Inventing Akromiya: The Role of Uzbek Propagandists in the Andijon Massacre

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Abstract: Many have claimed that the alleged terrorist group Akromiya incited the violence in the city of Andijon, Uzbekistan, in May 2005. This article contends that the portrayal of Akromiya as a violent organization is highly suspect and may have been created by members of the Uzbek government and propagated by members of the international scholarly community.

Key words: Akromiya, Andijon, Islam, propaganda, terrorism, Uzbekistan

Introduction

On May 16, 2006, a group of scholars, policy experts, and journalists convened at the Hudson Institute in Washington, DC, for the unveiling of a video that promised to reveal the truth about the violent events in the city of Andijon, Uzbekistan, one year before. "This video demonstrates that the organizers of the uprising may not have been, as some have claimed, 'peaceful Muslims,'" proclaimed the cohosts of the event, Zeyno Baran of the Hudson Institute and S. Frederick Starr of the Central Asia Caucasus Institute, in an invitation to colleagues.[1] According to Baran and Starr, this new video, which had been made available to them by the Uzbek embassy, would put to rest reports declaring the Andijon events to be a Tiananmen Square-style massacre of defenseless citizens by the Uzbek government. Proof of the falseness of this allegation, they claimed, lies in the fact that the video "shows clips recorded by members of Akromiya (a Hizb-ut Tahrir splinter group) during the uprising in Andijon on May 14, 2005."[2]

Roughly twenty-six minutes long, the video consisted of three main parts: clips of remorseful Akromiya members pleading for the forgiveness of the government; conversations with alleged witnesses and victims; and an interview with Shirin Akiner, a professor and close colleague of Starr who has condemned Akromiya and supported Uzbek President Islam Karimov's claim that the use of force was

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necessary. Titled "Andijan Tragedy: The Course of Investigation," the English-language documentary was shown to an audience composed largely of Westerners, many of whom remained doubtful of the video's veracity given the policies of the Karimov administration toward independent Muslims. Had an average Uzbek television viewer been in attendance, however, he or she might have been skeptical for wholly different reasons. "Andijan Tragedy: The Course of Investigation" is known, in Uzbekistan, as *Qabohat* (Villainy), a state-produced propaganda video about the attacks that Uzbek television played repeatedly during the summer of 2005. A comparison of the video with English-language transcripts of *Qabohat*, made available by Eurasianet.org last summer, shows that the two contain many identical segments,[3] a fact mentioned by neither Starr nor Baran.

The creation and promulgation of "Andijan Tragedy: The Course of Investigation" is only the latest move by certain Uzbek and international scholars, policy analysts, and state propagandists against Akromiya, the alleged Islamic terrorist group blamed for the attacks in Andijon. According to these individuals, Akromiya armed the militants, Akromiya gave the orders, Akromiya was responsible for the deaths of Uzbek citizens in Andijon.[4] There is one significant problem with this theory. Akromiya, by the accounts of many Uzbek and international human rights groups, political organizations, journalists, citizens, and accused Akromists themselves, does not exist.

In researching Akromiya, one is struck not only by the paucity of sources on the group, but of what these few sources consist. Unlike other Central Asian radical Islamic organizations such as Hizb-ut Tahrir or the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Akromiya went almost completely unnoticed and unexamined by both Uzbek and international scholars and policymakers prior to May 2005. While organizations such as Hizb-ut Tahrir have developed elaborate Web sites and distributed literature to advance their goals and win adherents, Akromiya has produced no publicly available materials, save one work by the group's eponymous leader, Akrom Yo'ldoshev. While the violent actions of organizations such as the IMU are a genuine threat to Central Asian security, Akromiya has remained dormant since its alleged founding in 1992, only to suddenly be held accountable for the Andijon massacre.

Given Akromiya's negligible status as an organized force prior to 2005—if, indeed, it existed as an organization at all—the few resources available on Akromiya raise serious concerns about the reliability of the group's public profile. Nearly every piece of information about Akromiya prior to May 2005 has its origin in books written by Uzbek officials or in documents presented in Uzbek courts. Therefore, the current public perception of Akromiya as a violent entity is based almost entirely on propagandistic works issued by the government that were then reiterated by both Uzbek and international scholars. Its very existence in doubt, Akromiya appears to have operated far more effectively as a myth than as a movement.

Much as the 1999 Tashkent bombings led to the arrest of thousands of innocent Muslims based on accusations of membership in Hizb-ut Tahrir,[5] the 2005 Andijon events have led to a crackdown on alleged Akromists. The key difference between the two instances is that while Hizb-ut Tahrir has overtly stated its

goals to form a caliphate in Central Asia, Akromiya's intentions have been voiced only by those who renounce Akromiya—that is, the Uzbek government and certain members of the academic and policy communities who support the government's portrayal of the group. (This is excluding "confessions" made by alleged Akromiya members after weeks of torture in Uzbek prisons.[6]) The Karimov administration appears to have gone from inventing fictional allegiances to a real organization to creating fiction about an organization itself.

Due to the general confusion and government cover-up surrounding the Andijon events, it is unlikely we will ever know what the true goals of Akromiya members—if such people existed—were prior to May 2005. It is equally difficult to assess the role of Akromiya or Akromists in the protests in Bobur Square. This article, therefore, is not intended to advocate or condemn the philosophy or actions of Akrom Yo'ldoshev or of any individual who participated in the events on May 13, 2005, in Andijon. The objective of this article is to examine the origins of the myth of Akromiya as a terrorist group in Uzbek state-sponsored propaganda and trace how it came to be propagated in reference books, encyclopedias, and media reports before being accepted as fact in certain policy and scholarly circles. With hundreds imprisoned or exiled for being affiliated with an organization that does not have a terrorist or extremist intent, the Akromiya myth is one that deserves to be questioned.

Part One: Akrom Yol'doshev's "Road to Faith"

History, in Karimov's Uzbekistan, is rewritten as it is made. Within hours of the Andijon uprising, the authorities sealed off the city and commanded citizens not to speak to investigators. At the same time, the government began propagating their own version of the tragedy through state-controlled media and public statements by key advisors. The exact chain of events in Andijon on May 13, 2005, therefore, remains difficult to ascertain even after numerous inquiries by international polities and investigative groups. The basic facts are thus: on the night of May 12, 2005, a group of armed men stormed a military garrison and prison and released roughly 1,000 prisoners. The prisoners included twenty-three young businessmen held on charges of religious extremism due to their allegiance in Akromiya, a group allegedly seeking the overthrow of the Uzbek government and the installation of an Islamic state. The arrest of these businessmen had, over the preceding weeks, led to public demonstrations, attended by thousands of citizens, in the Andijon city center.

Following the prison break, the attackers and freed prisoners joined the crowd on May 13 in Bobur Square in a massive public protest of the economic, social, and political conditions of the area. The next day the crowd swelled to over 10,000 people, some drawn by an expectation that Karimov would address the largest protest in Uzbekistan's history. Instead, military forces dispatched by the authorities greeted the demonstrators. According to the Uzbek government, the forces targeted only armed, hostage-taking insurgents, 187 of whom were killed. According to nearly all other accounts, the military fired indiscriminately into the crowd, murdering at least 800 people, including many children.

At the center of the confusion was Akromiya. "There is virtually no information available about Akromiya, the group [the businessmen] are alleged to belong to," reported the BBC on the morning of May 12, when the crowds calling for the businessmen's release had reached considerable mass.[7] This dearth of information stopped few, however, from writing about the group or its leader, Akrom Yo'ldoshev; and, in particular, a booklet titled *Iymonga yo'l* ("The Road to Faith") purported to outline the organization's philosophy, goals, and future plans. Yo'ldoshev wrote the booklet in 1992, when he was a twenty-nine-year-old mathematics teacher in Andijon. It was then circulated widely throughout the Ferghana Valley. In 1998, Yo'ldoshev was arrested for possession of drugs, which, according to some reports, were planted on him by Uzbek security forces,[8] and soon released. He was rearrested in 1999 when a series of bombings in Tashkent led to a renewed crackdown on independent Islam by the Karimov administration. During the trial, which resulted in a seventeen-year prison sentence, "The Road to Faith" was presented as a key piece of evidence proving Yo'ldoshev's aim of overthrowing the Uzbek government.[9]

What, exactly, does "The Road of Faith" say? Accounts vary widely. According to a United Press International article run by several American newspapers, the booklet "argues that Hizb-ut-Tahrir's non-violent tactics were devised for Arab states rather than Central Asia while arguing that Islamic governance should be established on a local rather than a national level."[10] Numerous commentators, ranging from the Arab news network Al-Jazeera[11] to political scientist Martha Brill Olcott,[12] assert similar claims that Akromiya is a fringe group of Hizb-ut Tahrir that adheres to an even more rigid, fundamentalist philosophy. Wikipedia, a popular online encyclopedia whose definitions are formed by a plurality of contributors, states that the tract "condones and encourages suicide bombers."[13] In complete contradiction to the aforementioned claims, several news outlets, including the BBC[14] and Agence France Presse,[15] maintain that the work is merely a philosophical analysis of Islam. Shirin Akiner, an academic who visited Uzbekistan a few weeks after the events, provides a lengthy description of Yo'ldoshev's philosophy in her article "Andijon: An Independent Assessment":

> Yo'ldashev's primary aim, as is evident from his work "Road to Faith," written in 1992, is to bring people back to Islam. He presents his ideas in a simple (some would say simplistic) manner. Uzbek scholars of Islam find fault with his teachings on three main points. Firstly, his lack of formal religious education results in misinterpretations of key texts. Secondly, he propagates heretical beliefs—for example, he is said to instruct his followers that because they/we are living in a time of *jahiliya* (pre-Islamic ignorance), they can drink alcohol and take narcotics; the only precept that they need to hold fast to is belief in the oneness of Allah and the uniqueness of Muhammad as His Messenger. Thirdly, it is claimed that he has drawn up a phased system of training for his followers to prepare them for their mission to establish an Islamic state (caliphate) in the Ferghana Valley. This is the view of the Akromiya that I heard widely expressed by madrassah students and teachers.[16]

The most revealing aspect of Akiner's argument is not her description of Yo'ldoshev's goals, but how she procured her knowledge of them. "He is said to," "it is claimed," "this is the view that I heard"—aggressive claims based on passive

knowledge. Akiner's embrace of secondhand sources is typical of the insufficient scholarship on Akromiya. This is research by *mish-mish*, in which dubious information is rephrased, reprinted, and repropagated, while the source material in question remains obscured. Akiner is not the only individual to subscribe to such a depiction of "The Road to Faith," and her description of the Akromiya doctrine, while inaccurate, is not without its supporters. Before examining the works of the aforementioned Uzbek scholars of Islam, which seem to have provided the impetus for Akiner's analysis, let us turn to a topic that is unexplored: the actual content of "The Road to Faith" itself.

"All people in the world are trying to improve their own lives. They try hard to overcome difficulties and eliminate flaws; from day to night they aspire to do good. For their own lives and for the lives of all mankind, the basic goal is improvement. However, there are various ways to achieve this objective."[17] So begins Akrom Yo'ldoshev's roughly 7,000-word philosophical opus, which is divided into twelve chapters on distinct but interrelated themes. This is not an introductory paragraph befitting a violent radical manifesto dedicated to the overthrow of the government, nor is it reminiscent of works by apostolic and anti-Western groups such as Hizb-ut Tahrir. Published in the Ferghana Valley at the dawn of the post-Soviet era, Yo'ldoshev's work bears a tone and content likely then unfamiliar to locals accustomed to anti-Islamic communist doctrine. Western readers, however, may find the general persuasion of the text somewhat familiar. Yo'ldoshev's work resembles less a terrorist manifesto than a Western-style self-help guide.

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"The Road to Faith" is a rambling, authoritative, optimistic but not particularly well-grounded work of philosophy. Yo'ldoshev's primary aim may be, as Akiner says, "to bring people back to Islam," but his manner of achieving this stresses practical considerations rather than theological orthodoxy. He is not bringing people back to Islam so much as affirming that Islam still exists as a viable force to be brought to—this was 1992, after all. Yo'ldoshev is sympathetic to the situation of his fellow countrymen living in a time of intense and rapid ideological transformation. While Karimov proclaimed in his 1992 inauguration speech that Uzbekistan had entered an era of "great hope and confidence,"[18] Yo'ldoshev recognized that there remained deep societal problems and proposed ways to fix them. He acknowledges early on that "for many people nowadays religion seems like a suspicious fairy-tale or legend."[19] He wants to ease that suspicion by making religion palatable. His tone is folksy, his language easy to understand. He is prone to homespun aphorisms such as "When there are four seasons, man cannot have only spring and summer.[20] At times he betrays a stultifying flair for the obvious.

The bulk of "The Road to Faith" is devoted to detailing man's material (*moddiy*), moral (*ma'naviy*), and spiritual (*ruhiy*) relationships (*munosabat*). As Yo'ldoshev explains, without proper consideration of the last, the first two will inevitably suffer, as the three are inextricably bound together. Yo'ldoshev gives examples of each type of relationship, the material consisting of "a house, clothing, and essential household items"; moral concerns such as "fatherhood, childhood, neighborliness, friendship"; the spiritual as "man's relationship with the divine."[21] By strengthening his relationship with the divine, man can transform not only the abstract condition of his soul, but practical events in everyday life.

In discussing how, exactly, man can strengthen his relationship with the divine, Yo'ldoshev veers from pop psychology to pop physiology. The most important tool in man's possession, he declares, is intelligence (*aql*). Without intelligence, man will blindly process information without any idea of what to do with it, and therefore remain in a spiritual slumber. He compares *aql* to a car. "If you have a car, and you don't know anything about it, you can't use it properly, because the car doesn't run on its own," he says.[22] Learn how to use the car, and you become the car's master. So it goes with matters of the spirit. Learn to use your intelligence, and you become keenly aware of Allah's presence in your life and in the world, bettering yourself in the process. As Akiner notes, this freewheeling approach could be offensive to Muslims who adhere to a strict interpretation of Islam. One imagines that Yo'ldoshev's appeals for self-reliance, self-respect, and independent exploration of Islam are even more threatening to a government accustomed to dictating ideological and spiritual norms to maintain power.

Having established the importance of intelligence, Yo'ldoshev goes on to detail a somewhat dubious account of how the brain interacts with the five senses in receiving and perceiving information. This pseudo-scientific jaunt, presented in a far more convoluted manner than the rest of the text, is notable for its discussion of an integral part of his philosophy, the idea of *fikrlashlik*. *Fikrlashlik* is a word made up by Yo'ldoshev to describe "the working process of intelligence" that one must perfect to bring about spiritual wisdom.[23] It is the noun form of the Uzbek verb *fikrlashmoq*, meaning "to think." *Fikrlashlik* corresponds roughly to "thinkingness" in English and sounds just as awkward in Uzbek. Yo'ldoshev's use of such terminology provides insight into both the man himself and the times in which he lived. This is not the term of a profound intellectual theorist, a radical revolutionary, or a pious scholar. *Fikrlashlik* is the invention of a writer who lived in an era in which old dreams were shattered as rapidly as new illusions were constructed, in which the Uzbek language underwent tremendous reform and philosophy became fluid. *Fikrlashlik*—why not? It was no more far-fetched than anything else that had transpired. In "The Road to Faith" Yo'ldoshev argued for and embodied a freedom of spiritual and intellectual exploration that proved short-lived in Karimov's Uzbekistan. In certain respects, the most controversial, attractive, and perhaps, to Karimov and his followers, menacing thing about "The Road to Faith" is not what it said, but that it dared to say something original.

Throughout "The Road to Faith," Yo'ldoshev inserts various verses from the Qur'an and occasionally passages from the *hadith* chosen to give credence to his

philosophical theories and validate his worth as a religious scholar. Juxtaposed with his prosaic parables, in which spiritual processes are compared to such experiences as driving a car, watching a movie, and eating at a restaurant, the excerpts seem not intimidatingly abstract, as they may well have been to a populace raised under decades of socialist atheism, but sensible, even accessible.

"The Road to Faith" is not so much a religious text as it is a text about religion. It is bereft of political content. There is nothing about the government or its overthrow; the word *Uzbekistan* does not even appear in the text. Recommendations and advice are relegated to the individual and how he can improve himself by adhering not only to Islamic principles, but to the mental processes Yo'ldoshev describes. In a parallel universe, one can imagine "The Road to Faith" supplanting Dianetics and Hollywood-style Kaballah guides among those seeking a fast and easy spiritual fix, so devoid is it of political, geographical, and, to some degree, philosophical affiliation. There is no mention of an organized Akromiya group in the pamphlet or of a desire to form one. This correlates to the bafflement expressed by many alleged Akromists when accused of taking part in the group's plans—not only did they deny affiliation with a terrorist Akromiya group, but they had no idea such a group existed and found the notion of a political organization built around Yo'ldoshev somewhat laughable.[24]

Part Two: The Appearance of Akromiya in Uzbek Propaganda

How, then, did Yo'ldoshev's philosophy become described by journalists, policy analysts, and academics such as Akiner and Starr as advocating violent Islamic revolution? The answer is in a 2000 book written by Zuhriddin Husniddinov titled *Islam: Directions, Factions, and Movements* (*Islom: Yo'lnalishlar, mazhablar, oqimlar*). Husniddinov is the rector of Tashkent Islamic University, and from 2001 until 2005 was a prominent advisor to Karimov on religious matters.[25] Prior to that, he served as an officer in the National Security Services.[26] Today he is at times referred to as "the leading expert on Islam in Uzbekistan."[27] His English-language publications and lectures discuss how Uzbekistan is taking steps to encourage religious freedom and quell terrorist activity in the region.[28] His publications have made him a favorite at leading Washington think tanks.[29] His Uzbek-language writings, however, tell a different story.

Islam: Directions, Factions, and Movements, published one year after the bombings in Tashkent spurred a harsh government crackdown on independent Islam, is a detailed guide to various Muslim sects and organizations in Central Asia. After an introduction on the danger of religious extremism to Uzbekistan, Husniddinov goes on to provide capsule histories of every religious group or movement that could conceivably pose a threat to the Uzbek government. Among the entries are Wahhabism, Hizb-ut Tahrir, Adolat,[30] and, meriting a two-page entry of its own, Akromiya. According to Husniddinov, Akromiya is a "religious-political movement" that "does not recognize the presently existing system, the state, laws, or even parents; submission to the movement is all that matters."[31] The inclusion of parents (*ota-onaga ham emas*) is notable; given the immense importance of family and heritage in Uzbek society, it is difficult to believe that

even the most vile of terrorists would shun *ota* and *ona*.[32] Karimov, throughout his presidency, has linked patriotism and Uzbek "Muslimness" with respect toward elders and family.[33] Husniddinov's description, therefore, seems to indicate an attempt by government officials to link Yo'ldoshev's alleged rejection of the Uzbek state with a rejection of the Uzbek people and their cultural norms.

Husniddinov goes on to describe the content of "The Road to Faith" itself: "In this booklet, the movement's end goal is stated as the establishment of an Islamic state. The movement's chosen candidates will carry out their plan in the obligatory five stages described in the program."[34]

Each step of the plan is then described in detail. In the first stage, called "secret" (*sirli*) or "undercover" (*maxfiy*), "susceptible" individuals "inclined to religious fanaticism" are analyzed by Akromiya recruits to see whether they truly have what it takes to be a terrorist. If they pass muster, they are initiated into the group and the second stage, "material" (*moddiy*) begins. Here the new recruits are placed in jobs providing them "high material benefits," one-fifth of which is contributed toward a group treasury (*baytul mol*). This step, it seems, could provide an impetus for the Uzbek government to crack down on financially successful local businessmen—such as the twenty-three businessmen on trial in Andijon. The third stage is the moral (*ma'naviy*) stage, in which the recruits are "re-educated in ideological-political issues" and provided with literature "in the spirit of extremism and terrorism." The fourth stage, "networking" (*uyviy maydon*—literally, "organic territory"), involves the co-option and takeover of local businesses and social organizations by Akromists—again, motivation for Karimov's regime seeking to paint all independent economic entities as linked to terrorism and antigovernment motives. In the fifth and final stage, "overturning" (*to'ntarish*), the Akromists carry out their ultimate aim: the "overthrow of the existing constitutional system." Husniddinov then states that there is a set timeline to this plan, and that the influence of Akromiya is particularly strong in Andijon and in Kokand.[35]

None of this information is actually in "The Road to Faith," nor is any of the content of Husniddinov's concluding paragraph, which paints Yo'ldoshev and his alleged followers as antigovernment terrorists and disobedient Muslims. "The movement's representatives believe that Muslims do not have to perform their obligatory Muslim duty to pray, fast, tithe or perform the hajj because we are living in a blasphemous state," Husniddinov claims. With the basic tenets of Islam stricken off the schedule, what does an aspiring Akromist do instead? Drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, and indulge in temporary marriages, according to Husniddinov.[36] He adds that the *ulama* has condemned Akromiya for endorsing such activities. Husniddinov's depiction of Akromiya as amoral, ambitious lawbreakers not only places the group in opposition to state law, it presents the group as subscribing to a corrupt value system alien to both pious Muslims and patriotic Uzbeks.

Husniddinov is also the editor of the 2004 *Encyclopedia of Islam* (*Islom Entsiklopediya*), issued by the publishers of the Uzbek national encyclopedia.[37] Contributors to the *Encyclopedia of Islam* include leading Uzbek scholars of Islam and experts on the religion—the kind of experts, it would seem, from whom

both Akiner and much of the Uzbek population receive their information on Uzbekistan's religious movements.[38] The encyclopedia contains hundreds of entries on Islamic history, doctrine, Qur'anic verses, and Islamic art and architecture. It corresponds in format and often, quite notably, in content, to reference books on atheism issued during the Soviet era. The goal of the encyclopedia, writes Husniddinov in the introduction, is to "illuminate" the religion of Islam, which, as the obligatory introductory quote from Karimov affirms, "cannot be separated from our nation's culture and morality."[39] Yet, it is not the Muslim culture that the encyclopedia evokes so much as it is the Soviet practice of state propaganda disguised as scholarship on religion.

Many of Husniddinov's entries from *Islam: Directions, Factions, and Movements* are printed verbatim or near verbatim in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*. The majority of modern religious-political (*diniy-siyosiy*) groups that Husniddinov profiled are omitted, with the exception of Wahhabism, Tablig',[40] Hizb-ut Tahrir, and Akromiya. The exclusion of the other groups, however, did not keep the content of their entries from making it into the encyclopedia. In several cases, they appear to have been absorbed into a description of an entirely different extremist outfit. For example, Husniddinov's description of the Adolat group in *Islam: Directions, Factions, and Movements* includes a guide for identifying potential members: "The main signs of them are: unattractive long beards, legs spread apart during prayer [*namoz*], crossing their arms over their chests, saying 'Amen' in a loud voice, and not reading the *sunnat* prayer in a mosque out in the open."[41]

He describes Wahhabis in the *Encyclopedia of Islam* as: "Uzbekistan's Wahhabis grow long beards, spread their legs far apart during the climax of prayer, cross their arms over their chests, say 'Amen' in a loud voice and separate themselves from the Hanafi sect."[42]

Aside from mentioning the Hanafi sect and the *sunnat* prayer, there is no difference between the two groups—they are religious extremists/terrorists—and therefore interchangeable. Husniddinov has created a terrorist profile and provided the means for any ordinary Uzbek to target an ostensible culprit. A terrorist is an Adolat member or Wahhabi, an Adolat member or Wahhabi is a man with a long beard who prays in a certain manner; thus a bearded man who prays in this manner is a terrorist. Unfortunately, Husniddinov's description could fit many devout male Muslims irrespective of factional affiliation or political motivation. The practice of labeling any openly pious Muslim as a Wahhabi dates back to the late 1980s.[43] In the Karimov era, a Wahhabi became a terrorist, codified as such not only in government speeches, but also in reference books written by an allegedly objective cadre of scholars.

Husniddinov's encyclopedia entry on Akromiya is an abridged version of his depiction of the group in *Islam: Directions, Factions, and Movements*.[44] Each of the five stages of Yo'ldoshev's purported plan are merely named and not described, which, in certain ways, is more effective in terms of propaganda as it lends the group a threatening air of mystery. Nothing said in the encyclopedia to be in "The Road to Faith" actually exists in the text itself. While Husniddinov appears largely responsible for this portrayal of Yo'ldoshev and his writing being

accepted in Uzbek-speaking circles, it is a different written work that introduced such claims to the Western world, where certain academics and international journalists embraced them. It is here that we must turn to an influential article written by Uzbek professor Bakhtiyar Babajanov titled "The Fergana Valley: Source or Victim of Islamic Fundamentalism?"[45]

Part Three: Bakhtiyar Babajanov and the Case Against Yo'ldoshev

Bakhtiyar Babajanov is a well-regarded scholar in both Western and Uzbek academic circles. He is currently the head of the Department of Islamic Studies at the Institute of Oriental Studies in Tashkent.[46] Babajanov's articles are often cited in scholarly journals and included on syllabi for college courses on Central Asia. The "Fergana Valley" article is among the most well-known and widely read of his works.

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In this article, which appeared shortly after Yo'ldoshev was convicted of terrorism in 1999, Babajanov describes Akromiya as a Hizb-ut Tahrir offshoot that also exists under the name *Iymonchilar* (believers) or *Khalifatchilar* (those who seek a caliphate). He claims that Akromiya split from Hizb-ut Tahrir after finding their methodology too tame, a position echoed in a 2003 Eurasianet.org article by an Uzbek Tufts University graduate student named Alisher Hamidov,[47] which was itself paraphrased in several American newspaper articles about Andijon. Babajanov's piece seems to have influenced several of Akiner's questionable claims, particularly her references to Yo'ldoshev's condemnation of Uzbekistan's state of *jahiliyyah*, his desire to replace the existing Uzbek government with a caliphate, and his multiphased system of takeover, none of which are mentioned in *Iymonga yo'l*. Babajanov discusses Akromiya's five-part plan for overthrowing the government in language almost identical to that of Husniddinov. Only the final stage differs greatly: what is referred to by Husniddinov as *to'ntarish* (overthrow) is called *akhirat* or final by Babajanov. It calls not for the overthrow of the government, but for the "genuine Islamization of society" and the "natural transition" of power to leaders of the Akromiya group.[48]

Babajanov goes on to detail the way in which Akromiya has inserted itself into a position of power in the Fergana Valley by means of a special production-and-distribution community (*jama'ah*).[49] The *jama'ah* is divided into numerous *halqa*, a cell representing a different professional trade. According to Babajanov, Akromiya members are taking advantage of poor economic conditions in the Fergana Valley to win adherents. This all would sound plausible, and is certainly reminiscent of methods used by other religious-political groups to gain recruits,[50] were it not for four factors: (1) the inaccuracy of Babajanov's portrayal of the content

of *Iymonga yo'l*; (2) the predilection of the Karimov regime to crack down on both independent Islam and, more notably, in the case of Akromiya, successful independent businessmen in the Fergana Valley, (3) the particularly heated and paranoid environment in which Babajanov wrote the article in 1999, shortly after Yo'ldoshev's conviction over the February attacks in Tashkent, and (4) Babajanov admitted in 2005 that he based his article on a lie.

Following the February 2005 arrest of the twenty-three businessmen, which ultimately sparked the May 13 events in Andijon, two writers—one Uzbek, one Russian—began investigating the Akromiya group and publishing their findings on the Internet. Both writers were eventually put in jail by the government for posting their findings. In fact, every person in Uzbekistan who writes an article revealing the true contents of *Iymonga yo'l* is faced with incarceration, deportation, or exile.

Saidjahon Zainabitdinov is an Uzbek journalist and political activist from Andijon. He was the leader of the human rights group Appeliatisa (Appeal)[51] and a nonlawyer public defender for one of the twenty-three businessmen.[52] He ultimately refused to participate in the trial proceedings, claiming they were a sham and that the judge did not allow him to carry out a defense of his client.[53] On May 21, Zainabitdinov was arrested for "giving false statements to journalists,"[54] "distribution of materials that threaten public order"[55] and for "inciting the May 13 demonstration through an article he published on the Internet."[56] The article he published was a Russian-language translation of *Iymonga yo'l*.[57]

Zainabitdinov's translation, posted on the Web site Centrasia.ru[58] on August 25, 2004, was the first published translation of the text. The Uzbek language original, on which I based my own translation,[59] was published by the Web site of the Uzbek activist group Ozod Ovoz ("Free Voice") but has since been removed, like much of the site's content, by government censors. Ozod Ovoz's founder is Yusuf Jumaev, an outspoken poet, Birlik member, and activist who claims to come from "the biggest prison in the world, Uzbekistan."[60] Jumaev is an associate of Muhammed Salih and a long-time critic of Karimov. He has been arrested for inciting terrorism, most notably for a poem he wrote titled "Jihad."[61] The organization's Web site is loathed by the government and Webmasters in Uzbekisan must provide six different anonymous proxy servers for users to access its content.[62] Zainabitdinov's translation is quite significant, as it allows "The Road to Faith" to be read not only by Russians and Russian-speaking Westerners, but by Russian-speaking Uzbeks with Internet access who could no longer procure the document in their own country or language.

Following the events in Andijon, Zainabitdinov's translation caught the attention of a Russian journalist, Igor Rotar, a long-time Central Asia correspondent currently working for Forum 18, a news service that focuses on the struggle for religious freedom around the world.[63] Rotar knew Babajanov and had voiced arguments against the veracity of his research in the past, accusing him at a 2002 conference on Islam and National Security held in Almaty, Kazakhstan, of basing his work on falsified government documents about Islamic terrorism.[64] After reading the newly translated *Iymonga Yo'l*, Rotar was skeptical of Babajanov's

"Fergana Valley" journal piece, noting in a June 16, 2005, article for Forum 18 that "the only indirect evidence that members of Akromiya were pressing for armed conflict prior to the Andijan uprising is the so-called supplement to the *Iymonga Yo'l* pamphlet cited in 1999 by the Uzbek orientalist, Professor Bakhtior Babajanov."[65] Actually, Babajanov never referred to any such supplement in his article, but said the ideas were expressed in "The Road to Faith" itself. When Rotar asked Babajanov about the discrepancy, Babajanov replied that:

> The prosecutor's office referred this supplement to our Institute of Oriental Studies for expert analysis in 1999, just before the second court case against Akram Yuldashev, Professor Babajanov told Forum 18 on 13 June from Tashkent. As was demonstrated in this paper, they provided an outline of Yuldashev's teachings to his pupils. It is simply impossible to establish whether this outline accurately reflected Yuldashev's views. The Yimonga Yul pamphlet is a purely theological, if not very academic, tract. It is true that it contains nothing about politics and or a call for the forcible overthrow of authority.[66]

This is the clearest evidence yet that the popularly accepted description of Akromiya and *Iymonga Yo'l*, repeated and recirculated by academics, journalists, and politicians; possibly used as pretext to arrest and indict and shoot Uzbek citizens, may well have been an invention of the Uzbek prosecution itself. Following the publication of his article, Rotar was arrested on August 11, 2005, for political reasons at the highest level. According to Forum 18, Rotar's arrest was carried out on the instruction of the Uzbek secret police.[67] Rotar, a Russian citizen, was eventually released. Zainabitdinov, an Uzbek, is currently serving a seven-year prison term after being convicted on January 12, 2006, following a closed trial criticized by human rights activists.[68] In a move that highlights the ironies of the Uzbek judicial system, the same prosecutors who prosecuted Yo'ldoshev sentenced Zainabitdinov. As if refusing to buy into a myth, Zainabitdinov became part of the mythology.

According to Zainabitdinov, "The Road to Faith" was the main piece of material evidence presented in the 1999 sentencing of Yo'ldoshev, in which the alleged Akromiya founder was accused of upsetting the "social and political work" of Uzbekistan and violating the 1948 UN agreement on human rights. At that trial, someone supplied the "supplement" allegedly based on Yo'ldoshev's teachings for the prosecution. The validation of the supplement by an academic such as Babajanov lent credence to the depiction of Akromiya as a terrorist group. Similarly, the repeated citation of Babajonov's "Fergana" piece, in which he neglects to mention that this additional "outline of Yo'ldoshev's teachings to his pupils" was not part of the primary text and indeed quite contrary to the ideas expressed within it, led to this portrayal becoming accepted in international academic and policy circles.

The writer of this supplement is unknown. Uzbek prosecutors deny that a government official created the supplement. They claim there is an international media conspiracy to paint Akromiya as an "invention of law enforcement bodies."[69] Among the conspirators, according to Prosecutor-General Anvar Nabiev, were the news services BBC and Ferghana.ru,[70] both since banned from the country, and Zainabitdinov. While it is impossible to verify the identity of the author

of the supplement, his source of inspiration should be apparent to anyone who has visited Hizb-ut Tahrir's official Web site. In a booklet titled "The Method of Hizb ut-Tahrir," the organization lays out its goals and ambitions. After discussing the travesty of Muslims living in an infidel state in a matter quite similar to the description of the Akromiya tract given by Akiner, Babajanov, and Husniddinov, the booklet goes on to detail a multistage plan for the takeover of the government and the installation of the caliphate.

> The party divided its method of work into three stages:
>
> The First Stage: the stage of culturing to produce people who believe in the idea and the method of the Party, so that they form the Party group;
>
> The Second Stage: the stage of interaction with the Ummah, to let the Ummah embrace and carry Islam, so that the Ummah takes it up as its issue, and thus works to establish it in the affairs of life; and
>
> The Third Stage: the stage of establishing government, implementing Islam generally and comprehensively, and carrying it as a message to the world.[71]

These stages correlate roughly with the *sirli* (secret), *uyviy maydon* (networking), and *to'ntarish* (overthrow) stages described as existing in *Iymonga yo'l* (or the supplement). "Method of Hizb ut-Tahrir" elaborates on several of these steps, particularly the recruitment of future members, in language extremely similar to that of the alleged content of *Iymonga yo'l*.[72] The similarity of Hizb-ut Tahrir and questionable Akromiya documents and depictions of writings likely led many to believe Karimov's widely echoed pronouncement[73] that the latter is a more violent version of the former.[74] Given that the basis of information about Akromiya is in great doubt, it seems more likely that Hizb-ut Tahrir's writings proved inspirational for a creator of fictitious terrorist doctrine. Correspondingly, the association of Hizb-ut Tahrir with Akromiya was strengthened, placing the nonexistent group on equal footing with one of the greatest perceived threats to Central Asian security.

The primary force behind the invention of Akromiya was Husniddinov, in collaboration with other government officials. He is the leading propagator of the false description of "The Road to Faith." He is also the primary advisor on religious matters, the head of the main Islamic university in the country, and the chair of a commission dedicated to reforming the prison system (which, judging by the thousands of Uzbeks tortured while in custody, does not seem to be yielding laudable results). The commission emphasizes discussing the true principles of Islam with imprisoned alleged Hizb-ut Tahrir members and forcing them to accept the commission's theological work.[75] Husniddinov has a track record of not only defining Islam in official, state-sanctioned terms, but forcing those on the wrong religious path[76] to adopt a new belief system. In his own works, he describes various religious groups (such as Adolat and Wahhabism) almost interchangeably, in a manner that befits the similarity found between official Hizb-ut Tahrir writings and fabricated Akromiya doctrine. Many accused Akromists and defenders of accused Akromists have claimed the group to be "an invention of the security services";[77] Husniddinov himself was a member of these security services at the time Yo'ldoshev was on trial and the supplement was written.

Conclusion

When Abdulboiz Ibrahimov, one of the twenty-three businessmen put on trial in Andijon, was accused of being an Akromiya member, he was startled. "Surely it's clear," he protested, "that Akromiya is just a myth."[78] In Uzbekistan, however, myths can be as meaningful as any reality. The issue of who specifically authored the false Akromiya documents becomes almost irrelevant when placed in the greater context of Uzbekistan's long history of religious and antireligious propaganda. Tactics used by the government to maintain control over Islam differ little from methods used during Soviet times to enforce atheism and quell both religious and political dissent. As was true in the Soviet era, Uzbekistan's campaign against independent Muslims is codified in law, propagated through speeches, and validated by scholars, political scientists, and appointed government "experts" on Islam. It is a campaign rooted not in religion but in definition; not in theology but in the framework in which theological and political designations—*terrorchi*, *Vahhobiy*, *ekstremist*, *Akromiy*—are constructed.

According to a survey conducted by Tashkent Islamic University in 2004, the majority of Uzbek youth view the "most trustworthy source of information about religion" as religious books (*diniy kitoblar*) followed closely by "the written works of expert scholars on religion" (*dinshunos olimlarining asarlari*).[79] This is a natural response for young Uzbeks, who generally define themselves as secular and poorly informed on Islam.[80] It is therefore important to recognize that the content of many of these books, particularly those written by experts on religion, not only reflects past government initiatives, but also sets the groundwork for legally persecuting religion in the future.

Religious policy in Uzbekistan is defined by the narrowing of choice. State propagandists—in many cases, respected Uzbek scholars of Islam—are key to this initiative. They codify acceptable beliefs in scholarly volumes, the veracity of which goes unquestioned. It can be argued that Akrom Yo'ldoshev and his readership challenged this mindset; that they sought, in a nation where ideologies and values changed overnight, to form their own understanding of Islam. What they found instead is a bureaucratic boundary that a believer cannot cross, a delineation of spirituality into acceptable and unacceptable categories echoed in both domestic and international interpretations of Central Asian Islam. In the arena of state-sanctioned Islam, censorship masquerades as scholarship. There is only one road to faith in Uzbekistan, and it terminates in Tashkent.

NOTES

1. Zeyno Baran and S. Frederick Starr, Invitation to Hudson Institute screening (sent by e-mail on May 15, 2006).

2. Ibid.

3. For a copy of the video, see "Andijon a Year Later," Registan.net, May 13, 2006, http://www.registan.net/?p=6418#more-6418. For the transcripts, see Justin Burke, Eurasianet.org, August 18, 2005, http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/uzbekistan/hypermail/200508/0030.shtml.

4. Human Rights Watch, "Bullets Were Falling Like Rain": The Andijan Massacre, May 13, 2005 (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2005), 2.

5. Abdumannob Polat and Nickolai Butkevich. "Unraveling the Mystery of the Tashkent Bombings: Theories and Implications," *Demokratizatsiya* 8, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 541–53.

6. Daniil Kislov and Alexei Volosevich, "The True Confession of Islam Karimov," New Times, January 2006, http://www.newtimes.ru/eng/detail.asp?art_id=1504. See also, Human Rights Watch, "Witness in Andijan Trial Describes Soldiers Shooting Civilians," November 1, 2005.

7. Jenny Norton, "Uzbekistan's Most Orderly Protest," BBC, May 12, 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4540041.stm (accessed January 16, 2006).

8. Igor Rotar, Forum 18, "Islamic Charitable Work 'Criminal' and 'Extremist'?" http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=508 (accessed January 28, 2006).

9. Human Rights Watch, "Bullets Falling," 55–56.

10. "UPI hears . . ." Insider notes from UPI Press International, May 13, 2005, http://www.washtimes.com/upi-breaking/20050513-123200-1744r.htm.

11. Al Jazeera, "Uzbek Troops Fire on Protesters," May 13, 2005, http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/2F5CAD11-3F34-4989-AD5C-468AD25FBF0A.htm (accessed January 28, 2006).

12. Martha Brill Olcott, "The Impact of Current Events in Uzbekistan," speech delivered at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace discussion on "The Impact of Current Events in Uzbekistan," Washington, DC, May 17, 2005.

13. "Akramiya," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akramiya.

14. Paul Tumelty, "Analysis: Uzbekistan's 'Islamists,'" BBC, May 15, 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4548371.stm (accessed January 16, 2006).

15. Agence France Presse, "Akromiya: A Shadowy Group Comes Under Spotlight after Crackdown," May 17, 2005, http://www.newagebd.com/2005/may/17/inat.html (accessed January 28, 2006).

16. Shirin Akiner, "Violence in Andijon, 13 May 2005: An Independent Assessment," Silk Road Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, and Silk Road Studies Program, July 2005, 29.

17. Akrom Yo'ldoshev, *Iymonga yo'l*, chapter 1, 1992. Translated from Uzbek. Originally downloaded from http://www.ozodovoz.org/ru/contents.php?cid=75; content no longer available online.

18. Islom Karimov, *Istiqlol va Ma'naviyat*, "O'zligimizni Anglash Yo'li" (Tashkent: O'zbekiston 1994), 115.

19. Yo'ldoshev, *Iymonga yo'l*, chapter 2.

20. Ibid.

21. Yo'ldoshev, chapter 1.

22. Yo'ldoshev, *Iymonga yo'l*, chapter 4.

23. Yo'ldoshev, *Iymonga yo'l*, chapter 5. See also chapter 12 for a summary of the *fikrlashlik* process.

24. International Crisis Group, "Uzbekistan: The Andijon Uprising," 4–5.

25. According to the International Crisis Group report "Central Asia: Islam and the State," his official position is State Adviser on Interethnic Relations and Religious Affairs. See also Radio Tashkent International, "Relations of State and Religion Discussed" http://ino.uzpak.uz/eng/report_eng/report_eng_0302.html (accessed February 14, 2006).

26. International Crisis Group, "Radical Islam in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb-ut Tahrir," Report No. 58, June 2003, 23.

27. The International Institute for Strategic Studies, "Eurasia Strategy Seminar—Professor Zukhridin Khusnidinov and Zafar Abdullaev," July 14, 2004, http://www.iiss.org/events-more.php?eventID=205 (February 14, 2006).

28. Zukhriddin Husniddinov, "Religious Extremism—Danger to the Security of Society," The Muslim World, March/April 2003. See also his lecture "State and Religion in Uzbekistan" delivered at a Nixon Center conference titled, "Religion and Uzbekistan: State, Religion, and Interfaith Acceptance," October 6, 2004.

29. Zeyno Baran, opening remarks at a leading Washington think tank conference on "Religion and Uzbekistan: State, Religion and Inter-Faith Acceptance" at the the St. Regis Hotel, Washington, DC, October 26, 2004. http://www.nixoncenter.org/index.cfm?action=showpage&page=barantrans (accessed February 18, 2006). See also the opening remarks by Chris Seiple, in which he describes Uzbekistan as "lucky" to have a minister such as Hudniddinov.

30. Literally, "Justice." The name of an Islamic party begun by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan head Tohir Yo'ldoshev (no relation to Akrom) in the early 1990s advocating the creation of an Islamic state in Uzbekistan.

31. Zuhriddin Husniddinov, *Islom: Yo'nalishlar, Mazhablar, Oqimlar* (Tashkent: O'zbekiston Milliy Entsiklopediyasi Davlat Ilmiy Nashriyoti, 2000), 107.

32. This is also contradictory to the government's policy of accusing family members of alleged Akromists and Wahhabists of aiding and abetting the accused and implying that it is not mere individuals but entire families that prove prone to antigovernmental activities.

33. For some examples, see Karimov's collection of speeches in *Istiqlol va Ma'naviyat* (Independence and Morality), particularly the entries "Respect the Faith of Our Ancestors," "We Depend on the Purity of the Souls of Our Ancestors," and "The Road to Identity."

34. Husniddinov, *Islom: Yo'nalishlar, Mazhablar, Oqimlar*, 107–8.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. Both encylcopedias are published by Davlat Ilmiy Nashriyot (State Scientific Press).

38. Akiner says in her article of the experts in question: "Supporters of the Akromiya often dismiss the opinion of such scholars as though they were ignoramuses; in fact, as foreign Muslims will testify, they have a thorough grounding in Islamic studies and in classical Arabic. Thus, from this stand point, they are certainly competent to comment on the nature of the Akromiya's teachings." Their other qualifications—as close advisors to Islam Karimov and fervent supporters of his policies—may make them far more "competent to comment" in the propagandistic world of Uzbek scholarship.

39. Zuhriddin Husniddinov, *Islom Entsiklopediya* (Tashkent: O'zbekiston Milliy Entsiklopediyasi Davlat Ilmiy Nashriyoti, 2004), 3–4.

40. A conservative Muslim missionary group formed in rural India.

41. Husniddinov, *Islom: Yo'nalishlar, Mazhablar, Oqimlar*, 118–99.

42. Husniddinov, *Islom Entsiklopediya*, 62–63.

43. Haghayeghi, *Mehrdad. Islam and Politics in Central Asia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 227.

44. Husniddinov, *Islom Entsiklopediya*, 22–23.

45. Bakhtiyar Babadzhanov, "The Fergana Valley: Source or Victim of Islamic Fundamentalism?" *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 5, no. 4 (1999).

46. Ibid., 7.

47. Alisher Hamidov, "Hizb-ut Tahrir Faces Internal Split in Central Asia," Eurasianet.org, October 21, 2003.

48. Babajanov, "Fergana Valley," 8.

49. Ibid.

50. For example, Hamas.

51. Human Rights Watch, "Uzbekistan: Reveal Fate of Jailed Activist," January 20, 2006, http://www.hrw.org/english/docs/2006/01/20/uzbeki12481.htm (accessed February 2, 2006).

52. Human Rights Watch, "Bullets Falling," 7.

53. Ibid.

54. IRINnews.org, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Uzbekistan: Rights Groups Condemn Closed Trial of Andijan activist," January 23, 2006, http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=51275&SelectRegion=Asia.

55. Human Rights Watch, "Uzbek Rights Defender Saidjahon Zainabitdinov in

Andijan, Uzbekistan," February 8, 2006, http://hrw.org/campaigns/uzbekistan/andijan/hrdefenders.htm (accessed February 9, 2006).

56. Human Rights Watch, "Bullets Falling," 52.

57. Ibid.

58. Saidjahon Zainabitdinov, "Akramiya: Za Shto Boretsya Religioznaya Organizatsiya v Ferganskoy Doline," Centrasia.org, http://centrasia.org/newsA.php4?st=1093410660 (accessed March 2, 2006).

59. I printed out the original Uzbek version in September 2005, before it was removed.

60. Muslim Uzbekistan, "Yusuf Jumaev: Welcome to the Biggest Prison in the World, Mister Lemierre!" Ozod Ovoz, July 17, 2005. http://www.muslimuzbekistan.com/eng/ennews/2003/05/ennews05052003_3.html (accessed February 2, 2006).

61. Vladimir Socor, "Uzbekistan Criticized over Treatment of Political Oppositionists," *Monitor—A Daily Briefing on the Former Soviet States*," June 12, 2001. Reprinted on http://muhammadsalih.info/englishms/stobras/analitika.htm (accessed February 28, 2006).

62. Ozodovoz.org homepage, (accessed February 18, 2006).

63. Forum18.org, "Aim: Forum 18 is an instrument for promoting the implementation of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and concentrates on serious and obvious breaches of religious freedom, and particularly on situations where the lives and welfare of individual people or groups are being threatened and where the right to gather around one's faith is being hindered." http://www.forum18.org/Forum18.php (accessed January 28, 2006).

64. Edward Schatz, "Framing Islam: The Role of Anti-Americanism in Central Asia," (paper presented at the American Political Science Association, Boston, August 2002), 13, footnote 29.

65. Igor Rotar, "What Is Known about Akramia and the Uprising?" *Forum 18*, June 16, 2005. http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586 (accessed January 28, 2006).

66. Ibid.

67. Cassandra Uretz, "Russian Journalist Held Incommunicado by Uzbek Authorities," Eurasianet.org, August 11, 2005.

68. Amerika ovozi, "Saidjahon Zaynobitdinov 7 Yillik Qamoq Jazosiga Mahkum Etildi," January 13, 2006.

69. September 15, 2005, statement of First Deputy Prosecutor-General of the Republic of Uzbekistan Anvar Nabiev to local and foreign journalists on the results of investigation of the events in the town of Andijan.

70. The Ferghana.ru reporter, A.Volosevich, was held in particularly low regard by the prosecutor-general, who claimed he "splashed out the libels with inveterate enthusiasm on the Internet." The impetus for this accusation is likely Volosevich's article "The True Confessions of Islam Karimov."

71. Hizb-ut Tahrir, "The Method of Hizb ut-Tahrir," http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/english/books/hizb-ut-tahrir/chapter_08.html (accessed February 27, 2006).

72. Ibid. See section on "The Third Stage," which is divided into five separate steps of its own.

73. BBC News, "Key excerpts: Karimov address" May 15, 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4547459.stm (accessed January 16, 2006).

74. Alisher Hamidov's much quoted Eurasia.net article "Hizb-ut Tahrir Faces Internal Split in Central Asia" is the most notable proponent of this theory.

75. Zeyno Baran, "Hizb-ut Tahrir: Islam's Political Insurgency," the Nixon Center, December 2004. It should be noted that Baran believes this is a positive development.

76. Ibid.

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