

THE NEXT THREAT FROM CENTRAL ASIA

— Tyler Rauert —

Today, the United States faces a daunting set of challenges in Central Asia, ranging from the ideological to the strategic. None, however, are more complex than responding to *Hizb ut-Tahrir al Islami* (the Islamic Party of Liberation, or HuT). Highly secretive, HuT is a pan-Islamic movement that aims to seize power in Central Asia as the first step in an elaborate plan aimed at creating a unified worldwide Islamic state.

Thus far, HuT has managed to operate for the most part away from the eyes of Western governments, thanks in large part to a sophisticated worldview that simultaneously supports violent *jihād* and publicly proclaims peaceful Islamic change. It has not, however, escaped the attention of the governments of Central Asia—the “stans” at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East—and has become the target of massive clampdowns and domestic repression.

Much about Hizb ut-Tahrir is unclear, including its leadership, organizational structure, and financing. What is less ambiguous, however, is that HuT poses a growing danger to U.S. interests and long-term objectives in the region.

Origins and ideology

Hizb ut-Tahrir’s roots are shrouded in mystery. The organization appears to have been established in Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Jordanian-occupied East Jerusalem in or around 1953 by a group of Palestinians led by Taqiuddin



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an-Nabkhani al-Filastyni (1909-1977), a member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.¹ A party spokesman admits that “Hizb ut-Tahrir has been involved in a number of failed coup attempts in the Middle East”—including several attempts to overthrow the Jordanian government in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as well as involvement in an attack on the military academy in Egypt in 1974.²

In Central Asia, HuT cells began to emerge after the fall of the Soviet Union. Uzbek officials assert that the movement was introduced into Uzbekistan in 1995 by a Jordanian by the name of Salahuddin.³ From there, it quickly spread through the Ferghana Valley at the crossroads of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Leaders of Hizb ut-Tahrir believe that Central Asia is approaching a “boiling point,” making it ready for an Islamist takeover.

Little is known about HuT’s organizational structure, chain of command, or leadership. The group’s major organizational center is said to be in London, where most of its literature is published and a good deal of its fundraising and training occurs.⁴ There are no photographs of HuT leaders in Central Asia. There is no hint of who they are, precisely how the chain of command functions, or where they are based.

By contrast, the group’s platform and ideology are well-defined. Hizb ut-Tahrir rejects the modern political state. It disavows nationalism, democracy, capitalism, and socialism as Western concepts alien to Islam. Instead, the organization seeks a return to the *Khilafat-i-Rashida*, which ruled Arab Muslims from the Prophet Muhammad’s death in 632 until 661 under the four “righteous Caliphs.”⁵

The modern caliph envisioned by an-Nabkhani in his day, and thus by Hizb ut-Tahrir, controls the religion, army, economy, foreign policy and internal political system of the caliphate. He is not accountable to the people. There are no checks, balances, or branches of government. In fact, Hizb ut-Tahrir explicitly rejects democracy and sees it as a Western concept alien to Islam. Instead, *sharia*—Islamic law—will be the law of the land. It is left up to the caliph and his deputies to interpret and apply it. The imposition of *sharia* will solve all social, economic, and ethnic problems that the *ummah* (Islamic community) may have. Arabic will be the state language. The role of women will be restricted to the home, though they will be allowed to liberally pursue education. The defense minister—the emir of *jihād*—will be appointed by the caliph to prepare the people for and to wage *jihād* against non-believers, including the United States and the West. Military conscription will be mandatory for all Muslim men over the age of 15.

It is widely reported that Hizb ut-Tahrir shuns violence. This view, however, lacks the nuance necessary for useful analysis. Outwardly, HuT advocates the peaceful creation of an Islamic government in any region where the organization might initially gain power, including Central Asia. HuT literature supports *jihād* primarily as a means of mobilizing supporters against non-Muslims. With respect to Muslim regimes, the organization attempts to win over mass support in the hope that one day its adherents will rise up in peaceful demonstrations to overthrow the regimes they live under, ostensibly including those of Central Asia.⁶ To assert, however, that it is opposed to political violence *per se* is erroneous. In addition to calling for attacks on Coalition forces in Iraq,⁷ HuT has developed the concept of *nusrah*

(seeking outside assistance), including military assistance, from other groups.⁸ Moreover, HuT endorses defensive *jihads*, where Muslims are required to fight against an invader if attacked—a position that clearly has the potential to be interpreted very broadly.

Like many other radical Islamist movements, Hizb ut-Tahrir is virulently anti-Semitic, anti-Western, anti-Sufi and anti-Shi'a. The “enemy” that HuT perhaps spends the most time discussing, however, is the United States. The organization maintains that the United States has declared war on the *ummah* in establishing an international alliance under the pretext of fighting terrorism after September 11, 2001⁹—thus creating the precedent for a defensive *jihād*. In response, it calls on all Muslims to attack Coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, calls for the expulsion of all U.S. and Western citizens, including diplomats, from Muslim lands, and demands the abrogation of any agreements or treaties made with Western governments.

HuT's vision for Central Asia

The scenario played out in Hizb ut-Tahrir literature involves one or more Islamic countries in Central Asia coming under the organization's control, creating a base from which it will be able to convince still others to join the fold—generating what is in essence an Islamic domino effect. But, while Central Asia (and potentially the Xinjiang Province of China) may be the starting point for this campaign, HuT's ambitions are substantially broader.

Leaders of Hizb ut-Tahrir—citing the lack of secular space for political opposition, increasing despair and a lack of economic opportunity—believe that Central Asia is approaching a “boiling point,” making it ready for an

Islamist takeover.¹⁰ The group seeks to take advantage of this dispossessed population to seize power in Central Asia as a prelude to the establishment of a broader caliphate, removing wayward Muslim regimes and, eventually, overthrowing non-Muslim ones as well.

Within Central Asia, Hizb ut-Tahrir appears to be focused on destabilizing the regime in Uzbekistan. According to experts, “[I]eaflets from Hizb ut-Tahrir, now found virtually everywhere in Central Asia, call for the overthrow of the Uzbek government, regularly insult President Karimov, and call for the creation of an Islamic caliphate” in place of the ruling regime.¹¹

This focus derives from two sources. First, the organization itself is largely made up of ethnic Uzbeks.¹² It is only natural, therefore, that they focus their attention on their own government first.

Second, and perhaps more important, is the perception that the regime of President Islam Karimov represents the greatest threat to the goal of establishing a regional Islamic state. Uzbekistan has the largest and best-trained military and police force in Central Asia, making it the most well-equipped to quash a pan-Islamist movement, but also the most capable of spreading that same movement, if the existing regime can be overthrown. An Islamic revolution in Uzbekistan, in short, would make other, weaker Central Asian regimes more likely to fall.

Evidence of such a revolution appears to be surfacing in the recent unrest in the embattled Central Asian state. In addition to three days of violence in Bukhara and Tashkent in March 2004 that killed 42, three suicide bombers attacked the U.S. and Israeli embassies, as well as the office of Uzbekistan's prosecutor-general, in nearly simultaneous operations on July 30, 2004.¹³

More significant still has been the unrest in Andijan. International observers have characterized the events that took place in the Ferghana Valley city in May 2005 as a massacre, and with some justification.¹⁴ Yet, for all of the Uzbek government's brutal tactics, at least as disquieting are the circumstances that precipitated the regime's response. The killings began when thousands rallied in Andijan's Bobur Square in support of the freeing of twenty-three businessmen on trial for their alleged membership in Akramiya, an offshoot of Hizb ut-Tahrir, by an organized band of devout Muslims.¹⁵ A day earlier, that group had raided a military barracks and police station, captured weapons, led a prison break to free the businessmen and hundreds of other prisoners, and seized the local government building, taking law enforcement and government officials hostage and killing several in the process.¹⁶

Growing appeal

Hizb ut-Tahrir has grown exponentially since it emerged in Central Asia following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The majority of HuT members in Central Asia appear to be from the Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Unlike other radical Islamic groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), HuT finds its recruits among urban populations, as well as rural areas. Its support base consists of college students, the unemployed, factory workers and teachers.¹⁷

In addition to recruiting as many members as possible throughout Central Asia, Hizb ut-Tahrir actively seeks to convert regional government officials to its ideology. According to Ariel Cohen of the Heritage Foundation, "Hizb has begun to penetrate the elites in Central Asia. Observers in the region have reported successes in pen-

etrating the Parliament in Kyrgyzstan, the media in Kazakhstan, and customs offices in Uzbekistan."¹⁸

Hizb ut-Tahrir is currently most active in Uzbekistan, where it has a particularly pronounced presence as the only serious political opposition to an overwhelmingly repressive and disliked regime. HuT has gained this status in large part because all meaningful opposition parties, including secular ones, are illegal. The organization claims 10,000 adherents in Uzbekistan alone, with an undetermined number of supporters in addition to its active membership. Between 7,000 and 8,000 HuT members are thought to currently be in prison there.¹⁹

Washington faces a two-fold dilemma in Central Asia: how to deal with HuT on the one hand, and with intractable Central Asian regimes that inadvertently stimulate the growth of Islamic extremism on the other.

Hizb ut-Tahrir activity, however, is also on the rise in Tajikistan, especially in the north in the Ferghana Valley.²⁰ In addition, there are an estimated 3,000 members in Kyrgyzstan,²¹ with its strongest support in the south of the country around the provinces of Osh and Jalal-Abad (though there are sporadic reports of activity in the north).²² HuT also seems to be slowly gaining popularity in the southern part of Kazakhstan, where radical Islam historically has not made many inroads.²³ There are even reports that Hizb ut-Tahrir is at work in the prisons of Turkmenistan.²⁴

Hizb ut-Tahrir's rising popularity is unmistakable. It is also deeply counter-intuitive. Central Asia has a long legacy of Sufism, and HuT is violently anti-

Sufi. Moreover, the organization's very philosophy denies it any ability to adapt to the traditional norms of Central Asia. HuT draws its ideology from sources alien to Central Asian traditions, and *jihadi* literature is written for a global audience, rather than addressing local problems and specific concerns. In addition, the organization's leadership and hierarchy are kept secret, thus limiting its ability to be seen as a real alternative to the current regimes in Central Asia.

Yet, despite these inadequacies, HuT is making major inroads. The group has an advantage in societies with only limited religious knowledge among Muslims, because there are few religious leaders with adequate theological training to effectively refute HuT arguments. The suppression of Islam throughout the seven-odd decades of Soviet rule and the continuation of this policy in some regional states weakened many indigenous Islamic traditions to the point that they can be overcome by a movement which promises a better life and a return to glory of the cultures of Central Asia. Moreover, the secrecy of the movement's leadership does not indicate impotence. Quite the opposite, in fact; the spreading popularity of the group demonstrates a surprising degree of cohesiveness and strength.

The growth of Hizb ut-Tahrir has been significantly, though unintentionally, fueled by the repressive tactics adopted by Central Asian regimes. With few exceptions, the states that emerged out of the Soviet Union smother, rather than engage, their political opposition. The anti-democratic policies adopted by these regimes unwittingly expand the influence of extremist groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir and the IMU from the margins of national political discourse to its center. When there is no room for moderate and reasonable opposition, the only channel for change comes through radical elements.

Perhaps the most innovative force behind the rapid spread of Hizb ut-Tahrir, however, is the group's proficient use of technology. Unlike many other radical Islamic movements, the organization recognizes the achievements of non-Muslim cultures and strives to incorporate them. HuT relies heavily on modern technology such as the Internet to spread its message. The organization even has a fairly sophisticated and dynamic website (www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org). Moreover, arrests of alleged HuT members have yielded "[c]omputer disks, videos, CDs, the latest printing and photocopying machines, and extensive use of email—all of which are very rare in Central Asia, where people have little access to technology."²⁵ A great deal of the organization's technology has been funded and imported from abroad, signifying both the international scope of the movement and the complicity of at least some officials responsible for customs and border controls among local governments.

Washington's dilemma

Washington faces a two-fold dilemma in Central Asia: how to deal with HuT on the one hand, and with intractable Central Asian regimes that inadvertently stimulate the growth of Islamic extremism on the other.

Hizb ut-Tahrir presents a particularly difficult problem. The group is not currently on the State Department's list of designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations, largely because it has yet to definitively participate in guerilla activity, kidnapping, or the establishment of dedicated training camps. Rather, the danger stems from the ideological foundation that it creates for more violent offshoots, cross-pollination with other extremist groups, a potential internal radicalization, or some combination of these tendencies.

Increasingly, the movement is characterized by the “rhetoric of jihad, secret cells and operations, murky funding sources, rejection of existing political regimes, rapid transnational growth,”²⁶ and ideological—if not official—ties to al-Qaeda and other global *jihadi* movements. The organization’s leaders may “deny that they have *formal links* with other radical movements such as the Taliban, Al Qaeda, or the IMU.”²⁷ It is clear, however, that the ultimate aims of Hizb ut-Tahrir and these other radical movements are congruent; it is over the means through which to achieve those ends that the movements diverge.

Should one emerge, either as a result of peaceful grassroots change or violent revolution, a HuT-controlled state is likely to become a latter-day Afghanistan—a safe-haven from which terrorist organizations can carry out their nefarious activities. It would also almost assuredly be anti-democratic, anti-capitalist, and severely repressive.

Hizb ut-Tahrir is certainly sympathetic to other radical Islamic movements. It appears to have a tactical partnership with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)—a bond built on both ideological compatibility and ethnic ties. For example, HuT supporters were welcomed by the IMU in Afghanistan in 1999.²⁸ Moreover, HuT has supported and expressed empathy for the deposed Taliban movement in Afghanistan. There have been several reports of meetings between leaders of Hizb ut-Tahrir, the IMU, and the Taliban. And, despite denials of receiving money or support from al-Qaeda, the movement clearly sympathizes with the efforts of the Bin Laden net-

work. The group has also been tied to Jema’ah Islamiyya in Indonesia, and to Uighur separatists operating in China’s Xinjiang province.²⁹

Even if Hizb ut-Tahrir has not been directly involved in violence, like the Muslim Brotherhood, it is not averse to supporting other radical Islamic movements, through force if necessary. And the organization is gravitating toward a more aggressive, confrontational ideological stance. According to the U.S. Department of State,

Although there is no confirmed evidence of HT’s involvement in violent actions as an organization, HT propaganda has praised martyrdom operations against Israel and called for attacks against coalition forces in Iraq. HT leaflets have also claimed that the United States and the United Kingdom are at war with Islam, and have called for all Muslims to defend the faith and engage in jihad against these countries.³⁰

As a result of these ideological and tactical changes, Hizb-ut Tahrir is emerging as a distinct threat to American strategic objectives in Central Asia. Despite its persistent claims of a generally peaceful disposition, recent hostile rhetoric regarding the United States and the War on Terror, the group’s justification of *jihad* against *kufir* (unbelievers), and its organizational ties to *bona fide* terrorist organizations suggest at least the potential to conduct terrorist activities against the U.S. and its interests, particularly in Central Asia. At a minimum, Hizb ut-Tahrir is on the front-line of the “war of ideas.” It matters little whether HuT undertakes terrorist activities under its own banner, whether members act in their “individual capacities,” or if the organization supports others conducting terrorist activities. The relevant issue is that HuT has justified such actions, and

therefore constitutes a *de facto* threat to the United States.

Even if it continues to refrain from terrorist activities against the United States, Hizb ut-Tahrir has the potential to dramatically alter the correlation of forces in the region. Should one emerge, either as a result of peaceful grassroots change or violent revolution, a HuT-controlled state is likely to become a latter-day Afghanistan—a safe-haven from which terrorist organizations can carry out their nefarious activities. It would also almost assuredly be anti-democratic, anti-capitalist, and severely repressive.

That danger, moreover, is only exacerbated by the policies of Central Asian regimes themselves. Repressive security services, poverty, corruption, and state mismanagement of the economy have created an atmosphere of discontent that has absolutely nothing to do with religion. When combined with the elimination of all moderate and secular opposition, groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir can fill the “protest niche that would otherwise be occupied by legitimate political opposition.”³¹ In such a situation, it is inevitable that a certain level of sympathy, if not support, for HuT comes from those who are primarily opposed to the authorities, rather than particularly supportive of the organization’s goals in and of themselves.

In its understandable eagerness to combat terrorism, particularly in Afghanistan, the United States has so far given regimes like that of Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan at least a temporary pass on much-needed reforms. While such a tactic may be effective in the near term, in the long run it is likely to further destabilize the region, creating power vacuums that are then filled by political and religious extremists such as Hizb ut-Tahrir.


Confronting HuT

For the United States, neutralizing the nascent threat posed by Hizb ut-Tahrir requires a comprehensive strategy aimed at countering the organization’s political power, ideological influence and its destabilizing potential in Central Asia. Recent tensions with Uzbekistan have highlighted the fragility of the Bush administration’s contemporary, predominantly military, engagement with the Central Asian republics. A more multifaceted approach—one involving deeper political and economic dialogue with regional regimes on the part of Washington—could do much to erode HuT’s regional appeal.

In doing so, Washington must be willing and able to make potentially painful compromises between competing priorities. In essence, the United States must determine whether it is getting a good return on its investment in combating regional terrorism. Funding regimes that employ practices which encourage the growth of Islamic extremism is obviously counterproductive. Instead, the U.S. should tie security and economic aid to *authentic* reforms in the political, security and economic sectors, and make clear that it refuses to sanction policies that undercut regional stability.

Just as important, the U.S. must encourage non-violent regional political participation, if not democracy, as a means of diminishing Hizb ut-Tahrir’s relevance. In her June 20th speech in Cairo, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared that, “[f]or 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region... and we achieved neither. Now, we are taking a different course.”³² A failure to follow the same principle in Central Asia would similarly undermine American interests.

There are also certain measures the U.S. should not take. Hizb ut-Tahrir has shown no interest in legitimate political processes in the past, and can be expected to behave similarly in the future, even if Central Asian or Western governments attempt to engage it. As well, incorporating the group into local political systems would bestow upon it an undeserved legitimacy. The key to effectively confronting HuT instead lies in pushing it to the margins of regional political discourse.

Without such steps, the United States runs the risk of the emergence of a powerful new terrorist entity—or even a radical fundamentalist state—in the region. Should that happen, there can be little doubt that the United States would find its War on Terror much the worse for wear. 

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