

RELIGION IN SOCIETY

**TABLIGHI JAMAAT IN KYRGYZSTAN:
ITS LOCAL SPECIFICS AND
POSSIBLE IMPACT ON
THE RELIGIOUS SITUATION****Kanatbek MURZAKHALILOV**

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Introduction

Early in the 1990s, men who stood out in the crowd because of their beards and Pakistani clothing flocked to the newly independent country. They were members of Tablighi Jamaat, a religious movement which called on the faithful to pattern their lives on the rules and customs of the Prophet Muhammad.

Its high level of activity soon turned it into the largest of the Islamic organizations and groups (both local and foreign) operating in Kyrgyzstan. At first, the newcomers concentrated their efforts

on the country's north, which is much less religious than the south.¹ But after a while, the movement spread to the south to cover the republic's entire territory.

The first missionaries (who did not know any of the local languages and spoke English and

¹ See: I. Rotar, "Stranniki v nochi. Pakistanskiy islam v Tsentral'noy Azii: missionerstvo ili podryvnaia deiatel'nost'?" *NG-Religii*, 20 February, 2008, available at [http://religion.ng.ru/problems/2008-02-20/6_stranniki.html].

Arabic) came from Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and India²; they had to rely on local interpreters to explain the foundations of Islam to the people.

The Pakistani missionaries believe the Kyrgyz Republic to be the most fertile soil for tilling by foreign preachers; it is expected to serve as a springboard from which Islam, and its extremist trends, can be launched further across the region.³

Over 50 citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic are now educated in the Islamic regional educational establishments of Pakistan,⁴ although this figure

² See: Interview with R. Eratov, head of the Daavat Department, Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan, 15 June, 2009.

³ See: N. Samartseva, "Shirma dlia ekstremistov, ili Chto skryvaetsia za blagimi tseliami 'Tablighi Jamaat' po ozdorovleniiu musul'manskogo obshchestva," *ResPublika*, 18 June, 2006.

⁴ See: O. Mamaiusupov, K. Murzakhilov, K. Mamataliev, *Kratkiy analiz religioznykh sistem v Kyrgyzstane*, Bishkek, 2006, 172 pp.

is hardly correct. There is any number of those who travel on tourist visas and private invitations without informing the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (SAMK) and state structures to receive religious education abroad.

Tablighi Jamaat stepped up its involvement in the republic's religious life with the help of those who returned to till the local soil after graduating from religious centers in Pakistan and India. Kyrgyz students prefer the Tablighi Jamaat madrasahs in Lahore and Rayvind where they study Muslim theology and, not infrequently, bring back many religious convictions and teachings which contradict not only the local mentality, but also the Hanafi madhhab the Kyrgyz inherited from their ancestors.

In a very short time, the ranks of missionaries swelled with local people speaking Kyrgyz and Russian; some of them studied abroad, others had no formal education.

Members of Tablighi Jamaat in Kyrgyzstan

Today, the membership of Tablighi Jamaat is fairly large and diverse; there are laborers, shop owners, students, lecturers at higher educational establishments, businessmen, prominent actors, and even civil servants among them. Some of them devote a lot of their leisure time to "daavat" in all corners of the republic.

Most of the movement's members are ethnic Kyrgyz; members of other nationalities are few and far between.

It seems that abroad the Kyrgyz were singled out as the main target of missionary activities mainly because they were less religious than the republic's other Muslims (Uzbeks, Dungans, Uighurs, Darghins, and Tatars).

Followers and supporters of Tablighi Jamaat are found in practically every city, town, and even the smallest village, as well as in every age group from 16 to 70. The bulk of the movement in Kyrgyzstan belongs to the 19-45 age brackets. The total number of followers is hard to establish and is, therefore, unknown.

According to K. Malikov,⁵ there are about 80 jamaats (groups of Muslims) in Kyrgyzstan engaged in missionary activities.

S. Kalykov, the qadi of the Osh Region, estimated the number of Tablighi Jamaat followers at about 10 thousand and added that in principle they did no harm.⁶

⁵ See: K. Malikov, "Ne iskliuchaiu, chto vo vlastnykh strukturakh Kyrgyzstana est destruktivnye elementy, kotorym vygodno raskachivanie religioznoy lodki," Bishkek—24.kg Information Agency, 14 March, 2009, available at [www.24.kg/community/2009/03/14/109065.htm].

⁶ See: I. Rotar, op. cit.

Minister of education K. Osmonaliev, in turn, is of a different opinion about the movement's numerical strength: "There can be no exact figure since the movement's members are waging 'guerilla warfare.' Under cover of educational and missionary activities, Tablighi Jamaat is engaged in a very dangerous game."⁷

Other experts believe that there are about 2,000 "daavat activists" in the republic and over 50 "kudama" (the most active missionaries), a title assigned to those engaged regularly in preaching and missionary activities from 40 days to 4 months.

Our own studies⁸ revealed that today the republic's Muslim community can provisionally be divided into six groups:

- (1) graduates of the Al-Azhar University (Egypt);
- (2) members of Tablighi Jamaat educated in Pakistan;
- (3) followers of imams or religious authorities outside any of the groups;
- (4) graduates from the Al-Bukhari Madrasah (Bukhara);
- (5) people with Soviet theological education who tend toward the so-called Saudi model of Muslim community;
- (6) graduates of the Theological Faculty, the republic's only theological educational establishment sponsored by the Dayanet Vak Fund (Turkey) (the so-called Turkish model).

According to the associates of the Institute for Strategic Analysis and Forecasting at the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University, the Tablighi Jamaat movement has a well-organized structure and program of action; it relies on the republican, regional, and district councils to discuss the most effective methods of agitation. The councils are staffed with members experienced in daavat (age, religious education, and social and economic status being unimportant).

The republican council holds its monthly meetings in one of the mosques of Bishkek or Karabalty; they bring together delegates from all the regions, whereby any Muslim, be he a member of the clergy or a common believer, can voice his opinion. Not infrequently, the councils invite members of local administrations or law-enforcers to their meetings.⁹

Key Trends

Today, the movement is mainly engaged in daavat, intended to help people get rid of everything "bad" and move closer to everything "good." "Bad" refers to actions which go beyond the limits outlined by the Prophet and Sunnah, while "good" fully corresponds to them. Daavat is commonly associated with the movement's missionary activities which are, in fact, one of its many elements.

Daavat is a gradual process: those wishing to be involved in it should start with 5 to 10 three-day-long daavats; later, the period is extended to 40 days and still later, to 4 months. The fatwa of the Council of the Ulema of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan dated 16 February, 2003 limited daavats to those with special permission from the SAMK and its structures.

⁷ S. Kim, "Lokomotivom dvizhenia 'Tablighi Jamaat' iavliaetsia molodezh Kyrgyzstana," Bishkek—24.kg IA, 3 April, 2009, available at [<http://www.24.kg/community/2009/04/03/110935.html>].

⁸ See: K. Murzakhilov, "Islam v Kyrgyzstane: stanovlenie i perspektivy razvitiia," in *Materailly kruglogo stola "Sekularizm i islam v sovremennom gosudarstve: chto ikh ob'ediniaet?"* Almaty, 2008, pp. 179-199.

⁹ See: "Daavat—prisyv k islamu. Stanet li on protivodeystviem religioznomu ekstremizmu?" Institut strategicheskogo analiza i prognoza KRSU, available at [<http://www.easttime.ru/analytic/1/1/78.html>].

On 10 February, 2009, the SAMK responded to popular discontent caused by uncontrolled daavat with a Statute of the Department of Daavat which formulated the rules obligatory for people engaged in daavat.

Under the new document, these people should seek written permission from the SAMK, while their preaching activities should be controlled by qadis and chief imam-hatybs of districts and cities.

The document makes it incumbent upon the preachers to obtain official confirmation of their religious education from the chief imam-hatyb of the region (city) of their permanent residence, a corresponding document from the local department of internal affairs, and permission from their parents (or family members).

Daavat activists are obliged to carry passports or other forms of identification; they should not wear foreign clothes and should, in general, look presentable.

The Statute also sets forth the number of those intending to engage in daavat.

The document relieved the SAMK from its responsibility for non-registered groups that ignored the official rules.

The new Statute is not fully effective: there are instances of chaotic daavat activities by people with no official documents or identification papers.

Recently, women set up their own groups (*mastura jamaats*) to engage in daavat that is very different from the missionary activities of the male Tablighi members.

In Kyrgyzstan, the followers of Tablighi Jamaat consistently rely on personal contacts to involve people in daavat and draw them into the movement.

How Tablighi Jamaat Affects the Local Religious Situation

Some of the Soviet successor-states have banned Tablighi Jamaat. The Supreme Court of Russia,¹⁰ for example, ruled that its activities threaten national and confessional stability in the Russian Federation and its territorial integrity.

In Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, this organization is also persecuted as a potential national security threat.¹¹

The Kyrgyz Republic tried to emulate its neighbors and ban the movement as a terrorist and extremist structure; on 3 February, 2009, the republic's General Prosecutor's Office lodged a corresponding claim in the Pervomaysky District Court of Bishkek.¹² Some time later, however, it recalled the claim to study the movement and its activities in greater detail.

None of the Western countries (the U.S. included) has banned Tablighi Jamaat; European and American justice found no traces of terrorism or extremism in the movement's activities.

This gives rise to the legitimate question of whether its activities threaten the Kyrgyz Republic's national security? Is it engaged in spreading extremism and fanaticism? An affirmative answer to both invites another question: How is its negative impact on Kyrgyz society manifested?

¹⁰ On 7 May, 2009, the Supreme Court of Russia adjudicated Tablighi Jamaat as an extremist organization and banned it as threatening national and confessional stability of the Russian Federation and its territorial integrity. On 30 July, 2009, the cassation appeal of the Tablighi Jamaat regarding violation of its right to freedom of expression, conscience and association was denied and the court decision came into force.

¹¹ See: "Verkhovny sud Rossii zapretit islamskoe dvizhenie 'Tablighi Jamaat'," *NG-Religii*, 20 May, 2009.

¹² See: "Genprokuratura prosit priznat organizatsiu daavativov 'Tablighi Jamaat' terroristicheskoy i ekstremistskoy," Bishkek—AKIpress Information Agency, 3 February, 2009 [[http:// www. svodka. akipress.org/news:4531/](http://www.svodka.akipress.org/news:4531/)].

Experts and theologians fail to agree: while the former believe that the threat is very real, the latter insist that there is no threat. Some authors¹³ write that so far daavat activists present no direct danger, however over time their propaganda might push poorly educated groups, women and young people in particular, toward religious fanaticism and even religious extremism.

O. Mamaiusupov is of a similar opinion; he has described Tablighi Jamaat as a “factor which helps promote the ideas of religious extremism by bringing together destructive Islamic trends and daavat activities; in fact, it is not daavat itself which causes concern, but the forms and methods employed despite the SAMK Fatwa on daavat.”¹⁴

The youth is a target audience for Tablighi Jamaat; young people are taught to think that daavat is the prime duty of all Muslims; those unwilling to become involved are discredited in the eyes of others.

This may add impetus to the extremist propaganda carried out by Hizb ut-Tahrir and promote dissemination of extremist literature, while daavat might serve as a smokescreen for Hizb ut-Tahrir’s recruitment campaigns.¹⁵

K. Malikov believes there are certain weak points in Tablighi Jamaat’s activity: its missionaries are not very presentable, more often than not their religious knowledge leaves much to be desired, while the daavat process remains chaotic.¹⁶

On 8 October, 2008, the parliamentary commission set up by the Zhorgoku Kenesh on 22 May, 2008 (Decision No. 409-4) made public its final document which said that the activists of Tablighi Jamaat were based in mosques which they had turned into propaganda outposts. They called on the people to obey the Shari‘a, perform namaz five times a day, and suggested that women should wear hijabs. The commission described this as the first step toward religious fanaticism; the daavat activists insist on hijabs in secondary schools and separate educational establishments for boys and girls.

Over time, Tablighi Jamaat, with cells in every city and district, might develop into a serious rival of the SAMK; the parliamentary commission described daavat activities as “one of the most serious problems in the republic’s religious sphere.”¹⁷

What should be done to prevent the negative developments described above?

Some believe that excessive harshness might radicalize Tablighi Jamaat and drive it underground.

K. Malikov agrees with this; hundreds or probably thousands are already involved in daavat; a ban might radicalize the movement, while its supporters will either regard the state as an enemy or embrace more extremist ideas, like the members of Hizb ut-Tahrir and similar structures.¹⁸

A court decision will not liquidate the organization. Described as an extremist structure, it will go underground and break off its contacts with the SAMK and the State Agency for Religious Affairs. The state will lose control over its activities; this has already happened with Hizb ut-Tahrir.¹⁹

The April 2010 events in Kyrgyzstan affected Tablighi Jamaat and significantly reduced its activities.

¹³ See: K. Murzakhilov, K. Mamataliev, “Kyrgyz Republic—Religion,” in: *Central Eurasia 2005. Analytical Annual*, CA&CC Press, Sweden, 2006.

¹⁴ O. Mamaiusupov, *Voprosy (problemy) religii na perekhodnom etape*, Bishkek, 2003, 353 pp.

¹⁵ See: K. Murzakhilov, K. Mamataliev, O. Mamaiusupov, “Islam in the Democratic Context of Kyrgyzstan: Comparative Analysis,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 3 (33), 2005.

¹⁶ See: A. Lyman, “Kyrgyzstan stal ploshchadkoy, na kotoroy stolknulis interesy raznykh stran, blokov i ideologiy,” Bishkek—24.kg IA, 30 September, 2009, available at [<http://www.24.kg/community/62083-abdykadyr-orusbaev-pochemu-by-v-kyrgyzstane.html>].

¹⁷ I. Gorbachev, “Bes fanatizma,” Bishkek—24.kg IA, 11 October, 2008, available at [<http://www.24.kg/community/2008/10/11/95023.html>].

¹⁸ See: A. Lyman, op. cit.

¹⁹ See: Iu. Gruzlov, “Sovobodna li sovest, staviashchaia pod ugrozu natsbezopasnost?” *Obshchestvenno-politicheskaia gazeta MSN*, 13 March, 2009.

According to O. Moldaliev, daavat activists, who until the April events were quite visible in the countryside, disappeared; their leaders went back to their native villages to prepare for the coming parliamentary elections.²⁰

Today, the absolute majority demands outlawing Tablighi Jamaat: its members are poorly educated and hardly presentable (they wear Pakistani dress, beards, etc.). People also object to their habit of spending nights in the local mosques.

The republic's population does not like their aggressive missionary activities, which might negatively affect the situation in the Muslim ummah and confessional relations as a whole.

Today, the Kyrgyz should work hard to preserve social stability and harmonious relations among confessions.

As part of the republic's traditional poly-confessional context, the SAMK should pool forces with other state structures to oppose ideologically alien concepts and convince the faithful that Islam should not be used for illegal (including political) aims.

C o n c l u s i o n

It is very hard to separate the moderate intentions of Tablighi Jamaat (teaching Islam to the masses) from the radicalization of its fairly fanatic followers. In the long term, Islamic propaganda might end in extremism.

Today in Kyrgyzstan, Tablighi Jamaat has limited itself to daavat, but it is clearly an instrument of Islamization of the republic's population.

There is a fairly widely accepted opinion that daavat is not limited to propaganda—it is an instrument of religious enlightenment. Those involved in it are educating themselves; their propaganda tours upgrade their religious knowledge, spirituality, and dedication to the principles of Islam. On many occasions, people who have never prayed began praying five times a day after joining the daavat teaching.

Daavat is popular among the republic's Muslims as an instrument of religious enlightenment accessible to all ages, social and economic groups, and all levels of religious education.

Life has shown that daavat is popular because it is mobile: anyone can join at any time, in any corner of the country, and under practically any circumstances. This explains why its ranks are swelling in geometric progression.

The members of Tablighi Jamaat, very much like the members of other organizations for that matter, keep a low profile to avoid the attention of the public and the defense and security structures. Over time, the results of its activities in Kyrgyzstan might be manifested in the form of prerequisites of an "Islamic model of state governance," its educational activities being the key instrument. The above suggests that, if left unattended, chaotic daavat might create seats of religious tension, threaten society and the state, and complicate the social and religious situation.

To avoid this, the SAMK should formulate its own long-term conception of Islamic development in the republic that is conducive to its national security and in harmony with its secular nature. It should correspond to the Kyrgyz' national mentality and traditions, as well as to the ideas of the Hanafi madhhab. Interaction among the various Islamic trends and their impact on the religious situation in the Central Asian countries should also be studied along with the mechanisms involved in the process.

²⁰ See: B. Kolbaev, "V Kyrgyzstane dlia stabilizatsii obstanovki neobkhodimo privlekat religioznykh liderov," Bishkek—24.kg IA, 20 April, 2010, available at [<http://www.24.kg/community/51755-2009/06/11/114819>].

The Central Asian countries should launch in-depth religious studies; they should train theologians well-versed in the recent changes in the Islamic confessional infrastructure. This cannot be done without a profound systemic analysis and conceptual approach.

The missionary activities of Tablighi Jamaat should be regulated; the SAMK should probably set up a training center for daavat activists.

On the other hand, some experts and members of the clergy believe that the SAMK can carry out daavat on its own. Indeed, there are over 2,000 mosques in Kyrgyzstan, as well as 53 madrasahs, 8 Islamic institutes, and the Islamic University of Kyrgyzstan, which employ, on an official basis, about 10 thousand clerics (qadis, imam-hatybs, imams of mosques, mudarrises, etc.); students of the Islamic educational establishments can also lend a helping hand.

All settlements, large and small, have mosques; in large villages every street has its own imam.

The problems described above must be resolved in order to preserve religious stability in the republic.
