

**THE ISLAMIC
MOVEMENT OF UZBEKISTAN:
DEVELOPMENT STAGES AND
ITS PRESENT STATE**

Ikbaldjon MIRSAYITOV

*Chief expert at the International Institute of
Strategic Research under
the President of the Kyrgyz Republic
(Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan)*

On 10 January, 2006, leader of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) Muhammad Tahir “Faruk” (alias Tahir Yoldosh) issued a video address to all Muslims of Central Asia. He spoke in the Uzbek. In August 2006, after the antiterrorist operation of the law-enforcement

bodies in Osh, in the south of Kyrgyzstan, in which Muhammadrafik Kamalov, imam of the Friday al-Sarabsi mosque in the town of Kara-Suu, was killed, some information agencies and Internet sites (Voice of America, BBC, and Feghana.ru, among others) received audio address by the same person. In September 2006, the same information agencies and sites were treated to another share of his addresses marking the

fifth anniversary of the tragic events of 9/11 in the U.S.

I used these addresses and the recent Central Asian developments to analyze the present state of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, its plans for the future, and its relationship with other religious extremist organizations, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami, Akromiyya, and others.

IMU Activities: Stage-by-Stage

Events and facts as well as numerous publications and commentaries serve as a starting point for identifying the stages of IMU development.

- *First Stage.* 1988: Radically-minded Muslims and religious leaders first made their presence obvious in Tashkent; it became clear that there was an Islamic opposition movement in Central Asia. At this stage, the theologians and religious leaders resolved to reform Islam united into a group; A. Mirzoev, imam of the Friday mosque in Andijan, was among its leaders; later his followers joined the IMU.
- *Second Stage.* 1990-1991: The first radical religious-political organizations appeared in the CIS (Uzbekistan being no exception). It was at this stage that individual cells appeared, their heads later becoming IMU leaders.
- *Third Stage.* 1992-1996: A united Islamic movement appeared together with structures, a leading group, local cells and branches scattered across Central Asia. It was at this stage that the leaders of Uzbekistan strengthened the state's law-enforcement bodies for the first time for the purpose of fighting the IMU.
- *Fourth Stage.* 1996-2000: The IMU crossed the borders of Uzbekistan to operate in foreign territories. This ended in the first armed clashes across the region (in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan among other places).
- *Fifth Stage.* 2001 until the present: The IMU split into several groups now scattered across the world (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey).

I cannot agree with Yoldosh when he says that the IMU dates back to the first years of Soviet power in Central Asia. At that time, the so-called Basmachi hoisted the banner of Islam to fight the Soviets. Yoldosh has pointed out that the IMU is an old structure and a descendant of "our ancestors." To prove this he describes the following stages:

- I. 1917-1980: Makhfi harakat, an underground movement when, to quote Yoldosh, "the Muslims were readying themselves to rebuff Soviet order."
- II. Late 1980s-early 1990s: Oshkor davat, an open call and open propaganda; the period when Islam was revived across the post-Soviet expanse, including Uzbekistan.

- III. Middle and end of the 1990s. Hijrah harakat—emigration. The IDU first appeared in Tajikistan and then became active in Chechnia and Afghanistan. It was at this stage that it developed into a political movement.
- IV. 1999: The blasts in Tashkent caused a wave of arrests in Uzbekistan; the IMU launched its military offensive in Batken (Kyrgyzstan) and Tashkent.
- V. 2001: The American events of 9/11 ushered in a new stage in IMU activities. It allied with other organizations and movements that stood opposed to the antiterrorist coalition, and fought in Northern Afghanistan. It was at this stage, obviously, that the Islamic Movement of Turkistan took shape.

According to Yoldosh, the IMU “is moving outside the framework of a regional organization.” It has changed its political vector and developed from a regional organization into a structure engaged, together with al-Qa’eda and the Taliban, in the struggle against “all enemies of Islam” (the U.S., Israel, and Western Europe).

How the IMU Treats Other Extremist Religious Organizations

The video address mentioned above failed to reach the region’s broad peaceful masses for a very simple reason: as IMU Amir (head) Tahir Yoldosh subjected Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) and other religious organizations operating in the region to scything criticism. After receiving the text, the HT activists were obviously reluctant to expose their shortcomings and failures to the broad masses.

Tahir Yoldosh relies on information obtained from the most authoritative ulema of the Muslim world to go into details about HT’s ideology and criticize it.

Says he: “Our respected Muslims have not yet learned what HT is. What is it indeed? This happened because HT has yet failed to show its true face to the Muslim public of Central Asia.” While in emigration in Afghanistan, Yoldosh talked to many of the most respected ulema of the Ahli Sunna val Jamoa about what HT was doing in Central Asia. He offered his own opinion about the organization.

—HT strikes root where there are no knowledgeable ulema and where Islamic education (davat) has no stronghold. In 1995, when the highly respected imam of the Friday mosque of Andijan Abduvali Mirzoev “disappeared,” the HT activists organized a huge festival to celebrate the removal of their main opponent, one of the main supporters of Ahli Sunna val Jamoa in Central Asia. The IMU Amir is convinced that HT owes its popularity to the absence of respected and competent Muslim theologians and ulema. It should be said in all justice that back in 2004 one of the most respected ulema of Tajikistan, Hoji Aqbar Turajonzodah, warned his compatriots about the harmful nature of HT’s ideology.¹ Mufti of Kyrgyzstan Murataly azhy Zhumanov has written a book about HT in the Kyrgyz language.² What is more, Tablighi Jamaat, an organization that has posed itself the aim of providing Islamic education, has become widely popular in Central Asia.

¹ See: H.A. Turajonzodah, “Islam, protivorechashchiy Koranu. Za chto boretsia ‘Hisb ut-Tahrir?’” *NG-religii*, 4 August, 2004.

² See: M. Zhumanov, *Hizb ut-Tahrir degen kim?* Bishkek, 2004.

- There are fundamental differences between the aqiya of HT and the aqiya of Ahli Sunna val Jamoa with respect to the Islamic canons. As distinct from the latter, the former does not recognize dadzhol (anti-Christ), while the latter insists that there are qabr azoby (eternal tortures in the afterlife for the sins committed on earth), whereas HT rejects this completely, says Yoldosh. “There is another reason why the HT is active in the region: it simplifies the religious canons to adjust them to the unenlightened minds, thus pushing the canons away from Islam,” says Yoldosh and adds: “HT tries to penetrate people’s minds with its own version of Islam.” Turajonzodah, in turn, said that HT’s interpretation was far removed from the genuine Islamic sources, the Koran and the hadith of the Prophet, as well as the best-known commentaries to the Koran.
- There is any number of publications in the Islamic world authored by prominent Muslim scholars completely refuting HT’s ideology. They have not yet reached the ordinary Muslims of Central Asia. Recently a book appeared in Arabic written by Dr. Maani ibn Maadil Juhani that provides a detailed response to HT’s ideology. It analyzed nearly all of HT’s publications and identified the worst, from the point of view of Islam, errors and blunders. I have already written that similar books appeared in the local Central Asian languages as well.
- HT supplies simplified answers of its own to the most burning issues. “HT publishes its own fatwahs, which contradict true Islam. It says that non-Muslims and women can be accepted as members of the Shura (the Islamic parliament). It permits erotic scenes, films, and photos; it also permits kissing women and talking to them. HT went even further: it admits that a non-Muslim can head a Muslim state. Here is the most interesting point: HT rejects jihad as a war against the infidels (kafir), yet accepts involvement in armed struggle on the side of non-Muslims fighting other non-Muslims (qufr against qufr). HT rejects namaz on board a plane. The Koran bans marriages between close relatives while HT permits them. Those who violate the ban run the risk of arrest and ten years in prison,” writes Yoldosh. On the strength of the above, he concludes that HT was instituted to split the Muslims. I would like to compare Yoldosh’s opinion about “the consultative structures of HT’s ideology” with what Turajonzodah wrote: “According to the HT ideologists, Islam does not recognize consultative procedures in social-political order. For example, in his book *Democracy is a Godless System*, the party’s chief ideologist Taqiuddin an-Nabhani describes all consultative structures (the parliament among them) and universal voting as alien to Islamic society.”³ To my mind, the HT ideologists have become lost in the woods of their statements: some of them reject the parliament as a branch of power, while others permit women and non-Muslims to be elected to it. In Kyrgyzstan, HT even took part in the election process by lobbying its own presidential candidates.

Yoldosh has concluded that HT is a mutant of sorts that relies on Islam and politics to secure its own purely utopian aims. He is convinced that by doing this the party betrays Islam and all organizations that are following the road of true Islam. As if to confirm this, Turajonzodah wrote: “A more profound study of HT’s program and ideological attitudes and its practical activities suggests that it was set up by anti-Islamic circles. Its affluence in some of the Western countries, in which it runs large centers and offices working on a conception of ‘worldwide Islamic Caliphate,’ is proof of this. It has no popular support in the Arab world, especially in the Gulf countries, and has no stand among the Islamic clerics and ordinary Muslims.”⁴

It seems that the IMU leader is criticizing HT from a different viewpoint. HT has developed into the most influential political tool in Central Asia, while the IMU enjoys no respect among the local Muslims. HT’s supporters condemned the 9/11 events in the United States, while the IMU rejoiced over them.

³ H.A. Turajonzodah, op. cit.

⁴ Ibidem.

HT has stepped up its activities across the post-Soviet expanse; today it runs large analytical, propaganda, and publishing centers in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Russia, and China. It enlists members from among all ethnic groups.⁵ Today, “HT’s peaceful methods” of influencing the minds of the common people look much more attractive to the youth than the much harsher radical methods of the IMU. The two organizations will obviously go on competing for the minds of the local people.

The IMU and its Amir do not limit themselves to criticizing HT. In his address, Yoldosh regrets that the Andijan events of 2005 claimed numerous innocent lives. Tashkent and Moscow shifted the blame for these events onto the IMU. In actual fact, says Yoldosh, “IMU had nothing to do with this bloodshed. It sticks to the tactics of jihad as described by the Koran and the Sunnah.” He pointed out: “For this reason we cannot use women, old people, and children as a live shield in our struggle as the activists of the Akromiyya movement did. I would like to say that the IMU had no part to play in the terrorist acts of 2004 in Tashkent and Bukhara. It should seek revenge for those who perished in these bloody events. This is our duty.” He goes on to say: “Those who led peaceful people to the rally and then abandoned them to their fate and those who fired at these people will have to account for this before the nation and Allah.” “We cannot justify those who sought refuge in the West after the bloodshed. They will not be treated as Muslims there; the United States will try to use them for its own purposes.” He also said in his address: “I want to use this opportunity to invite them to join the true Islamic fighters” (i.e. him).

In August 2005, dozens of Muslims rallied together at the Dutch embassy in Tehran mainly to demand a refugee status. All of them insisted that they were “former IMU members.”⁶ Yoldosh regretted the action of his former followers and said: “Right after the antiterrorist forces headed by the United States began their combat action in Afghanistan, these people betrayed us (him and his organization.—*I.M.*) by choosing the ‘qufir’ and a conspiracy with the IMU opponents.”

It has become clear that the movement’s original idea in 1999-2000 of fighting the official Tashkent to “set up an Islamic state” ultimately failed. No wonder many of the IMU members gathered up their families and moved away from the IMU camps in Afghanistan using the coalition’s bombs as a plausible pretext.

It looks as if those who supported the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) have opted for the same thing to give Tahir Yoldosh the chance to accuse them of betraying their common interests. The civil war in Tajikistan cost the country thousands of lives; it was for this reason that the IRPT deemed it wise to cast aside the IMU principles and seek an agreement with the authorities. The dialog and the 1997 armistice forced the IMU to move to Afghanistan.

The Andijan tragedy of 13 May, 2005, the events of the spring and fall of 2006 in Kyrgyzstan, as well as clashes between the Taliban and the antiterrorist forces in Afghanistan allowed Yoldosh to stir up another propaganda campaign among the Central Asian Muslims.

Today the IMU is mostly a virtual structure doing its best to lure the Muslims onto its side. Together with the Taliban and al-Qa‘eda, it hopes to resume conscription of those willing to fight.

Its efforts to criticize HT and other extremist organizations of the region are nothing but a smoke-screen designed to cover up the IMU restored activities in Central Asia and an effort to patch up the damage inflicted by its crimes.

⁵ See: I. Mirsayitov, “Aktivnosti Hizb ut-Tahrir neobkhodimo protivodeystvovat’ ideologicheskii,” available at [www.ferghana.ru].

⁶ I. Mirsayitov, A. Saipov, “Byvshie soratniki Takhira Iuldasheva rasskazyvaiut o tom, cho takoe ‘Islamskoe dvizhenie Uzbekistana’ segodnia,” available at [www.ferghana.ru].