luong noted a worrying trend in Central Asia. The US military involvement in Afghanistan, which brought US troops into close proximity of Central Asians, and the security pacts formulated between the United States and the authoritarian Central Asian regimes, especially in Uzbekistan, gave local grievances with the ruling regime an anti-American dimension. This was a similar pattern to the Middle East, where the United States was widely seen as sponsoring authoritarian regimes in power to fend off the rise of forces that could potentially put US interests at risk. Luong (2003) called this process the 'Middle Easternization of Central Asia'.

The rise of extremist Islamist activity in Central Asia may be traced to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). In 1999 the IMU shocked public opinion in Central Asia by detonating a number of bombs in Tashkent. The region had not seen anything like this mindless and indiscriminate campaign of violence. The IMU declared itself committed to deposing President Karimov and establishing an Islamic state in Uzbekistan. Indeed, the personal antipathy of the IMU leadership against Karimov seemed to overshadow any ideological or doctrinal objectives. This did not win the IMU many supporters. The IMU's involvement in drug trafficking and cross-border attacks on Uzbek and Kyrgyz villages further undermined its credibility as a serious political challenger. Instead, it was relatively easy for the Uzbek government to accuse the IMU of banditry and seek the extradition of IMU leaders from Tajikistan, where they had sought refuge in the late 1990s. This growing pressure forced many IMU fighters to relocate to
Afghanistan. In 2001 the IMU suffered a fatal blow as it aligned itself with the Taliban against the advancing forces of the Northern Alliance in the city of Mazare Sharif. Most of the IMU fighters were killed in battle, bringing the IMU threat to an end (Akbarzadeh 2005: 29–31).

Given the incoherent and very personal nature of the IMU’s position on Islam and politics, it never posed a serious challenge to the authority of the ruling regime. In fact, its banditry and violence only served to justify the repressive measures employed by the Uzbek regime to ward off potential threats. However, as noted by Luong, Central Asia is being dragged into the Middle East. The emergence of Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) has introduced a new dimension to Islamism in Central Asia that is akin to the experience of Islamism in the Middle East—one that is vehemently anti-American and aims to revolutionize society in order to establish an Islamic state. In this case, the Islamic state is not seen as a distinct polity operating within the boundaries of an existing state, something that Islamists had traditionally favored, but a polity that is global and covers all Muslim lands, headed by a Caliph. Hizb ut-Tahrir prides itself for its promotion of the Caliphate. Vitaly V. Naumkin, a long-standing scholar of Islam in Central Asia, compares the ideology of HT to that of Islamism in Iran, which gave rise to the institution of the velayat faqih, or the supremacy of the jurisprudent (Naumkin 2005: 134).

HT first came to public attention in the late 1990s in Uzbekistan and spread to neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Containing HT has proven very difficult for the authorities due to three key reasons. First, unlike many other Islamists, HT eschews violence and rejects terrorism as a form of political expression. Instead it emphasizes the importance of Islamic education and learning. It forms Qur’an study circles that explore the holy text and the prophetic message. Given the long history of isolation from the Muslim world during the Soviet era, Central Asian Muslims yearn to learn more about Islam and feel part of a greater whole. HT offers a welcome opportunity for many disgruntled Central Asian Muslims to learn more about their religion without approaching the formal Islamic establishment, whose authority is somewhat stained because of its subservience to the ruling regimes. Second, HT is an international organization with a strong presence in Europe. It is also technologically savvy and makes effective use of the internet to propagate its message. The opening of Central Asia to air travel and population movement following the Soviet collapse made the region accessible to HT, the ideas of which are likely to have reached Uzbekistan by visitors from Turkey. This international support base allows local HT activists to draw strength and inspiration needed to withstand the well-documented brutality of the Uzbek regime (Abou Zahab and Roy 2004: 9–11). Third, the combination of the above factors has helped HT present a coherent vision, drawing a seamless link between local grievances and its ultimate goal of establishing the Caliphate. In the familiar paradigm of ‘Islam is the solution’, HT blames the ruling regimes for failing to uphold Islam as the underlying cause of corruption and social ills that pervade Central Asia. A return to Islam and restoring the glory of the Caliphate, HT argues, is the solution to local grievances (Jonson 2006: 165–66).

Conclusion

The rapid growth of HT in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan has caused unease in the region and beyond. The regimes have accused HT of engaging in violence and terrorism, a charge that has found some endorsement in the scholarly community. Citing a 2001 publication by HT, Naumkin has argued that HT does not live up to the image of a peaceful organization when it advocates uprising and jihad (Naumkin 2005: 155). The events of 2001 and the arrival of US forces in Uzbekistan have added a new dimension to the activity of HT. The party has blamed President Karimov for facilitating the US military involvement in Afghanistan, calling him a
'Jew' – the ultimate insult for Islamists in the Middle East. This term, however, carries little political or ideological weight for Central Asian Muslims, who were protected from the escalation of hostilities between Muslims and Jews in the twentieth-century Middle East.

The knee-jerk reaction of the authorities to HT and other Islamists has been uncompromising, and ultimately counter-productive. The ruling regimes, especially the Uzbek regime, have become increasingly wary of Islam and its role in politics. The state machinery of control has seriously undermined the Islamic institutions of learning in Uzbekistan to such an extent that there is next to no intellectual and religious capacity in the office of the Muftiyat to challenge the ideology of the Caliphate. The former Mufti of Uzbekistan, Muhammad Yusuf (now in exile), blames the growth and popularity of HT on the behavior of the regime for purging the Islamic establishment of the energy and the intellectual capital needed to counter radical ideologies (Naumkin 2005: 157).

The crack-down on dissent and accusation of extremism and affiliation with HT leveled against anyone suspected of harboring critical views of the Karimov regime has pushed Uzbekistan towards breaking point. Tensions boiled over in 2005 when a group of women stormed Andijan’s prison to free their male relatives accused of links with HT. In the ensuing violence around 400 people lost their lives. The authorities blamed the violence on HT, but independent reports have pointed the finger at the indiscriminate shooting of civilians by the security forces (International Crisis Group 2005). Whatever the truth, the Andijan events demonstrated the depth of tensions in Uzbekistan and the immense risk for violence. They demonstrated that the standard response of the authorities to Islamic and non-Islamic dissidents, the iron fist policy of suppression and persecution, has polarized society and led to a greater radicalization of the opposition. This political environment is best suited to Islamist groups such as HT which maintain a binary worldview, seeing it in terms of the war between Islam and kufr, good and evil. As Eric McLindle (2005) has argued, the growth of Islamism in Central Asia is to a large extent due to the authoritarian and intolerant policies pursued by the incumbent regimes.

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References


