
Islamist Terrorism in Greater Central Asia: The "Al-Qaedaization" of Uzbek Jihadism



Didier Chaudet

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Summary

The goal of this paper is to analyze the threat of Islamist terrorism in Central Asia, through the examination of what could be termed a real Al Qaeda-like threat: the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and its splinter cells, which seem to be the real problem in Central Asia. Even before the American campaign in Afghanistan began, the IMU had become more than an Islamo-nationalist threat, i.e. a problem for just one local regime. Its fight was already regional, and a threat to Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan at least. The loss of the Afghan safe haven at the end of 2001 was a severe blow, but it did not destroy the movement. This development prompted a change in the group from a hierarchical structure to one that should better be understood as a network. Now the problem is not only the original IMU, but also a splinter cell, the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) and a network of sleeper cells in Central Asia, still somewhat connected to the IMU and IJU, but also able to act autonomously. The "Al-Qaedan" threat here is very real, and will need to be addressed not only in post-Soviet Central Asia, but as the neo-Taliban are the main protectors of the IMU and the IJU, it will also need to be tackled through the War in Afghanistan.

Introduction

In Central Asia, the real impact of Islamist groups is a controversial subject. Some organizations are known for their actions. Others owe their celebrity to actions attributed to them, sometimes without solid evidence.

One can find a striking example of such a situation with the *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (HT, the Party of Liberation) in Central Asia. It is not unusual to read both analysts and government officials proclaiming that the non-violent but radical HT is the main “Islamist terrorist” problem in Central Asia. Some do not hesitate to compare HT to Al-Qaeda, even saying that it could soon replace the terrorist group, or become more dangerous than it in the long term.¹ The problem with such fears is that anything can happen in the long term, therefore such arguments are not really convincing. Besides, other than distributing ideological leaflets, the HT in Central Asia has never appeared as a real security issue, aside from overflowing Central Asian mailboxes.² However, the comparison is still interesting. As Al-Qaeda is now the yardstick of any global terrorist threat, it is important to know if there is indeed an Al-Qaedan threat in Central Asia—a region which is on the frontline of the war for Afghanistan, and is beginning to attract the interest of Europeans and others due to its oil and gas deposits.

In order to answer this question, one first needs to understand the differences between the Islamist movements. Objectively, the level of threat cannot be seen as the same from one group to another. One can see three main kinds of group:

- The ones that eschew violence in transmitting their message, even if it is a radical one. This is the case of the HT or the *Tablighi Jamaat* (TJ, the “Conveying Group”).³ They are not a direct security threat, so even if it is good policy to monitor their members to identify suspicious individuals, as organizations these groups need only be a secondary focus in a sound counterterrorist policy.

- Violent “Islamist-nationalist” groups. For them the national political domain guides policy.⁴ They focus on the theological notion of “defensive

¹ See S.R. Bowers, V. Ciobanu, A. Tabyshalieva, “Hizb ut-Tahrir in Tajikistan”, William R. Nelson Institute, December 2003.

² For an evaluation of the threat posed by the HT, see D. Chaudet, “Hizb ut-Tahrir, an Islamist Threat in Central Asia?”, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 26, No. 1, April 2006, pp. 113-125.

³ About HT and TJ specifically in Central Asia, see D. Chaudet, “La menace djihadiste en Grande Asie Centrale” [The Jihadist Threat in Greater Central Asia], *Politique Etrangère*, No. 3, 2008.

⁴ O. Roy, *Généalogie de l’islamisme* [A Genealogy of Islamism], Paris, Hachette, 1995, p. 101.

jihad”: a reaction against a direct cause of oppression or occupation.⁵ Indeed, besides their Islamic flavor, these groups seem to continue the anti-colonial and liberation struggles of the past.⁶ From a global security point of view, the advantage of such groups is that they want a share of power over a very specific territory. Hence, it is possible to negotiate with them, if they cannot take power they will not choose a fight to the death if offered a way out.

– The “Al-Qaeda” groups. Ideologically speaking, these groups can be defined as Salafist-jihadists. Salafism focuses on a strict, literal interpretation of religion. The religious texts are considered the only source of authority, in order to avoid human subjectivity and self-interest, which leads, from this point of view, to a world where injustice triumphs and where the weak find no protection. For these groups, the current regimes in the Muslim world are guilty of instituting such a situation.⁷ For Salafists, only one vision of Islam can be right, this makes them a very extreme and often divided community. Jihadism is one of the sub-groups within Salafism. Its followers believe that it is only through violence that their ideas will be able to influence politics in the Muslim world. They have a top-down strategy, they do not believe in converting people to their ideas, like the majority of Islamists. Their goal is to impose their vision upon people through coercion, through capturing the state, or through terrorism. Like the Islamo-nationalists, they are the product of an oppressive political environment, but they do not focus only on the “Near Enemy” (the local regimes broadly speaking). For them, there is also a “Far Enemy” (most of the time the US, more broadly speaking the Great Powers) that needs to be fought as fiercely.

This is why it is important to know if there is indeed an Al-Qaeda threat in Central Asia. If such a challenge exists, it will not be a threat to just one state, but a threat to regional security, at the very least. Such a situation would be particularly dangerous not only for post-Soviet Central Asia, but also for the stabilization of what can be called “Greater Central Asia” (post-Soviet Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan),⁸ which will be the main front of the War on Terror in the coming years.⁹

The goal of this paper is to show that if there is one Al-Qaeda threat in post-Soviet Central Asia, it comes from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and its former affiliates. Serious analysis of this issue requires an understanding of the evolution of terrorist organizations since the end of the cold war. Indeed, it would be simplistic to reduce our

⁵ This is the vision of a group like Hezbollah, see for example W. Charara and F. Domont, *Le Hezbollah, un mouvement islamo-nationaliste* [Hezbollah, an Islamo-Nationalist Movement], Paris, Fayard, 2004, p. 110.

⁶ H. Jaber, *Hezbollah, Born With a Vengeance*, New York, Columbia University Press, p. 17-18.

⁷ Q. Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 29, No. 3, p. 209-210.

⁸ M.B. Olcott and J. Linn, “Turmoil in Central Asia”, *Wall Street Journal*, 12 August 2008.

⁹ Questioned in the Senate by Joe Biden 4 August 2008, Ryan Crocker, Ambassador in Iraq and ex-ambassador to Pakistan, admitted that the real Al-Qaeda threat was in the Afghanistan-Pakistan area, and not in Iraq, which was a serious symbolic blow for the Bush Administration.

conception of the threat to movements organized only in a pyramidal structure. This kind of group cannot be reduced to its leadership, so a counterterrorist approach focusing only on decapitating the organization will not be effective. Of course, it would be a mistake to forget the historical leadership or the top of the pyramid, as explained by B. Hoffman and by R. Gunaratna.¹⁰ This explains why IMU “Central” is still of consequence, and why charismatic leaders are important for the cohesion of such groups. However, as explained by M. Sageman, it is important to remember that a terrorist organization can become a leaderless network.¹¹ This is what happened to Al-Qaeda after the defeat of the Taliban, this also happened to the IMU during the same period. The Al-Qaeda threat in Central Asia does not come from a single source, but can be seen as a Hydra with three heads: IMU “Central,” the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) splinter cell, and the former sleeper cells still in Post-Soviet Central Asia.

¹⁰ B. Hoffman, “The Myth of Grass-Roots Terrorism”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 3, May/June 2008; R. Gunaratna, *Inside Al-Qaeda. Global Network of Terror*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2002, p. 58.

¹¹ M. Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.

The Original Threat: Uzbek Islamism and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

The Hydra's main head is what the IMU became in the 1990s. Before the American campaign against the Taliban, the group was growing and becoming one of the main causes of concern for the security of post-Soviet Central Asia. However, following this rise, is it appropriate to talk about a fall of the IMU as an Al-Qaeda threat?

The roots of jihadism in Uzbekistan

To understand the initial threat, one needs first to return to the roots of the problem. Three can be identified: social inequality, religious revival, and the authoritarian nature of post-Soviet Uzbekistan.

With independence, Uzbeks lost free public services and regulated prices for basic goods. The *budjetniki* (employees of organizations funded by the government), farm workers, and industrial and construction workers, became the "new poor" of the post-Soviet era.¹² At the same time, the fortunes made by a few, the "new Uzbeks," as well as the strong influence of criminal organizations became apparent.¹³ To make things worse, demographic pressure had always been high: in 1989, Uzbek citizens aged 10-14 numbered three and a half times more than those aged 50-54, foretelling devastating levels of unemployment for the new generation.¹⁴

The reaction of the "new poor" to this situation was informed by their Soviet education: they rejected the new system because the notions of social equality and justice were not being defended. More broadly speaking, their philosophy was clearly a mix of Marxist philosophy and Islamic morality.¹⁵ During the same period, the young poor also found in

¹² A. Ilkhamov, "Impoverishment of the Masses in the Transition Period: Signs of an Emerging 'New Poor' Identity in Uzbekistan", *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2001, p. 34.

¹³ F. Heyat, "Re-Islamisation in Kyrgyzstan: Gender, New Poverty and the Moral", *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 23, No. 3-4, 2004, p. 280.

¹⁴ M. Kaser, "The Economic and Social Impact of Systemic Transition in Central Asia and Azerbaijan", in M. Amineh and H. Houweling, *Central Eurasia in Global Politics. Conflict, Security and Development*, Leiden, Brill, 2005, p. 146-147, 153.

¹⁵ A. Ilkhamov, *op. cit.* [12], p. 33.

religion a kind of “social therapy” helping them to deal with their difficult life in independent Uzbekistan.¹⁶ Such a situation reminds us that the “poor, urban youth” the first victim of unequal societies in the Middle East and elsewhere, has historically been one of the main components of radical groups, and this is still the case nowadays.¹⁷ Uzbek jihadism, like other jihadisms before, found its foot soldiers among this population.

Secondly, with the fall of the USSR an Islamic revival took place. The majority of Uzbeks did not become devout Muslims overnight; for most, a return to Islam represented a way to put some order in the post-Soviet social chaos. This trend was also linked to the rise of local nationalism, as Islam is a part of the local culture.¹⁸ For some, however, religion also had an ideological appeal.

Around this time some Salafist groups with a revolutionary agenda appeared, in particular in the Ferghana Valley. Salafism already had deep roots in Central Asia.¹⁹ With independence, in the Uzbek part of the Ferghana Valley, fundamentalist groups appeared. Their goal was to restore order to the streets and to regulate prices in local markets. This is how a group like *Adolat* (Justice) made itself known in the early 1990s. Originally a local militia, it was quickly influenced by a more Islamic agenda. It is believed that it was incorporated into the group *Islam Lashkarlari* (The Warriors of Islam) as its fighting force. Another branch of the movement responsible for religious propaganda was controlled by Tahir Yuldashev, a 24-year-old local mullah who quickly became one of the most influential Salafist leaders in the Ferghana Valley. Other Islamist groups existed in the same area, and there was definitely a revolutionary mood in the air. Tensions were exacerbated, as the state was powerless to assert its authority in the area.

Being the only real authority, the Salafists soon showed their intention of taking power: in December 1991 they took over the local headquarters of the former Communist Party in the city of Namangan. They wanted to pressure Tashkent to proclaim the establishment of an Islamic Uzbek Republic. From the Ferghana Valley, *Adolat* also tried to expand its activities to Tashkent itself. In February 1992, the Salafists, associated with the democratic opposition (*Erk* and *Birlik* parties) and the moderate Islamists (The Islamic Renaissance Party of Uzbekistan), tried to force president Islam Karimov to negotiate, whilst intensifying their contacts abroad. The Islamist leadership, clearly with a jihadist mindset already, planned to take over through insurrection at that time.²⁰

¹⁶ J. Nazpary, *Post-Soviet Chaos : Violence and Dispossession in Kazakhstan*, London, Pluto Press, 2001.

¹⁷ G. Kepel, *Jihad, Expansion et déclin de l'islamisme* [Jihad, the Expansion and Decline of Islamism], Paris, Gallimard, 2000; N. Beau and C. Graciet, *Quand le Maroc sera islamiste* [When Morocco becomes Islamist], Paris, La Découverte, 2007, p. 21-24, 29.

¹⁸ A. Khalid, *Islam after Communism. Religion and Politics in Central Asia*, Los Angeles/London, University of California Press, 2007, p.118-119, 128.

¹⁹ S. Peyrouse, “The Rise of Political Islam in Soviet Central Asia”, in H. Fradkin, H. Haqqani, E. Brown (eds.), *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Vol. 5, pp. 40-54.

²⁰ V.V. Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia. Between Pen and Rifle*, Lanham, Md., Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, p. 70.

The local situation and rising tensions in neighboring Tajikistan between former Communists and the opposition were clear signs that heads of state in Central Asia could not take their survival for granted. The danger of civil war was not a government fantasy, but a frightening possibility. Like the leaders of the Near East after decolonization, they found themselves in a situation where power could be gained or lost through violence, making opposition intolerable from their point of view. In Uzbekistan, it strengthened a tendency toward authoritarianism, which was already evident at the end of the 1980s in Karimov's opposition to *Perestroika*. Since then, the Uzbek government has made the same strategic mistake as governments in the Middle East made during the second half of the 20th century: they strongly opposed any moderate religious or secular challenge, leaving the extremists the only form of opposition. With the situation in the Ferghana Valley out of control, Karimov decided to act decisively to recover total control of the Republic. In January 1992, live fire was used to disperse crowds in Tashkent, after he sent in armed police to deal with a student strike. The demonstrations were over food-ration tickets, but the government's goal was to send a clear message: authority and stability were to be restored at all costs. As the Uzbek president famously said in July 1992: "It is necessary to straighten out the brains of one hundred people in order to preserve the lives of thousands."²¹

By 1993, all opposition groups had been wiped out, and the jihadists were on the run in Tajikistan, in hiding, or in jail. This gave the outside appearance of stability. In fact, the Uzbek leadership had chosen the same path the Middle Eastern regimes had chosen before them: short-term stability through widespread repression, risking radicalization and even larger problems in the future.

The rising threat of the IMU before 9/11

Hence, the potential for radicalism did exist in Uzbekistan during the 1990s, but the threat needs to be better defined: was it a purely Islamo-nationalist threat or an "Al-Qaeda" one?

In some ways, the jihadist vision that gave birth to the IMU appears to be Islamo-nationalist. The jihadists, like their leading military commander, Juma Namangani, did not have a clear ideological approach: their only goal was to get rid of Karimov. Besides, there had been terrorist actions attributed to Uzbek Islamists, in particular the IMU, during the second half of the 1990s. There were several assassinations in 1997, and a large-scale terrorist attack in Tashkent in February 1999.²² Despite the fact that responsibility could not reliably be ascribed to any organization, it is important to note that these actions targeted representatives of the state

²¹ Human Rights Watch, "Straightening Out the Brains of One Hundred": Discriminatory Political Dismissals in Uzbekistan", *Helsinki Watch*, April 1993.

²² C. Poujol, *L'islam en Asie Centrale. Vers une nouvelle donne* [Islam in Central Asia. Towards a New Deal], Paris, Ellipses, 2001, p. 54-55.

authorities first and foremost. Moreover, it seems that some Islamist leaders considered negotiating with the government in Tashkent in order to be accepted as part of a more open political process. Yuldashev himself claimed that his followers were waging a war against the Uzbek government only because Karimov did not accept real political debate in the republic.²³

However, it soon became clear that the government would not compromise. The peace process between the Tajik government and its opposition in 1997 reinforced the local authoritarian tendency. Indeed, for Karimov's government, it was a dangerous precedent that showed violence worked when directed against Central Asian states. To make matters worse, the capital of another neighbor, Afghanistan, fell to the Taliban in September 1996. Such a situation was seen as threatening to the vital interests of the country. By 1997 the Uzbek military had dramatically strengthened its control of the borders, especially those with Afghanistan. Also by 1997, Tashkent had begun a regional war against Islamism. Anyone seen giving assistance to the Islamists became an enemy of the state. Uzbekistan used the Tajik warlord Mahmud Khudoiberdiev against Tajikistan, still seen as a source of troubles.²⁴ He organized armed uprisings in February 1996, August 1997, and November 1998. In addition, Karimov supported the ethnic-Uzbek Afghan Rashid Dostum's campaign against the Taliban.²⁵ More broadly, Tashkent used its security forces against Islamist or even secular opposition in neighboring countries, sometimes without notifying those countries.²⁶

Hence, for the Islamist opposition, which fled after 1992, exile did not mean safety. It created a vicious circle in which neither the Uzbek government nor its opposition would feel secure before the complete destruction of the other. Last, but not least, repression inside Uzbek territory was also harsh, fueling extremism. After the assassinations in 1997 the police harassed practicing Muslims broadly speaking, conducting a witch-hunt to track down any possible Islamist threat. Like in the Middle East before, repression seemed to work, in the short term at least. In the long term, however, it simply encouraged extremism among the people who continued to follow the IMU's path.

This path clearly became extremist, going beyond the classic Islamo-nationalist agenda. Once in exile, Yuldashev sought outside help to continue his fight. He cultivated links with extremist movements and foreign intelligence agencies in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates.²⁷ He received funds from the famous Inter-Services

²³ BBC, *Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/3831 G/4, 4 May 2000. From an interview for *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, Mashhad, 1 May 2000.

²⁴ L. Jonson, *Tajikistan in the New Central Asia. Geopolitics, Great Power Rivalry and Radical Islam*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2006, p. 48.

²⁵ M. Fredholm, "Uzbekistan and the Threat from Islamic Extremism", Conflict Studies Research Centre, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, K39, March 2003, p. 2.

²⁶ A. Polat, "Central Asian Security Forces Against their Dissidents in Exile", in R.Z. Sagdeev and S. Eisenhower (eds.), *Central Asia: Conflict, Resolution, Change*, Chevy Chase, Md., The Center for Political and Strategic Studies, the Eisenhower Institute, 1995.

²⁷ See P. Mann, "Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan : Will it Strike Back ?", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 26, No. 2, April 2002, p. 236.

Intelligence (ISI) in Pakistan.²⁸ He was not the only Central Asian Islamist in Pakistan in the 1990s, several hundred of them could be found among the *madaris*²⁹ of the Jamiat-i-Ulema (JIU), a Pakistani group very supportive of the Taliban. They were mostly Tajiks and Uzbeks, but there were also Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and Kyrgyz. During his stay in Peshawar from 1995 to 1998, Yuldashev made contact with Afghan Islamist groups, but also with Afghan-Arabs and, ultimately, with Osama Bin Laden himself.³⁰ His need for funds made him even more dependent upon extreme foreign influences: it is known that the JIU also helped him financially.³¹

During the period Yuldashev was building this network, a group began to build itself around Juma Namangani reflecting this transnational approach. One could find Uzbeks, and other Central Asians, but also Arab *Mujahidin* from Afghanistan and Chechnya. Even if Uzbeks were clearly the majority in the movement, the jihadist fight was broader than a national one. This explains why the Islamist leaders decided to be part of a war to destabilize the post-Soviet regime in Tajikistan. In this conflict, Uzbek Islamists were clearly hawkish, opposing any kind of appeasement with the Tajik government. They also opposed the Tajiks in their nationalist approach and support for Ahmad Shah Masoud when Yuldashev and Namangani favored the Taliban. Those differences pushed them to create their own structure, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, in 1996. Again, its membership went beyond Uzbeks,³² their fight was at least as much regional as it was national, and it was so obvious that, in 2001, some rumors claimed that the IMU had changed its name to Islamic Party of Turkestan (IPT).³³ This was so credible that the religious head of the movement, Zuhayr Ibn Abdur Raheem, had to give an interview to Radio Free Europe to dismiss the rumor.³⁴

The IMU soon showed that its transnational strategy and composition made it a threat to all Central Asian states. In summer 1999, the IMU began its military attacks. They attacked Kyrgyzstan from Tajikistan, and were able to humiliate the local army and to take hostages, in particular Japanese geologists—Western sources say their government paid between 2 and 6 million US dollars to obtain their release.³⁵ It seems that Yuldashev wanted to use the Japanese to force the Uzbek government to negotiate a political settlement, but Namangani opposed this approach, choosing a fight to the death and a ransom.³⁶ The 1999 campaign seems to have concluded an internal power struggle, giving Namangani, as the main organizer of the military branch, the upper hand. This explains the strategy adopted that year. As revealed by some Kyrgyz officials, the IMU could

²⁸ V.V. Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia. Between Pen and Rifle*, New York, Rowman & Littlefield, p. 71.

²⁹ Plural of the singular *madrassa*.

³⁰ A. Rashid, *Jihad*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002, p. 140.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² One could find other Central Asians, and Uyghurs, in its ranks.

³³ See R. Yakemtchouk, *Ouzbékistan, puissance émergente en Asie Centrale* [Uzbekistan, Emerging Power in Central Asia], Paris, L'Harmattan, 2003, p. 156.

³⁴ A. Rashid, *op. cit.* [30], p. 180-181.

³⁵ See M. Crosston, *Fostering Fundamentalism: Terrorism, Democracy, and American Engagement in Central Asia*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2006, p. 46.

³⁶ V.V. Naumkin, *op.cit.* [28], p. 92.

have easily continued its campaign into Uzbekistan.³⁷ But their long-term goal required a different approach, desiring total victory over the Uzbek government, they had no desire to push for a peace agreement. Numangani knew that to attain such a goal, he needed money to pay for soldiers and weapons. So one of his major objectives in the long term was to protect the movement's financial sources, i.e. the drug trafficking business the military leader began to organize in 1997. Also around 1999, Kyrgyz law enforcement agencies brought the drug-trafficking routes inside the country under control. It was an economic blow for the movement, as the IMU previously had controlled up to 70% of the traffic entering Kyrgyzstan.³⁸

Besides, Namangani had two regional goals: first, to put pressure on the local governments, to push them to make mistakes and to be unable to work with one another as a consequence;³⁹ second, to get a foothold in the Fergana Valley, and to organize sleeper cells there. His strategy worked, and made him a military threat to all the Central Asian regimes. In August and September 2000, the IMU struck again in the south of Kyrgyzstan, and was able to come close to Tashkent. Again, in July 2001, the Batken area in Kyrgyzstan and the Surkhandarya area in Uzbekistan came under attack.⁴⁰ This last year showed the degree of organization of the movement: at the same time the IMU was able to send 600 of its men to fight for the Taliban against the Northern Alliance.⁴¹

Moreover, what we know of its ideology makes the IMU closer to Al-Qaeda than to the Tajik Islamo-nationalists. Indeed, primary evidence shows that the Uzbek regime was not the only enemy identified: the United States, Russia, Christians broadly speaking, and Jews were also targeted.⁴² The jihadist fighters are seen as a vanguard, different from the average population who from their perspective are like sheep.⁴³ In this vanguard, Numangani benefited from a cult of personality equivalent to that around Bin Laden in some Islamist communities.

This tendency was strengthened by the influence of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. The Afghan experience made the structure of the movement even more international. Indeed, the Taliban put Uyghur and Pakistani Islamists under the command of the IMU. This was a way of preventing these groups becoming a problem in its relationship with Beijing or Islamabad. The scope of the enemies of the IMU became even wider as its fighters began to fight for Taliban supremacy in Afghanistan, and when the movement tried to recruit Afghan Uzbeks for the cause of the mullah

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

³⁸ S. Cornell and R.A. Spector, "Central Asia: More than Islamic Extremists", *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 1, Winter 2002, p. 197.

³⁹ A. Rashid, *op. cit.* [30], p. 154.

⁴⁰ Uzbekistan tried to hide this last attack, claiming that it was military exercises.

⁴¹ Editor's note: The Northern Alliance was an umbrella organization of anti-Taliban forces, created in 1996.

⁴² M.B. Olcott and B. Babajanov, "The Terrorist Notebooks", *Foreign Policy*, April 2003, p. 37-38.

⁴³ V. Naumkin, *op. cit.* [28], p. 103.

Omar.⁴⁴ Furthermore, they were even more exposed to the “Al-Qaeda” way of thinking, with Osama Bin Laden, but also other ideological thinkers of global jihad, like Abu Mus’ab al Suri, showing a strong interest in them. The latter taught in their training camps, and saw the fight of Central Asian Islamists as key to global jihad.⁴⁵

Hence, it seems that before 9/11, the IMU had made its choice: despite its national rhetoric, its scope was already much broader than victory in one country.

The IMU after the fall of the Taliban

The American campaign against the Afghan Emirate began on 7 October 2001. It has been a blow for the IMU as much as for the Taliban: they lost their safe haven, their training camps, and their military leader—Namangani was killed in combat in November 2001. Led by Yuldashev, the Uzbek jihadists fled to the Pashtun tribal belt in Pakistan, and tried to reorganize there.

Some could have thought that Yuldashev would make the movement take an Islamo-nationalist turn. After all, he was the one who once claimed to seek a political settlement with the Uzbek leadership. On the contrary, it seems that he himself has converted to global jihad, if he ever really believed in accommodation. In recent tapes, widely available in the Ferghana Valley, he says: “the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan used to fight Karimov alone once. No more. We are going to war on all enemies of Islam worldwide. [...] The jihad is the only means of dealing with the Jews and Christians who demean Islam.”⁴⁶ Hence the IMU is now rhetorically aligned with the Al-Qaeda way of thinking. As explained during a speech given by Yuldashev in March 2007, the most important battles now are in Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition, the IMU has aligned its methods with those of Al-Qaeda. In the materials found in 1990s, IMU trainees learned escape methods: suicide missions were not part of the curriculum in the jihadist camps of the Ferghana Valley. Now Yuldashev sends Uzbeks on suicide attacks against foreign troops in Afghanistan, and Americans are clearly identified as one of the principal enemies.⁴⁷

There have been two limits to the realignment of the IMU. Firstly, it is still focusing on its regional fight against post-Soviet Central Asian regimes, in particular Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, as proved by Yuldashev’s allocution marking the fifth anniversary of 9/11. Even if he has organized suicide missions in Afghanistan, he did not want to put the bulk

⁴⁴ R. Johnson, *Oil, Islam, and Conflict. Central Asia Since 1945*, London, Reaktion, 2007, p. 132.

⁴⁵ B. Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad*, Columbia University Press, 2008, p. 262.

⁴⁶ Ferghana.ru news agency, “Tahir Yuldash: US Fiasco is Nearing. Look us up in Washington”, 15 October 2007, <www.ferghana.ru>.

⁴⁷ A. Sidikov, “Features—Pakistan Blames IMU Militants for Afghan Border Unrest”, *RFE/RL*, 2 July 2008, <www.rferl.org>.

of his forces in Afghanistan. Secondly, he opposed the “Far Enemy,” but still wanted to fight the “Near Enemies” at a regional, “Greater Central Asian” level, in particular Pakistan. The IMU has probably chosen such a strategy on pragmatic grounds: to privilege the campaign against Pakistan is less dangerous than a fight in Afghanistan, and it has helped to secure a new safe haven. But is the IMU still be a real threat to Uzbekistan and other Central Asian republics?

IMU “Central” taken alone, in its present state, leaves one unconvinced. In January 2006, Yuldashev himself made it clear that he did not organize the riots in Andijan in 2005, despite suspicions to the contrary. He claimed that IMU members would not hide behind women and children, but after the American campaign, it would also be difficult to see Yuldashev’s group having the means to plan such a large event.⁴⁸ However, it would be a mistake to see it as irrelevant as a security issue. The group is still quite strong, even if it is no longer the important organization it was under Namangani’s command.

Indeed, the leader of the IMU lost the trust of a number of the movement’s foot soldiers. A lot of Uzbek men who came to Afghanistan with their families grew disillusioned there. They felt uncomfortable with Yuldashev’s dictatorial attitude. Some did not understand why the fight for Uzbekistan took so long, or why they had to fight against the Northern Alliance. It seems that the death of Namangani and the successful American campaign against the Taliban at the end of 2001 unleashed the frustration of a significant part of the group. Indeed after 2001, at least 600 men with their families left the movement, and are now refugees in Afghanistan, Pakistan (Peshawar), Iran, and Turkey. However, Yuldashev still has several hundred soldiers under his command, and the IMU is still welcoming volunteers from Central Asia. The group is still involved in drug trafficking, receiving regular drug shipments, and is still able to acquire weapons and munitions, mostly of Russian manufacture.⁴⁹ So the group is far from destroyed, but does not look as strong as it did under Namangani.

Besides, their current haven is much less safe than the Afghan “Emirate” of the mullah Omar, but it is still a safe haven, where the IMU is strong enough to defend itself if attacked. In South Waziristan, since late 2003, they have had to join the fight against the Pakistani army, and are seen as a real threat by Islamabad.⁵⁰ They also entered into a conflict with local tribesmen and the Taliban between March and April 2007. The clash was due to internal tensions between neo-Taliban and the fact that the Uzbek jihadists aggressively pursued their anti-Pakistani agenda, targeting elders who wanted a better relationship with the government. Indeed it is because of an overzealous campaign against the Pakistani government in the name of the Al-Qaeda fight against Islamabad (not uniformly shared by their neo-Taliban allies) that they found themselves in trouble. It has

⁴⁸ Ferghana.ru news agency, *op. cit.* [46].

⁴⁹ I. Mirsaitov and A. Saipov, “Ex-gunmen of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Claim their Organisation is No More”, 16 April 2006, <www.ferghana.ru>.

⁵⁰ A. Sidikov, *op. cit.* [47].

been said that they lost between 100 and 200 men in this fight,⁵¹ but it seems that this is an overestimate. Independent sources cite about 50 deaths, Pakistanis and Uzbeks combined.⁵² They still suffered a defeat, of course, but they have been beaten by a former ally of sorts—who fought the Coalition in Afghanistan as a neo-Taliban—and not by the Pakistani army. Indeed, Maulvi Nazeer, a local leader of Wana, accepted to work with the government only on this particular matter. Whilst he warned the neighboring tribes not to allow their lands to be used for retaliatory actions by the Uzbeks, he also made it clear the he would not track them down once they were out of Wana, and he did not try to annihilate them on the battlefield. The Uzbek jihadists were able to leave the local area of Wana, where the fight started, relatively unscathed, thanks to the interference of leading Afghan Taliban. Even if the peace deal accepted by the Uzbeks asked for them to go to Afghanistan, on neo-Taliban territory, it is very clear that they were not forced to do so. They moved to other places in North and South Waziristan.⁵³ As allies of the leader of the Pakistani Taliban, Baitullah Meshud, they could not abandon the fight against the Pakistani regime. In 2008 then, they are still a significant part of the fight against the Pakistani army.⁵⁴

⁵¹ These figures can be found in G. Witte and K. Khan, “Pakistan Officials Applaud Fighting in Tribal Region”, *Washington Post*, 23 March 2007, p. A13; and D. Montero, “Pakistan’s Embattled President Touts Gain in War on Terrorism”, *Christian Science Monitor*, 23 March 2008, <www.csmonitor.com>.

⁵² See R. Yusufzai, “Eviction or Safe Passage?”, *Newsline*, May 2007, <www.newsline.com.pk>.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ G. Steinberg, “A Turkish Al-Qaeda : The Islamic Jihad Union and the Internationalization of Uzbek Jihadism”, *Strategic Insight*, Center for Contemporary Conflict, July 2008, p. 7, <www.ccc.nps.navy.mil>.

After the fall of the Afghan Emirate: An Uzbek Leaderless Jihad

Hence, if the IMU is still a threat, it is not the danger it used to be. An analysis focusing on a pre-9/11 vision of terrorist groups could dismiss attempts to label the IMU the “Al-Qaeda in Central Asia.” But like Al-Qaeda, the IMU must be seen as more than a pyramidal organization: its followers, even if they no longer follow Yuldashev, can still be part of a jihad against Islam Karimov. There may still be connections between groups based in Waziristan, or elsewhere in the Pakistani Pashtun belt, and the local sleeper cells put in place by Namangani by the end of the 1990s. Last, but not least, there may be other groups, not necessarily linked to the IMU *mujahidin* but inspired by their methods and ideology. Indeed, IMU “Central” is connected with ex-IMU soldiers and other Uzbek and Central Asian/“Greater Central Asian” jihadists sharing their ideas as part of a broader IMU network in order to fight the Uzbek regime, Central Asian regimes, and increasingly regimes in the “Greater Central Asian” area.

The internal split and the birth of a Central Asian Al-Qaeda

As explained earlier, Yuldashev has not been able to keep the Uzbek jihadists united. In 2002, some left the IMU and established the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) or the Islamic Jihad Group.⁵⁵ One has to be cautious before talking about a new Islamist threat in Central Asia. Some analysts doubt the existence of the IJU because it would not be the first time that Central Asian secret services have created false threats.⁵⁶ In this case, however, it would seem that the threat is real, and that it extends beyond Central Asia.

It is known to be based in North Waziristan, Pakistan, and to have training camps there that are not under the official control of the IMU.⁵⁷ In order to settle there, they have allied themselves with the area’s most important neo-Taliban group, the Haqqani network. One has to remember

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵⁶ C. Murray, “The Mysterious Islamic Jihad Union,” 8 September 2007, <www.craigmurray.co.uk>.

⁵⁷ R. Sandee, “The Islamic Jihad Union,” the NEFA Foundation, 14 October 2008, <www.nefafoundation.org>.

that this Afghan group is the same one that strongly opposed the attacks against Tahir Yuldashev in Wana.⁵⁸ These Afghan jihadists are also very close to Al-Qaeda and have adopted their fighting methods, i.e. suicide attacks and the use of Improvised Explosive Devices. The IMU and the IJU also share an important alliance with Bin Laden's group. As seen before, Yuldashev is an ideological follower of the Al-Qaeda line, at least partially. And there is proof the IJU is linked to Al-Qaeda: indeed, for their propaganda videos, like the one showing the German-born Cüneit Cifti carrying out a suicide bombing in Khost, Afghanistan, on their behalf, they work with *As-Sahab*, an Al-Qaeda production firm.⁵⁹ It is said that Al-Qaeda has kept a particular interest in Central Asian jihadists. Some analysts are going as far as to say that since 2006 the terrorist group has been recruiting young Central Asian boys as new volunteers to replace their casualties.⁶⁰ The idea that Al-Qaeda could recruit members via the IMU and IJU, including adolescents, seems credible. Indeed, foreigners from Central Asia and elsewhere have already gone to fight for Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Furthermore, propaganda videos have proven that the IJU has trained and sent into combat children as young as 11 years old.⁶¹ This recruitment could be a factor strengthening the links between the Uzbek jihadists and their neo-Taliban and Al-Qaeda allies. Hence even if there is, indeed, a separation based on what kind of leadership the Uzbek jihadists should have, there have been no signs of animosity between the two groups, they still share the same allies, and seem to have the same enemies: the United States, the Coalition in Afghanistan, the Karzai government as well as all the regimes in Greater Central Asia.

The IJU also claimed responsibility for several actions that showed distinctly Al-Qaeda traits: the use of suicide attacks as a weapon against its enemies, a taste for spectacular attacks to publicize the group and attract recruits, the importance given to propaganda inspired by the ways of Bin Laden, and a regional, and even international vision of jihad.

Indeed, the group claimed responsibility for the first suicide bombing attacks in Central Asia, and the first direct attacks against symbols of the "Far Enemy" for Al-Qaeda, i.e. the West, in particular the US, and Israel, in March-April and July 2004 respectively. According to some reports and individuals, like the former head of the IMU counterintelligence service, Shurat Mosirakhunov, IJU gunmen were involved in the events of Andijan in May 2005.⁶² In November 2006, it was a Pakistani IJU cell which was stopped before executing planned rocket attacks on government buildings in Islamabad, in order to punish Pakistan for its support of the US. Moreover, the group has carried out a considerable public relations campaign since September 2007, especially on Turkish jihadist websites. Its leadership is Uzbek, but this organization is now clearly international in a

⁵⁸ I. Ali, "The Haqqani Network and Cross-Border Terrorism in Afghanistan," *Terrorism Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, Vol. 6, No. 6, 24 March 2008.

⁵⁹ B. de Cordier, "The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Islamic Jihad Union: a Jihadi Nebulous in Central Asia and the EU," 02 July 2008, <www.caucas.com>.

⁶⁰ CBS News, "Al-Qaeda Expanding Recruitment of Children," 4 July 2008, <www.cbs4.com>.

⁶¹ R. Sandee, *op. cit.* [57], p. 12.

⁶² I. Mirsaitov and A. Saipov, *op. cit.* [49].

truly Al-Qaeda way. This was confirmed when three of its members were arrested in September 2007 in Sauerland, Germany. They were working with an indeterminate number of members of the IJU, to organize attacks during the Bundestag debate over the presence of German troops in Afghanistan. The details of the plot have been striking and frightening: the three suspects arrested were not Uzbek, but German converts or German-born Turks. They were trained in the Pashtun belt by the IJU, and sent back to Germany as operatives. They were able to obtain around 730 kilograms of 35-percent hydrogen peroxide, and the detonators needed to organize spectacular attacks.⁶³ The IJU claimed responsibility and warned that similar plans were afoot elsewhere. Even such a possibility needs to be confirmed by official sources, it is a fact that this splinter cell from the IMU is now training Central Asians, Pakistanis, Afghans, and Europeans (especially ethnic Turks and German converts) to organize suicide attacks in Afghanistan. The idea of the IJU as a jihadist threat for “Greater Central Asia,” and for Europe, cannot be disregarded. It seems the Uzbek group strengthened the Al-Qaeda profile of the pre-9/11 IMU, continuing on the path chosen by Namangani rather than Yuldashev. It also appears that the group still has at least some links in Central Asia, neutral relations with IMU “Central,” and a good relationship with the Al-Qaeda/neo-Taliban network.

Before moving forward, there is still one question that needs to be asked about the IJU: if it seems to have kept the same allies and the same vision as the IMU, why did the split happen? I disagree with the idea that it comes from the fact that the IMU has an Islamo-nationalist agenda.⁶⁴ As explained above, it already had an Al-Qaeda ideology during the second half of the 1990s, and this ideology did not disappear. One can outline two main causes for the split:

- A structural cause, linked to the leadership and the financing of the IMU. Even in Al-Qaeda, finance has always been a pressing issue, capable of fueling tensions between the members of the group.⁶⁵ It was Namangani who guaranteed sufficient levels of income for the IMU through drug trafficking. With the military leader dead, and Afghanistan lost, the IMU as a criminal organization was disorganized and definitively lost an important part of its income. This loss could only mean weakened leadership. Yuldashev was only second-in-command *de facto* by the end of the 1990s, less charismatic, and hence less influential with the foot soldiers. As seen above, Yuldashev clearly disappointed a lot of people. In such a situation it was just a matter of time before a split or an internal “coup” occurred.

- Nevertheless, those changes cannot be justified only by structural causes. The best way to attract soldiers to a successor organization is to show that the split is in fact ideological. This was partly the case here: to cut a long story short, the difference was less about the ideological choice made (the two groups chose an Al-Qaeda approach) than about how radical and uncompromising this ideological approach would be. Indeed, the IMU and the IJU are both internationalists and jihadists. The difference

⁶³ Y. Musharbash and M. Gebauer, “Islamic Jihad Union Threatens Attacks Outside Germany,” *Der Spiegel*, 9 December 2007.

⁶⁴ One of the main ideas of the otherwise excellent article by G. Steinberg, *op. cit.* [54].

⁶⁵ F. Gerges, *The Far Enemy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 124.

is that the IMU, as explained before, still focuses on “Greater Central Asia,” and on the three countries around the Ferghana Valley in particular. Moreover, the IMU, whilst supportive of the Taliban, was more enthusiastic about fighting Islamabad than Kabul. One can make a comparison based on contemporary jihadist groups elsewhere to understand their difference. The IMU definitely resembles Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: it is following the lead of Al-Qaeda more and more as it lost its national/regional fight, but it still keeps a relatively local agenda, focusing only on regional affairs, so being only partly an Al-Qaeda threat.⁶⁶

The IJU, like Al-Qaeda “Central,” has a much broader agenda, and has demonstrated its internationalism through its actions. The IJU tries to be more than Al-Qaeda in Central Asia, it seems that its goal is to be a “Greater Central Asian” Al-Qaeda, based regionally in the Silk Road, like the original Al-Qaeda was linked first to the Arab world, but with a global agenda. The two Al-Qaedas here have the same enemies, the West broadly speaking, and the US in particular, plus the local regimes in the Muslim world. Going beyond the ambitions of the IMU, they are keen to strike anywhere, making a Central Asian security issue an international one.

The Leaderless Jihad in the Ferghana Valley.

But the IMU and the IJU are threats that by themselves are physically remote from their original area of jihad. Their core members had to find a safe heaven too far from Post-Soviet Central Asia to really strike the local regimes the way they used to at the end of 1990s. Here again, an Al-Qaeda threat is not only coming from pyramidal groups the way the terrorist groups used to be before Bin Laden’s organization. It is also a matter of networks: cells and small groups, more or less independent, working with the same ideology, but not with a strong hierarchy. It is such an organizational model that kept Al-Qaeda alive, despite the severe blows delivered by the US and its allies after 9/11.

It is safe to say that it is thanks to the same kind of organization that Uzbek jihadism is still alive in the Ferghana Valley. First, it seems that the IJU itself is less a traditionally organized group than a network of several small groups working together.⁶⁷ More broadly speaking, local cells, planted by Namangani at the end of the 1990s, did not disappear with the fall of the Taliban. It is safe to assume that they became more autonomous and used whatever means they had at their disposal to continue the fight. Indeed, they were quick to recover from the terrible blow caused by the loss of the Afghan safe haven. They first struck in Kyrgyzstan, which is still the soft underbelly of Central Asian security. They have been accused by Boris

⁶⁶ M. Guidère, *Al Qaïda à la conquête du Maghreb* [Al Qaeda’s North African Conquest], Monaco, éditions du Rocher, 2007, p. 131.

⁶⁷ C. Moore, “Uzbek Terror Networks: Germany, Jamoat and the IJU,” *Terrorism Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, Vol. 5, No. 21, 8 November 2007.

Polektov, Deputy Chairman of the Kyrgyz National Security Service, of being responsible for an explosion in Bishkek's largest clothes market in December 2002. They are also accused of having planned the murder of 19 Chinese in March 2003, and two explosions in Osh in May 2003. For these first attacks it is said that they received the help of the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM).⁶⁸

Some attacks definitely demonstrated the impact of the War on Terror, making the US the primary "Far Enemy." In November 2003, the Kyrgyzs stopped three jihadists who planned to plant a bomb at the Ganci Airbase at Manas Airport, used by the U.S. military in the Afghan war. Suicide bombing, Al Qaeda's calling card, was also used during a series of attacks that lasted five days during March 2004. During this fight civilian casualties were carefully avoided, the real target was the police, a move that was clearly intended to win popular support. In July 2004, the Israeli and American Embassies were targeted by suicide attacks. The IJU has claimed responsibility for this action,⁶⁹ but it had to be organized by a sleeper cell or radicalized individuals on the ground. It is safer to talk about local radicalized Uzbeks who received tactical support from the IJU or another outsider.⁷⁰ Hence either the links between the Uzbek jihadist base in Waziristan and the Ferghana Valley are still active, or the local cells are even more radicalized than expected.

But this more or less leaderless jihad is not only being pursued in Uzbekistan. In 2006, there were jihadist actions in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. In particular the 12 May 2006 attack on the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It seems that those were the actions of local followers of the IMU, or ex-IMU fighters. According to officials from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, they are the result of the harsh repression of religious opposition inside Uzbekistan itself.⁷¹

Indeed, even if the Ferghana Valley is divided between those three states, it is in fact one "cultural unit." The small number of jihadist militants, linked to the IJU or an independent local cell, active during the Andijan crisis, were not crushed by the repression: they just moved their activities to the Kyrgyz and Tajik parts of the Ferghana Valley.⁷² This means that security issues in Uzbekistan directly impact the stability of surrounding states. This trend is sure to continue, as there is no chance of a real policy reorientation in Tashkent on this matter. Indeed, far from carefully targeting suspects identified through intelligence work, religious individuals broadly speaking are suspected and interrogated.⁷³ But to blame Tashkent alone would be simplistic: the Uzbek militants are also used as an excuse by the

⁶⁸ R. Weitz, "Storm Clouds over Central Asia: Revival of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)?", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 27, No. 6, 2004, p. 512.

⁶⁹ Press Room, U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Designates Leadership of the IJU Terrorist Group", 18 June 2008, <www.ustreas.gov>.

⁷⁰ I. Rotar, "Terrorism in Uzbekistan: A Self-Made Crisis"; *Terrorism Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, Vol. 2, No. 8, 23 April 2004.

⁷¹ I. Rotar, "Ferghana Valley: Return of the Jihad," 28 August 2007, <www.eurasianet.org>.

⁷² *Ibid.* [interview with Alexandre Knyazev, political scientist at the Slavic University in Bishkek].

⁷³ Ferghana.ru News Agency, "Uzbekistan: Night spent in a Mosque May Cost the Faithful Summons to the National Security Service," 22 October 2007, <www.ferghana.ru>.

leaders of the three countries to strengthen their political control. For example, very recently, Kyrgyzstan passed a new law on freedom of religion; the law of 1991, the most progressive in a region where tight control is the norm, was seen as “too liberal and outdated.”⁷⁴ In fact, their common repressive attitude, demonstrated in such actions, feeds the jihadist threat in the area.⁷⁵ The new law will permit closer regulation of the activities of the religious groups, which is a veiled allusion to the fact that it can be used against groups like HT or TJ, discussed in the introduction, which are not a real security risk. Such a rationale, which is the same everywhere in Central Asia, will have a serious downside, jailing religious or possibly extreme individuals could lead to their radicalization.

Interestingly enough, by focusing on official declarations from Tashkent and other Central Asian capitals, there is the feeling that the local governments do not know the exact nature of the threat they face. Like in the 1990s, the Uzbek leadership still considers all groups, violent and non-violent, as a common threat. For example, during a televised appearance in September 2004, talking about TJ, Islam Karimov said “If we do not fight against terror, we are going to have more and more organizations of this kind.”⁷⁶ There is a clear conflation here of the groups who have actually exercised violence since Uzbekistan achieved independence, and groups like the *Tabligh*, which may be fundamentalist or radical in their perception of religion, but never violent. Besides, even as late as 2007 it was usual for Central Asian officials from the Ferghana Valley to blame the violence on the IMU,⁷⁷ showing their failure to understand the mutation of the IMU since 2001, which can partly explain their bad policy choices. Nor do they think that part of the problem is local politics either, clearly. For example, the conspiracy explanation is the best explanation for the Andijan crisis for Islam Karimov: “I’m convinced that what happened in Andijan was impossible without serious preparations and the experience gunmen had accumulated in Afghanistan and other hot spots.”⁷⁸

More interestingly, there has not been any declaration from Central Asian officials on the IJU. Indeed, since the discovery of the IJU cell in Germany, the Uzbek security services have refused to make any comments on the IJU or the event itself. The official answer from the National Security Service’s (SNB) press service has been to refuse to answer journalists who are not accredited in Uzbekistan itself.⁷⁹ This silence is all the more striking when one remembers that the Central Asian intelligence community is known to have invented or exaggerated the importance of Islamist groups in order to get the support of others in the

⁷⁴ Interfax, “Kyrgyzstan Adopts New Law on Freedom of Worship”, 6 November 2008, <www.interfax.com>.

⁷⁵ G. Saidazimova, “Central Asia: Is Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Really Back?”, *RFE/RL*, 2 February 2006, <www.rferl.org>.

⁷⁶ G. Saidazimova, “Uzbekistan: Tabligh Jamaat Group Added to Uzbek Government Blacklist”, *RFE/RL*, 20 December 2004, <www.rferl.org>.

⁷⁷ I. Rotar, op.cit. [71].

⁷⁸ I. Karimov, addressing journalists in Tashkent, 17 May 2005.

⁷⁹ Uznews, “Uzbek security services silent about Islamic Jihad”, 14 September 2007, <www.uznews.net>.

past.⁸⁰ These generalizations on the different groups, on the IMU, linked to the Uzbek silence on the IJU, gives the impression that the Central Asian states are not exactly sure of the nature of the security threats. It explains even more their tendency of striking broadly any suspects that fit a very general profile. Hence, this policy is not necessarily Machiavellian, even if it also has its political advantages. It is also a result of the lack of understanding, and maybe the lack of information, of the governments themselves. So on this matter, admonition by the West to respect human rights will be totally ineffective so long as it is not coupled with real intelligence and security help against jihadist and other threats.

Until this kind of help comes, this repressive policy is dangerous for the future, as the states in the area are weak. Because of a power structure without a clear order of succession in particular, jihadists can easily destabilize the Central Asian states in a more effective way than they should. One can find an illustration of such a fact with Andijan, which seems to have been made possible because of a power struggle between Zakir Almatov, the all powerful Interior Minister and most likely successor of Islam Karimov in 2005⁸¹ and Rustam Inoyatov from the National Security Service (NSS). It is said that the NSS let the tensions grow, leaving Almatov to deal with the mess, and making him lose influence with the president. Such a disgraceful failure meant his political death.⁸² But it could have meant much more if the Andijan area had fully rebelled against the center, something that is not totally impossible considering the area's History. Hence, state weakness and internal power politics seem to feed the leaderless jihad in the area, making it more dangerous.

Last, but not least, the Uzbek leaderless jihad could easily find more local allies on the ground in the near future. First, it can count on the radicalization of some more "moderate" Islamists, for example disillusioned members of the HT who want to fight the regional repression of all kinds of Islamism. As recalled above, HT has always refused to use violence against local regimes. However, some local cells do not see eye-to-eye with this approach.⁸³ Radicalization is all the more possible with regional states unable to fight the movement ideologically, and with only brutal repression being seen fit to deal with these non-violent Islamists.⁸⁴ As the HT is one of the largest opposition groups in Central Asia, with 15,000 to 20,000 members,⁸⁵ local splinter cells getting closer to former IMU fighters—a real danger—would be damaging to regional security. Besides, the Uzbek leaderless jihad could also find allies in Tajikistan, where some Islamists who fought on the side of the Islamic Revival Party in Tajikistan (IRPT) during the 1992-1997 civil war have grown disillusioned with the 1997 peace process. A minority of them returned to violent action

⁸⁰ I. Mirsaitov and A. Saipov, *op. cit.* [49].

⁸¹ A time when Islam Karimov was said to be ill.

⁸² M. Zygar, "The Clan's Warfare", *Kommersant*, 4 July 2005.

⁸³ A. Khamidov, "Hizb ut-Tahrir Faces Internal Split in Central Asia", 21 October 2003, <www.eurasianet.org>.

⁸⁴ A. Mamairov, "Kyrgyz Islamists Build Support", *Middle East Times*, 24 November 2007.

⁸⁵ International Crisis Group (ICG), "Radical Islam in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir", Asia Report, Osh/Brussels, 30 June 2003, p. 17.

through the group *Bayat* (the Oath),⁸⁶ and it could be possible that more join them in the future. It would be an important new ally for the Uzbek jihadist network in post-Soviet Central Asia itself.

The responsibility of the regional Great Powers

We have already seen the importance of the policy choices of the Central Asian countries in the way they deal with jihadism. These repressive policies have a devastating impact on security, an impact so great that it manufactured a threat that exceeds its original post-Soviet reach. Yet it would be too easy to cast the blame on Uzbekistan and its neighbors alone: their fear of destabilization, as they are weak states, is understandable, and it is difficult to imagine real governance reforms in the area without real financial help coming from the international community. More specifically, besides a significant economic engagement that could only come from the West, two important powers in “Greater Central Asia” also have a particular responsibility: Russia and China. One can point to a strange inconsistency in their policies. They are wary of the security situation in “Greater Central Asia” broadly speaking, with good reason. Yet they support policies that could, in the next decade, reinforce jihadism in the region.

Indeed, Moscow, followed by Beijing, made a point of playing power politics and opposing the US presence in Central Asia. Of course, this is not totally unexpected: the American desire to support the “independence” of Russia’s neighbors could reasonably be seen as a way of opposing Russian dominance of its near-abroad, using “colored” revolutions in particular, to reduce Russia’s status as a Great Power.⁸⁷ But even if one can assume that a Great Power will always think about its interest first, it is a fact that Moscow was not really able to counter the Taliban threat to Central Asia during the 1990s. It is even possible that it manipulated local jihadist threats, in particular the IMU, during this period, in order to force countries like Uzbekistan to accept its preeminence.⁸⁸ The Kremlin has also been a strong supporter of Uzbekistan after the Andijan crisis, supporting the repressive policy of Tashkent in order to push Islam Karimov away from his former American ally.⁸⁹ This can maybe be seen as a logical policy in a pre-9/11 world. Yet, by supporting authoritarianism and opposing even the constructive actions of a rival Great Power, such a policy also allows jihadism in the area to grow, unchallenged.

⁸⁶ International Crisis Group, “Tajikistan’s Politics: Confrontation or Consolidation?”, Asia Briefing, Dushanbe/Brussels, 19 May 2004, p. 9.

⁸⁷ D. Trenin, “Russia and Central Asia. Interests, Policies, and Prospects”, in E. Rumer, D. Trenin, and H. Zhao, *Central Asia. Views from Washington, Moscow, and Beijing*, New York-London, M.E. Sharpe, 2007, p. 92.

⁸⁸ I. Mirsaitov and A. Saipov, *op. cit.* [49].

⁸⁹ See J.A. Corwin, “Is Russia Helping Tashkent Clean Up After Andijan?”, Turkey Weekly, 19 July 2005, <www.turkishweekly.net>; L. Mandeville, “Un an après Andijan, Poutine soutient Karimov” [One Year after Andijan, Putin supports Karimov], *Le Figaro*, 15 October 2007.

Yet on the issue of jihadism, the actions of Beijing have more practical importance than those of Moscow, because of the specificity of the security issue coming from Xinjiang and Uyghur national aspiration. Indeed, Uyghurs are nearly everywhere in “Greater Central Asia.” There are Uyghur minorities in post-Soviet Central Asia, and several hundred Uyghurs left China to fight with the Taliban,⁹⁰ there are also Uyghur militants in Pakistan, in particular in the Pashtun tribal belt. Besides, a number of Uyghur militants have connections with the jihadist movement in “Greater Central Asia.” A specific jihadist influence in their nationalist movement appeared at the beginning of the 1990s as a consequence of the contacts made by Uyghurs with the Afghan *mujahidin* in the 1980s.⁹¹ Moreover, Uyghur jihadists integrated the IMU in the past, and as seen before, it seems likely that there is still cooperation between Uyghur and Uzbek jihadists based in post-Soviet Central Asia. Last, but not least, there is at least one jihadist Uyghur organization, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Reports indicate the possible existence of a second one, the Turkestan Islamic Party, which claimed responsibility for attacks in China in May and July 2008.⁹² It could be another name for ETIM, or a branch of the IMU, maybe former Uyghur members still linked to the movement but eager to have their own organization. But in one way or another, it means that there is at least one structure, linked with Uzbek jihadists, which could channel the frustrations of young Uyghurs and lead them to join a regional jihad, willing to fight not just in China, but also in Central Asia and Afghanistan.

The problem of the Chinese policy against Uyghur separatism is that, like other Eurasian countries, it has concentrated on short-term security gains. Chinese diplomacy focuses on improving relations with Central Asian states in order to stop separatism originating from the post-Soviet area.⁹³ It has been successful in doing so, but internally, even if the state has made some real efforts to promote social peace, repression has been the main response to discontent. For now, even if there is no real guerilla or strong terrorist movement inside Xinjiang, it is clear that a large number of the Uyghur people in China thinks that they have no interest in integration and no opportunities of advancement in this country. Institutional racism and the common Han chauvinism do not help to change such a situation.⁹⁴ If in the short term, repression seems to work, in a not-so-distant future a younger generation of Uyghurs could choose regional jihad against China and the local regimes that help it.

⁹⁰ J. Bajoria, “The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)”, *Backgrounder*, Council on Foreign Relations, 31 July 2008, <www.cfr.org>.

⁹¹ A. Lufti, “Blowback: China and the Afghan-Arabs”, *Issues and Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 1, January/February 2001, p. 161.

⁹² E. Wong, “Warning of Attacks on Olympics Is Said to be Linked to Muslim Separatist Group”, *New York Times*, 9 August 2008, <www.nytimes.com>.

⁹³ H. Zhao, “China in Central Asia Diplomacy”, in E. Rumer, D. Trenin, and H. Zhao, *Central Asia. Views from Washington, Moscow, and Beijing*, New York-London, M.E. Sharpe, 2007.

⁹⁴ B. Kaltman, *Under the Heel of the Dragon. Islam, Racism, Crime, and the Uighur in China*, Athens, Ohio University Press, pp. 131-133.

Conclusions

Hence, the idea of an Al-Qaeda threat is not a fantasy, it is something very real, but it has to be linked to a very specific problem. Not all Islamist groups are the same: the problem is specifically coming from the Hydra constituted by the IMU, the IJU, and the Central Asian jihadist cells in the Ferghana Valley. Together, they could be a destabilizing factor in “Greater Central Asia,” and even further afield when one considers the discovery of IJU cells in Germany. Hence, there is a need for different actors to assume their responsibilities in the face of such a challenge.

First and foremost, responsibility must be taken by the US and the other nations fighting on the first frontline of the “War on Terror”: Afghanistan. Victory in the war against the neo-Taliban is essential, not only to stabilize Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also the Ferghana Valley. The IMU and the IJU will continue to train young Central Asians and to diffuse jihadist propaganda in the area as long as they have the opportunity to do so. Even if, alone, they are not strong enough to create chaos in the Silk Road, the fact that they target weak states with uncertain successions gives them the possibility of having a real impact in Central Asia, possibly within the next decade. The American campaign at the end of 2001 greatly diminished the threat coming from the IMU, but the Al-Qaeda threat is still of consequence, and now seems to extend to Europe. Hence, it is now time for the Coalition to finish the job and to specifically target the IMU and the IJU in its strikes in the tribal belt and in its work with the Pakistani government against the jihadists. It is only by showing a real interest in Central Asian security that Western powers can have a say in the way governance is organized in Tashkent and elsewhere in the region.

Second, the fact that the Central Asian threat is also active in Afghanistan and Pakistan should push European countries to adopt the notion of “Greater Central Asia,” which was *de facto* adopted by the US State Department in February 2006.⁹⁵ It is not being suggested that it should be adopted as a rigid notion: of course, culturally speaking, the links between post-Soviet Central Asia make sense, and on matters linked to energy, a “Central Asia and the Caucasus” vision is totally understandable. However, at the security level, the danger posed by the Uzbek Hydra has proved how relevant the notion of “Greater Central Asia” is. The problem here is that the dominant vision in Europe is still the one of the cold war, linking Central Asia to Russia, Pakistan to India, and seeing Afghanistan as an island cut off from its neighbors. At a time when the EU, like Japan, the US, and others, is beginning to become interested in the resources of the

⁹⁵ D. Chaudet, “Introduction”, *Politique Etrangère*, dossier spécial “Grande Asie Centrale et manœuvres de puissance” [Greater Central Asia and Power Games], No. 3, 2008, p. 547.

post-Soviet states, and is involved through NATO in the fight against the neo-Taliban, the adoption of such a concept could be useful to deal with this particular area.