

# THE ISLAMIC MOVEMENT OF UZBEKISTAN: LINES TO COMPLETE THE PORTRAIT

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**I**n 2000, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, or the IMU, became the first terrorist group in the post-Soviet space to be included in the U.S. Department of State “List of Foreign Terrorist Organizations.” Despite its name, the IMU is composed of citizens of all the Central Asian states, Chinese Xinjiang province, Chechnia, and some Arab countries. The IMU’s main objective is to

create an Islamic state in the Ferghana Valley and consequently in the whole of Uzbekistan. It is supported by Islamic radicals around the world as well as intelligence services of some countries. The IMU also has links to Osama bin Laden’s al-Qa’eda and fought against the Northern Alliance of Ahmad Shah Masood alongside the forces of the Taliban Movement of Afghanistan. It carried out terrorist

attacks in Uzbekistan and made incursions into neighboring Kyrgyzstan. For years the international community and mainly Western states had been blind to the civil war in Afghanistan, the Taliban's stone-age policy and enormous drug business.

The world regained its sight as a result of the tragedy of 11 September, 2001 in the United States that promptly shifted the attention of the international community to Afghanistan. International terrorism's home, Afghanistan, was bombed. International terrorism's patron, the Taliban movement, was destroyed. Terrorists lost their home and were deprived of security; their base and financial system were damaged. Though not completely rooted out, the threat of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan to Central Asia was greatly diminished. Its military leader is thought to have been killed during the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan and

its political leader is believed to be in hiding. Following the Operation Enduring Freedom in late 2001, the IMU renamed itself the Islamic Movement of Turkestan (IMT), thus openly proclaiming its purposes of controlling the entire Central Asian region, disregarding the five existing nation-states and their boundaries.

This paper is about the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan's history, structure, objectives, tactics, leadership, and links to other terrorist and religious extremist groups as well as to al-Qa'eda and bin Laden. I will explain the conditions under which the movement came into existence and flourished in a country that was atheist for decades, and external factors that nourished its existence. In conclusion I will cover the implications the 2001 war in Afghanistan had on the IMU and its future impact on the security of Central Asia.

## IMU's Source of Financing

The IMU was established in the summer of 1996 when its leaders Juma Namangani and Tahir Yuldash met in Kabul. The declaration of *jihad* against Karimov's government followed the establishment of the movement. An official communiqué declaring *jihad* and calling for the overthrow of the Uzbek government was issued later on 25 August, 1999.

The organization was from the very beginning multi-ethnic: Central Asians, Chechens, Uighurs, Arabs, and Pakistanis. "Our organization does not follow only Uzbek interests. We are an Islamic group. There are many ethnic groups ... but because we are all from Uzbekistan, we call ourselves the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan," declared the IMU's press secretary, Zubair ibn-Abdurahman in a Radio Liberty interview.<sup>1</sup> In order to carry out such ambitious plans as overthrowing a government, the organization needed a lot of money to build its infrastructure, to attract new followers, to travel internationally to meet with followers and supporters, to buy modern communications equipment, arms and other military devices, and to have an active intelligence network.

The IMU received funding not only from many Islamic organizations in the world, but also from the Uzbek Diaspora in Afghanistan, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.<sup>2</sup> The Diaspora consists mainly of wealthy people who had fled Central Asia in the 1920s in the early years of the Russian Revolution or during the Sovietization of the region.<sup>3</sup> They supported the IMU cause because they viewed the current regime in Uzbekistan as the continuation of the Communist regime since the current leader Islam Karimov has a Communist political background.

Once the IMU established a relationship with the Taliban movement, drugs became a lucrative source of financing. Relations with al-Qa'eda and Osama bin Laden also generated substantial money for their cause. The Pakistani ISI also provided financial support to the IMU and supplied arms and military equipment.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See: B. Pannier, "Central Asia: IMU Leader Says Group's Goals Is 'Return of Islam'," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 6 June, 2001 [http://www.rferl.org/nca/features/2001/06/06062001121150.asp].

<sup>2</sup> There are about three million ethnic Uzbeks living in the Middle East and South-West Asia. Of them, two million live in Afghanistan and 700 thousand live in Saudi Arabia (see: "Military and Political Conflicts in Central Asia," *Center for Foreign Policy and Analysis*, Kazakhstan, 2000 [http://www.cvi.kz/text/Experts/Kozhikhov\_pub/Konflikt\_Central\_Asia.htm]).

<sup>3</sup> See: A. Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, Yale University Press, 2002, p. 141.

<sup>4</sup> See: *Ibid.*, pp. 140 and 154.

The movement's political leader, Tahir Yuldash, was the organization's main fund-raiser. In November of 1995 he visited Peshawar, Pakistan and met with representatives of Islamic organizations from Pakistan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. Senior ISI officers arranged the meetings, which addressed the allocation of funds for the IMU. Several Turkish organizations and charity foundations in Germany also contributed generously. Some of these organizations were acting under the umbrella of Turkey's Welfare Party led by Necmettin Erbakan.<sup>5</sup>

Pakistan's Jamaat-e-Islami and Qatar charity society, the Saudi Islamic Salvation Foundation, Ihwan al-Muslimun Egyptian Muslim brotherhood and the Saudi World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) also supported the IMU and its activities. In August of 1999, bin Laden's five personal envoys visited the mountainous village of Hoit in Tajikistan and handed 130 thousand dollars to Namangani. At this time, IMU fighters were carrying out incursions into Uzbekistan via southern Kyrgyzstan. A few weeks later, a meeting took place in Karachi between the members of Islamic organizations from Pakistan, Kuwait, Jordan, Egypt, the Palestine, Kashmir, Uzbekistan, and Chechnia. They agreed to raise two million dollars to support the Holy Jihad against Karimov's regime. In June of 2000, IMU's press-secretary Zubair ibn-Abdurahman confirmed the receipt of a few thousand dollars from bin Laden intended to stir up "the holy war against Karimov's pro-Zionist government."<sup>6</sup> According to the Ferghana Province Directorate of National Security, Juma Namangani annually received around three million dollars from Osama bin Laden.

Following the end of the civil war in Tajikistan in 1997, IMU's military leader Juma Namangani who had taken part in the war on the side of the Tajik opposition forces, settled in a Tajik village with his family and some forty Uzbeks. He began a business by buying several trucks and transporting goods to the Tajik capital, Dushanbe. Later Namangani became involved in the trafficking of heroin from Afghanistan to Tajikistan and on to Russia and Europe through his truck company. He also raised funds to sustain the IMU.<sup>7</sup> It wasn't until the IMU established good relationships with the Taliban, however, that the movement became heavily involved in the trafficking of lucrative opium, stockpiled in Afghanistan. According to the U.N. Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention (ODCCP), opium production in Afghanistan doubled between 1998 and 1999, from 2,750 tons to 5,000 tons. By July 2000, when the Taliban banned poppy cultivation, estimated 240 tons of opium were stockpiled in Mazar and Kunduz. Laboratories to refine heroin were set up in Tajikistan. Ralf Mutschke, assistant director of Interpol's Criminal Intelligence Directorate, reported to the U.S. Congress then that 60 percent of Afghan opium exports moved through Central Asia, and that the IMU might be responsible for 70 percent of the heroin and opium transiting the area.<sup>8</sup>

**Estimates of IMU Funds Received from Various Sources  
(U.S. Million \$)**

	Narcotics	Al-Qa'eda	Uzbek Diaspora and others
<b>1999</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2000</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2001</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>7</b>

*Source:* Estimates made by various Central Asian diplomats.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Turkish Milliy Gurush (National Outlook) organization based in Cologne, set up by Turkey's former Prime Minister Erbakan, gave away hundreds of thousands of dollars to the IMU, with Erbakan's consent, to buy arms through Milliy Gurush Secretary Muhammad Kuchak on condition that the IMU would become subordinated to Milliy Gurush and only Erbakan can specify a precise time when the jihad against Uzbekistan would begin. Leading Turkish company Ulker, controlled by Milliy Gurush, generates 1.5 bln. U.S. dollars in profits annually (see: B. Tursunov, "Extremism in Uzbekistan," *The Conflict Studies Research Center*, British Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, July 2002 [<http://www.csrc.ac.uk/pdfs/K37-hpz.pdf>]).

<sup>6</sup> Interview with an Uzbek intelligence official in 2002.

<sup>7</sup> See: A. Rashid, op. cit., p. 144.

<sup>8</sup> See: *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>9</sup> These may not be authentic but provide an idea of the magnitude of the resources available to the IMU.

Drugs, however, were not only the source of income for the IMU. According to Uzbek military prosecutor Bohodir Dehqonov, drugs also served as inspiration for IMU fighters during incursions into Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The prosecutor says that most of the militants were drug addicts, as investigators had found a large number of used syringes in the areas cleared of the infiltrators.<sup>10</sup>

One more source of financing for the IMU was hostage-taking. When the IMU carried out several incursions into Uzbekistan via the south of Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and 2000 from their bases in Tajikistan, they were able to take several people hostage. Some of them were U.S., Japanese, and Kyrgyz citizens. In exchange for ransom and a safe passage back to Tajikistan, the Kyrgyz hostages were freed. The hostage crisis involving four Japanese geologists working for a mining company made headlines in Japan. Continuous negotiations, which involved Japanese diplomats and intelligence officials, resulted in the release of the geologists after two months. Although both the Japanese and Kyrgyz leaders said no ransom was paid, some speculated that Japan had secretly paid 2-6 million dollars to the IMU.<sup>11</sup>

There is also a report that Tahir Yuldash used Kyrgyz Parliament deputy and Ombudsman Tursunbay Bakir Uulu to be a mediator between him and the Kyrgyz intelligence officials during the hostage crisis. The six million dollars were later spent to buy more arms and uniforms for the IMU fighters and some Tajik Opposition forces as well as to finance Tursunbay Bakir Uulu's election campaign in Kyrgyzstan. The report also states that this same Kyrgyz lawmaker later was invited to visit IMU bases in Afghanistan.<sup>12</sup> As for the four American climbers taken hostage, they escaped when their IMU guard fell asleep.

## **IMU's Military Structure, Tactics, Terrorist and Para-Military Activities**

Unlike the Hizb ut-Tahrir organization, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan never believed in coming to power peacefully. The hunt down of IMU's earlier parent organizations ("Adolat Uyushmasi" (The Justice Society), "Islom Lashkarlari" (Warriors of Islam) and "Tawba" (Repentance)) and Uzbek opposition members by Uzbek intelligence and law enforcement forces following the Uzbek presidential elections in 1992 only strengthened this conviction. Namangani, who fought in the Afghan war and later on fought with the Tajik opposition against its secular government, and Yuldash, who had been expelled from school and had little formal education, could hardly be expected to come to power in Uzbekistan through peaceful and democratic means.

A few months after the 1992 elections, the Democratic Party Erk (Freedom) and the People's Movement Birlik (Unity) were banned in Uzbekistan and their newspapers were forbidden for publication. Their leaders were harassed and fled the country gradually. These government actions betrayed the people of Uzbekistan's expectations that Independence from the Soviet Union would engender democracy.

The years of 1992 and 1993 were also economically the most difficult for the country. Uzbekistan had not yet introduced its permanent national currency. Enterprises with economic ties to other parts of the former Soviet Union had not gained sufficient independence and ceased functioning due to the lack of orders and raw materials. The banking structure had not been developed yet and there were no foreign investments. The earliest groups of foreigners to come to Uzbekistan were mainly Pakistanis and Indians who traded leather garments in small quantities.

<sup>10</sup> See: Uzbek newspaper *Halq So'zi*, 17 August, 2000.

<sup>11</sup> See: A. Rashid, op. cit., p. 164.

<sup>12</sup> See: B. Kudratov, "Ordinary Murder in the Name of Jihad," *Uzbek Information and Analytical Website "Stability"* [<http://www.stability.uz/ubiystvo.html>].

The difficulties of this chaotic period, compounded by the profound influence of various Islamic missionaries, produced the first generation of IMU members. These IMU members were taught that in order to revive Islam, an Islamic state must be built in Central Asia. However, to their conviction, Islam could not have been revived in a secular state run by the former Communist leader. The civil war (1992-1997) in Tajikistan served as an example. Namangani and Yuldash realized from the very beginning that they had to use force to achieve their goal. As one of the earlier members of the Adolat group said, "We have no desire to be in parliament. We want an Islamic revolution here and now—we have no time for constitutional games."<sup>13</sup> The government was also at fault for not paying sufficient attention to the religious issues in Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan, which had been part of the atheist regime for years, experienced a religious and spiritual vacuum once the old regime perished. The government offered no solutions. "There were three mosques in Namangan during Communist times, now there are 130 and most of them are controlled by these militants. I don't have the funds to compete with them," said one imam of an official government mosque in Namangan in 1992.<sup>14</sup>

Although the IMU carried out its first terrorist attack in 1999, Namangani and Yuldash-led Islamic groups began their criminal activity by murdering militiamen who they thought had been unjust toward fellow Muslims.<sup>15</sup> Despite their desire to build an Islamic state and invest in the revival of Islam, writer Ahmed Rashid says that "they had no respect for official Islam, no patience with tradition, and no fear of the political regime, which they overoptimistically considered to be on the verge of disintegration and collapse."<sup>16</sup>

The IMU used the raised funds to buy grenade cup dischargers, heavy machine-guns, mortars, AK-47s, night vision goggles, Russian and Japanese Jeeps, modern communications equipment, sniper rifles and many other things.<sup>17</sup> Relationship with al-Qa'eda training sessions in Chechnia, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan, and practical application of this training in conflicts in the former three countries shaped the movement's tactics and structure and transformed it from a group of undereducated mullahs, peasants and criminals into a modern combatant movement.<sup>18</sup> Some of their training manuals, confiscated during the IMU incursions into Uzbekistan in the summer of 2000, testify to their military structure and warfare tactics. They trained themselves in carrying out low-intensity guerilla warfare in mountainous areas. Their combat operations were organized by small mobile groups of 4-6 people that tried to avoid open spaces and direct battle, and act quickly, constantly changing their positions. They have employed intelligence efficiently. The IMU used women for delivering their messages to sleepers inside the country. Others, familiar with the terrain and the area, collected information on the situation inside. Groups usually consist of a commander, a bomber, a signaler, and 3-4 riflemen, including snipers. Snipers usually try to occupy higher positions than the enemy. After an extensive attack, they retreat immediately and change their positions.<sup>19</sup>

The guerillas are very well trained, strong, and enduring. They can wander highlands for a long time carrying three-day supplies of full ammunition and provisions. One of the guerillas trained in IMU's Afghan camps described the training exercises. "These exercises were conducted in highlands. When crawling, instructors would shoot to the ground past the trainees' ears—a psychological test." He says a fighter must learn to do without food for three days and eat whatever he lays eyes upon. At the training he also learns to shoot at sound, light and make explosives literally out of soap.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>13</sup> A. Rashid, op. cit., p. 139.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>15</sup> On 10 November, 2001 *Washington Post* reported that in 1997, members of the group had assassinated regional Uzbek officials, leaving the head of one on the gate of the home of the Namangan internal affairs chief (see: D. Struck, "Uzbek Taliban Chief Feared in Homeland," *Washington Post*, 10 November, 2001, p. A17).

<sup>16</sup> See: A. Rashid, op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> See: S. Jahangir, "The Prompt Islamic Construction of a Caliphate on Blood," Russian *Kommersant* newspaper, 18 August, 2000 [<http://www.uzland.uz/2000/special4.htm>].

<sup>18</sup> The IMU also consisted of criminals who were convicted in Uzbekistan for various crimes but escaped justice.

<sup>19</sup> See: "Military and Political Conflicts in Central Asia."

<sup>20</sup> See: L. Gibelgaus, "Who Are They: IMU Rebels?" *Deutsche Welle*, Russian-language version, 25 February, 2003 [[http://www.dw-world.de/russian/0,3367,2226\\_A\\_786870\\_1\\_A,00.html](http://www.dw-world.de/russian/0,3367,2226_A_786870_1_A,00.html)].

The IMU also learned evacuation techniques for wounded rebels, and methods of replenishing ammunition, medicines, uniforms, and fuel. They always try to carry the wounded and dead away from the battle-field to convince the enemy that they have suffered few casualties. IMU members never address each other by their real names. Each has a number that replaces their name. Failure to abide by this rule results in punishment, including death. They are also forbidden to make contacts with local populations or members of other groups. The IMU mainly uses Soviet and Russian-made weapons, because they are cheap and easily accessible.<sup>21</sup>

The IMU has two additional assets that contribute to its potential as a serious threat. The first is a safe haven in the Pamir Mountains.<sup>22</sup> The importance of a sanctuary or safe haven for an insurgency or protest movement is well understood to be critically important. In this case, it continues to provide opportunities for recruitment and replenishment as well as a safe base from which to move into Uzbekistan when weather conditions permit and other circumstances are favorable. The second asset is the underlying alienation of the population: the IMU benefits considerably because it is the most obviously available funnel for the political, social, and economic dissatisfaction existing in Uzbekistan. In spite of the setbacks suffered by the IMU in late 2001 and early 2002, it could ultimately prove resilient enough to become a formidable adversary for the Karimov regime, particularly if the regime continues to use the IMU's existence to justify even more repression.<sup>23</sup>

The IMU's first terrorist attack took place on 16 February, 1999, when five car bombs exploded in various parts of Tashkent within an hour. The first explosion occurred near the Headquarters of the Ministry of Internal Affairs with the final explosion detonating outside the Cabinet of Ministers building minutes before President Karimov's arrival at a special government meeting. All top government officials were to attend that meeting. The IMU had initially planned more than five explosions. The post-terrorist attack trial of 22 men involved in planning and execution of the explosions said 25 blasts had been initially planned that were aimed at toppling top government officials and spreading panic among the population, while Tahir Yuldash was to enter Uzbekistan from Afghanistan with the Taliban forces and Juma Namangani's rebels were to enter Uzbekistan from Tajikistan with UTO forces. The whole conflict was planned to be supported by sleepers in the Ferghana Valley and elsewhere in Uzbekistan who were waiting for a signal for the take-over.

Tahir Yuldash was to become a defense minister of a new Uzbek government with Muhammad Salih being its president.<sup>24</sup> One of the accused rebels at the trial said that had the first part of the operation been successful (the president's death and more explosions) the forces outside Uzbekistan would have entered.<sup>25</sup>

It was a brilliantly planned al-Qa'eda/IMU operation. If successful, it would have given al-Qa'eda a greater field in which to maneuver and plan its future operations and it would have given al-Qa'eda-linked terrorists more territories for new bases. If Central Asia's largest country became an Islamic state, the probability that the whole region would soon follow suit was very high. Moreover, the al-Qa'eda/IMU-controlled Central Asia would not pose a threat to the gangs' drugs business. (In late December 1999, Uzbekistan's Interior Ministry said that more than two tons of heroin had been seized by the Uzbek author-

<sup>21</sup> Interview with an Uzbek intelligence official in 2002.

<sup>22</sup> See: A. Rashid, "Pamirs Offer IMU Secure Base," *Eurasia Insight*, 10 April, 2001 [<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav041001.shtml>].

<sup>23</sup> See: G. Gleason, "Counterinsurgency in Central Asia: Civil Society Is the First Casualty," *Eurasia Insight*, 8 January, 2001 [<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav010801.shtml>].

<sup>24</sup> Muhammad Salih (a.k.a. Salay Madaminov) is a poet and exiled leader of the banned Democratic Party Erk of Uzbekistan, who was President Karimov's only opponent in the 1992 presidential elections. He was tried and convicted in absentia by the Supreme Court of Uzbekistan for taking part in the coup attempt of 1999. The Uzbek intelligence believes he used his high-level contacts in Turkey while being there in exile to help the IMU receive funds from various Turkish religious, political and business circles, including from Erbakan. He allegedly agreed to any form of government in Uzbekistan if he could be a president. The IMU thought that it could receive legitimacy from the West if Salih, whom international human rights organizations considered to be a democratic oppositionist, were to become a president of Uzbekistan.

<sup>25</sup> See: O. Juma, "Bandits and Their Human Rights Defenders," *UzLand.Uz*, 22 February, 2003 [<http://www.uzland.uz/2003/february/22/06.htm>].

ities that year compared to 11 kilos (only) in 1994. Uzbekistan has been a major cordon against drug trafficking in the region.<sup>26</sup> A larger territory would also allow al-Qa'eda to easily hide weapons of mass destruction if acquired.

The failure of the IMU/al-Qa'eda plan on February 1999 changed the IMU's tactics from terrorist attacks to paramilitary operations. It was logistically difficult for the IMU to plan and carry out terrorist attacks from Afghanistan, Tajikistan or elsewhere. They needed a base inside Uzbekistan to train people and store weapons. The Uzbek base would provide the movement more time to plan and accomplish their attacks, and would reduce the risk of being exposed to Uzbek security forces through cross-border movements and radio communication. So in the summer of 1999, the IMU crossed the Amu-Darya River into Tajikistan and then sent small groups of fighters into southern Kyrgyzstan, eastern Uzbekistan and the Ferghana Valley, operating mainly in mountainous areas. The main purpose of the incursions was to ship in supplies and manpower in order to set up bases in Ferghana that would facilitate the mobilization of the local population in the winter months.<sup>27</sup>

The IMU relied heavily on sleepers inside Uzbekistan whose numbers may have grown following the Uzbek government's persecution of Muslims in the country and their torture in prisons.<sup>28</sup> These men and women were accused of possessing ties to the February 1999 bombings in Tashkent. Another factor potentially adding to a rise in the IMU's popularity is the deteriorating economic situation in the Uzbekistan caused by the government's numerous economic failures, including the resumption of currency convertibility, which was halted in 1996.<sup>29</sup> Rural people, the most religious people in Uzbekistan, were hardest hit by religious repression and deteriorating economic conditions. Writer Ahmed Rashid says that when Namangani was in the Tavildara Valley of Tajikistan controlled by the Tajik Opposition, hundreds of people would come to see him from Uzbekistan in search of help, justice and revenge.<sup>30</sup> These were people whose family members were in jail in Uzbekistan. The United States Department of State annual reports on religious freedom in Uzbekistan have indicated that religious figures in Uzbekistan disappear, are kidnapped or put in jail, and frequently tortured. Some of them die in prisons and their dead bodies are brought home in coffins that are forbidden to be opened. The letters of bereaved family and friends to President Karimov have produced no results. Namangani could immediately recruit all these people for the movement, however, he asked them to stay in their homes, go about their daily business, and wait for his call to arms.<sup>31</sup> Some of them stayed with Namangani, though, and made up the IMU's second generation of members.

Setting up bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan was aimed at training these sleepers and supplying them with arms when needed. I should also mention that people had different motivations to join and support the IMU. Some of them were religious fanatics who hated Karimov and his regime; some were criminals who joined the movement to avoid conviction; some supported the IMU because they suffered from government persecution and injustice; some came to Namangani's camp for financial reasons.<sup>32</sup> However, there were also people who had followed Namangani to study real Islam, but realized they had been deceived once they got to the IMU base and learned about the use of arms and explosives more than the Koran. These people had no choice but to stay there, because the area was remote and highly secured. Those who attempted to flee were cruelly killed.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See: J. Sinai, "Islamist Terrorism and Narcotrafficking in Uzbekistan," *Foreign Affairs*, May 2000, Lexis-Nexis.

<sup>27</sup> See: A. Rashid, "Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan's Incursion Assists the Taliban," *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute*, 13 September, 2000 [[http://www.cacianalyst.org/view\\_article.php?articleid=132](http://www.cacianalyst.org/view_article.php?articleid=132)].

<sup>28</sup> In 2002, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Torture, Theo van Boven, visited Uzbekistan that resulted in a report condemning the systemic use of torture by law enforcement and security officials of the country.

<sup>29</sup> The government resumed currency convertibility in November of 2003.

<sup>30</sup> See: A. Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, p. 158.

<sup>31</sup> See: O. Juma, op. cit.

<sup>32</sup> The Uzbek government's economic failures produced high unemployment rate. But even the employment wouldn't guarantee better life in the country where the minimum monthly wage is 15-20 U.S. dollars, not enough to maintain a family of 3-4 children. In his book *Jihad* Ahmed Rashid says that Namangani paid his guerillas monthly salaries of between \$100 and \$500—in U.S. dollar bills. This rumor alone was enough to ensure that more recruits would join him (p. 167).

<sup>33</sup> In May of 1999 a group of IMU militants decided to go back to Uzbekistan following a presidential decree granting full amnesty to those who thought they were deceitfully kept in the IMU and would come back to Uzbekistan. Thirty-six IMU

The IMU incursions into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in the summer of 1999 were uncovered by Uzbek forces, and both governments sent special troops to the areas to fight the invading forces. Militarily stronger Uzbekistan also used military helicopters and SU jets to bomb highlands and villages where the militants were believed to be hiding. After two months of fighting, the remaining militants retreated to their base in Tajikistan, but could not remain long there because of the mounting pressure from the Uzbek and Kyrgyz governments on the Tajik government's inability to deal with the IMU.<sup>34</sup> Namangani's forces, numbering around 600, and their families were flown by Russian army helicopters from Tajikistan to the Afghan border.<sup>35</sup>

In his book *Jihad*, Ahmed Rashid recounts three instances of the Russian army's assistance in transporting some of the IMU members on helicopters to the Tajik-Afghan border. Russian assistance to Namangani can be explained in light of the corrupt nature of the current Russian political environment and imperial nature of the Russian military establishment.

I will give two explanations for the Russian-IMU cooperation. First, some of the Russian military stood to gain from the transit of drugs from Afghanistan via Tajikistan where in 1996 12,000 troops of the Russian 201st Motorized Rifle Division were based.<sup>36</sup> Although there is no direct evidence that Russian troops are involved in drug trafficking, Russian border guards have been accused of taking bribes for turning a blind eye to drug trafficking. My second explanation deals with the Russian military establishment's (mainly Russian "hawks") geopolitical interests and concerns in Central Asia. Uzbekistan's President, Islam Karimov, has criticized the Russian government and media for exaggerating the threat of Islamic fundamentalism and the Taliban movement to regional security in order to be accepted in Central Asia as protectors and to impose their imperial policy. This in part caused Uzbekistan to withdraw from the CIS Collective Security Treaty in 1999.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless the Russians pursued their goal of establishing a military presence in Central Asia and may have used the IMU to apply pressure on the region in order for the Central Asian states to accept a Russian military presence.

In August of 2000, the IMU changed its tactics and began carrying out multi-front surprise attacks on Kyrgyz and Uzbek troops to distract from the smuggling of arms and ammunitions into the Ferghana Valley for the sleepers. The guerillas possessed flak jackets equipped with infrared night scopes, sniper rifles, heavy machine guns, and rocket launchers<sup>38</sup>—the result of the 1999 funding of the IMU and the relationship with the Taliban and al-Qa'eda. From Tajikistan the IMU also tried to take the Kamchik mountain pass, the only and strategic pass linking the Ferghana Valley to Tashkent. This campaign lasted for three months.

Partly these campaigns, as part of the IMU tactics, were also aimed at testing the capabilities of government armed forces in the region, sowing the seeds of panic in those governments, undermining their legitimacy, keeping the populations under psychological pressure, and preparing the sleepers for a final battle.

The campaigns served as a good lesson for the governments of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan who witnessed the inability of their troops to fight well-prepared irregular units of small sizes in highlands and prompted reforms in their armies. The incursions also increased the regional states' awareness of the threat of international terrorism and prompted them to work together more closely, resulting in arms supplies from China and Russia for Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and U.S. government financial and training assistance for these countries. The 2000 designation of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan as a foreign ter-

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members decided to take that opportunity and were coming to Uzbekistan from their base in Tajikistan when another group of militants attacked them on Namangani's orders on their way and slaughtered 17 of them taking the rest back (see: B. Kudratov, op. cit.).

<sup>34</sup> Uzbekistan threatened Tajikistan to use its bombers against the supposed IMU locations if the Tajiks could not control the situation themselves.

<sup>35</sup> See: A. Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, p. 164.

<sup>36</sup> See: "Operational Group of Russian Forces in Tajikistan" [<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/russia/ogrv-tajikistan.htm>].

<sup>37</sup> The Collective Security Treaty was signed on 15 May, 1992 in Tashkent by presidents of Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Tajikistan, Belarus and Uzbekistan.

<sup>38</sup> See: A. Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, p. 167.



rorist organization by the U.S. Department of State also made it possible for U.S. intelligence to share information with their Uzbek counterparts.

## The IMU and al-Qa'eda

Throughout the paper I have indicated the cooperation between the IMU and al-Qa'eda and how the former received constant assistance from the latter. I also mentioned how Namangani was promoted to become bin Laden's deputy. I would also like to address what brought these two organizations together.

It is obvious that Namangani and Yuldash needed a strong partner and sponsor for their cause. It was this partnership through al-Qa'eda that the IMU turned from a small criminal group into such a sophisticated, secretive, and well-organized terrorist organization. The connection with bin Laden was the IMU's pass to the World Islamic Terrorist Network's treasury, top leaders, and fame. Had the Northern Alliance kept Afghanistan under control, and had there been no bin Laden and Taliban in Afghanistan, Namangani and his gang would have either sought refuge elsewhere or would have been subject to extradition while in Tajikistan as the pressure was mounting high on its government from neighboring Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Even if the IMU had sufficient funding from various donor-countries and international Islamic organizations, it would not have gained the skills that al-Qa'eda could provide its guerillas. Bin Laden's Arab instructors taught the IMU very sophisticated techniques of carrying out military and clandestine operations. In Chechnia, notorious Jordanian terrorist Khattab would host from time to time IMU fighters for training. Uzbek intelligence says that IMU guerillas used three languages for radio communications: Arabic (for al-Qa'eda), Pashtu (for Taliban and Pakistanis) and Russian (for the Central Asian contingent).<sup>39</sup> The association with al-Qa'eda also gave the IMU free movement between Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and possibly Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Al-Qa'eda benefited from its partnership with the IMU as well. The IMU served al-Qa'eda's goals to fight the Northern Alliance, to extend jihad to Central Asia, to report about the movements of Western and mainly American diplomats within the region, to control the routes for drug trafficking in Central Asia, and even possibly to help al-Qa'eda obtain elements of weapons of mass destruction.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, a former Soviet biological weapons test site containing tons of anthrax on Vozrojenie Island, located in the Aral Sea Basin, posed a serious threat as neither Uzbekistan nor Kazakhstan (who shared the Island territorially) had enough resources and skills to clean the site until the Pentagon's Threat Reduction Agency became involved in such a program. Although there are no indications that the IMU attempted to obtain any WMD elements, in 2000, however, Uzbek customs officials did detect a commercial truck with an Iranian license plate at the Kazakh border that contained radioactive substances and was heading to Pakistani Quetta. I was unable to trace the recipient of the substances and whether the IMU had any part in it.<sup>40</sup>

I must also say that the relationship with al-Qa'eda proved to be fatal for the IMU. The IMU's bases and men also became a target during the 2001 U.S.-led antiterrorist campaign in Afghanistan. Irregardless of how longer the Hizballah or HAMAS was on the U.S. Department of State List of Foreign Terrorist Organizations than the IMU, and irregardless of how much more violent than the IMU these groups

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with an Uzbek intelligence official in 2002.

<sup>40</sup> "Trailer with Radioactive Containers Expelled to Kazakhstan," *UzLand.Uz*, 1 April, 2000 [[http://www.uzland.uz/2000/04\\_01.htm#trailer](http://www.uzland.uz/2000/04_01.htm#trailer)]. In January 2003, BBC reported about the seizure of more radioactive materials at the Uzbek-Turkmen border (see: C. Davis, "'Dirty Bomb Material' Seized in Asia," *BBC*, 5 January, 2003 [<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/2629343.stm>]).

were, Hizballah and HAMAS were not affected by the war on terror. The IMU was simply at the wrong place at the wrong time and with the wrong partner, which greatly damaged the movement. Through involvement in the al-Qa'eda and Taliban offensive on the Northern Alliance, the IMU was distracted from its main focus—Uzbekistan.

## The Impact of Operation Enduring Freedom on the IMU

There is very little reliable information regarding the broader military impact of the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan on IMU military forces as a whole. An IMU contingent was heavily involved in fighting around Mazar-i-Sharif and Konduz in November of 2001, and it appears that substantial numbers of IMU followers were killed during fighting in the latter city. The IMU's political leader, Tohir Yuldash, is likely still alive. Some reports suggest that he fled to Pakistan, while others claim he is still in Afghanistan.<sup>41</sup> In late November 2001 it was widely reported that the group's 32-year-old military leader, Juma Namangani, died from wounds received during U.S. bombing in the Mazar-i-Sharif region of Afghanistan, although accounts varied.<sup>42</sup> He had been sentenced to death in absentia by the government of Uzbekistan in November of 2000.

Namangani was the only IMU leader who was well known throughout the region, and he cannot be easily replaced. He maintained tight control of his followers through both harsh discipline and personal loyalty, and there is no guarantee that this authority will easily transfer to his lieutenants.

While Tohir Yuldash is also an important figure, he has less charisma and authority than Namangani and has not been proven as a field commander. It is possible that he will encounter considerable difficulty retaining the support of the disparate groups that comprise the IMU, and it will take time for other leaders to emerge. Early 2002 the International Crisis Group reported that a number of splinter groups and factions might develop from the remnants of the IMU. While they would likely employ similar aims and tactics, they would be less of a threat than a more unified IMU operating under a clear leadership that the rank and file considered legitimate.<sup>43</sup> However, in contrast, there were reports in the fall of that year on the unification of a number of Islamic groups in the region into an Islamic Movement of Central Asia that included the remnants of the IMU, Islamic extremists of Tajikistan, Chechen guerillas, and Uighur separatists from the Chinese Xinjiang province with a headquarters in Afghanistan's Gorno-Badakhshan mountainous area.<sup>44</sup> It is interesting however to see how this new group will operate given the complexity of the situation and the active international antiterrorist campaign.

Events in Afghanistan might have severely disrupted the IMU's funding, which is believed to come from the drugs trade in Central Asia and in part from Osama bin Laden's al-Qa'eda.<sup>45</sup> The IMU no longer

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<sup>41</sup> *International Crisis Group*, "The IMU and the Hizb Ut-Tahrir: Implications of the Afghanistan Campaign," 30 January, 2002 [[http://www.crisisweb.org/projects/asia/centralasia/reports/A400538\\_30012002.pdf](http://www.crisisweb.org/projects/asia/centralasia/reports/A400538_30012002.pdf)], p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> General Tommy Franks, CINC CENTCOM, told journalists in Uzbekistan that Namangani was indeed dead although he did not reveal the source of this information (see: "Uzbekistan Gets U.S. Military Pledge," *The Associated Press*, 24 January, 2002, Lexis-Nexis). There were however other controversial reports from Russian and Kyrgyz intelligence sources that Namangani may still be alive and that he himself spread the rumor of his death intentionally to catch his breath before a new campaign (see: A. McConnell, "Islamic Radicals Regroup in Central Asia," *Eurasia Insight*, 15 May, 2002 [<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav051502.shtml>]), although, I think the Russians are interested in such a scenario for the reasons discussed above.

<sup>43</sup> ICG, p. 3.

<sup>44</sup> "Boeviki-islamisty ob'edinit'sya v Islamskoe dvizhenie Srednei Azii," *UzStrateg.Info*, the website of the Institute of Strategic and Regional Studies of Uzbekistan, 10 September, 2002 [[http://www.uzstrateg.info/frontend/index.cfm?target=news&sub=article&news\\_id=4887](http://www.uzstrateg.info/frontend/index.cfm?target=news&sub=article&news_id=4887)].

<sup>45</sup> See: ICG Asia Report No. 26 *Central Asia: Drugs and Conflict*, 26 November, 2001.

controls the drug routes through Tajikistan nor will it have access to narcotics if production is brought under better control in Afghanistan. Other possible sources of money include backers in the Middle East or local political groups seeking to use the IMU as a means to build their own influence. However, without its refuge in Afghanistan, the IMU is likely to face a serious financial squeeze.

Rohan Gunaratna says that the IMU may be replaced by the Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) organization. Founded in Jordan and Saudi Arabia in 1952, the HT is a non-violent Islamist party organized in the form of clandestine cells; its members are recruited from relatives and friends to restore the Caliphate.<sup>46</sup>

In Uzbekistan the organization clandestinely distributes leaflets exposing the corrupt nature of the leadership and even calls President Karimov “a Jew.” Its anti-Semitic character led to its ban in Germany recently.<sup>47</sup> The Government of Uzbekistan has also requested a number of other countries to do the same. Although the HT rejects the use of violence or force to pursue its objective, the events of the past few years in Uzbekistan, during which a number of HT members were arrested and put in jail (especially following the February 1999 bombings in Tashkent), may have forced it to review its tactics. There have also been cases when the militia, in pursuit of personal enrichment, revenge, or perhaps because of an unofficial government policy, would plant leaflets or drugs in people’s pockets in order to arrest them by accusing them of being HT members.

The International Crisis Group says that some HT members are already calling on the organization to be more decisive and take concrete actions. The ICG also says that “since many former IMU fighters may now be looking for a new affiliation and leadership, the Hizb ut-Tahrir could offer an attractive new home, increasing the potential for the Hizb ut-Tahrir to become more radical.”<sup>48</sup>

HT, however, faces a number of obstacles in realizing such a prominent position in Uzbekistan. According to the International Crisis Group, there seems to have been disagreement already within the leadership of the Hizb ut-Tahrir on organizational tactics. Hizb ut-Tahrir has also been subject to factionalism, with at least two cases of fairly significant groups establishing separate political movements independent of HT leadership. Further splits are possible, both for personal reasons,<sup>49</sup> and over political tactics.<sup>50</sup> Also, the HT, like the IMU, lacks a social, economic, or political plan for governing the Caliphate they want to restore. Their ideologies are based not on the indigenous Islam of Central Asia, the birthplace of Sufism and nineteenth-century Jadidism, but on imported ideologies.<sup>51</sup>

Another factor that might obstruct HT goals of establishing an Islamic regime in the region is the dubious role of Islam in Central Asia as a consolidating factor at ethnic and national levels. Regional, clan, ethnic, and tribal interests nowadays have precedence over adherence to a common religion. For example, the civil war in Tajikistan took place between Muslims from various regions and clans. In Kazakhstan, to be a member of the *Juz* (clan) is in practical life incomparably more important than professing Islam. Finally, in the ethnic conflicts in Central Asia (in Ferghana in 1989; in Osh in 1990) those involved were Muslims. The population itself is not ready for an Islamic state and does not see Islam as a factor of unity and political stabilization. Most people confine Islam’s role to the religious and cultural sphere and regard Islam as a regulator of relations between people in everyday life.

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<sup>46</sup> See: R. Gunaratna, *Inside Al-Qa’eda: Global Network of Terror*, Columbia University Press, 2002, p. 171.

<sup>47</sup> “Germany Bans Accused Islamic Organization,” *The Associated Press*, 15 January 15, 2003, Lexis-Nexis.

<sup>48</sup> ICG, p. 13.

<sup>49</sup> In early 1997 a group in the Ferghana Region of Uzbekistan led by Iu. Akramov left the main body after disputes with the local leadership; a further split in 1999 reportedly took place in the Tashkent branch when a fairly significant group set up its own party, called Hizb an-Nusra (Party of Victory) (see: *Ibid.*, p. 9).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>51</sup> See: A. Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, p. 9.