

Countering The Ideological Support For HT And The IMU: The Case Of The Ferghana Valley

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Executive Summary

The Ferghana Valley consists of portions of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The chief problems of that Valley include the absence of democracy, the presence of acute economic underdevelopment, and a high degree of repression. These conditions are generally considered to be contributing to the popularity of extremist movements. Two such organizations are the focus of this study: *Hizb ut-Tahrir-e-Islami* or *Hizb Tahrir* (the Islamic Liberation Movement or HT), and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). HT is a radical Islamist party, but it is not Jihadist in orientation. Its purpose is to establish the Caliphate (*Khilafah*) in Central Asia and elsewhere in the world of Islam. The proposition of creating a Caliphate is a radical one; however, HT insists that it intends to achieve its purpose through peaceful means only. The IMU is a pan-Islamist and Jihadist party. As such, it intends to overthrow the governments of the Ferghana Valley through violent means (i.e., through the use of militant Jihad). Indeed, it has exploited the repressive governing style of the governments and the acute economic underdevelopment of the area to launch a number of armed attacks in those countries in the late 1990s and 2000.

The US involvement in Central Asia in the 1990s has been sporadic, and has not been guided by a coherent strategy. It was only after the terrorist attacks on its homeland on September 11, 2001, that the United States decided to seek the establishment of military bases in the region. Even then, the administration of President George W Bush was not focused on developing a coherent counterterrorism strategy that encompassed Central Asia and Afghanistan.

This study sketches out a counterterrorism strategy for the United States in the Ferghana Valley. In essence, such a strategy should be called an anti-terrorism strategy, because it is much more comprehensive than America's present counterterrorism emphasis that drives its global war on terrorism.

Considering the fact that the United States is resolute about advocating democratic reforms in the Muslim Middle East, it is perceptibly easy to develop the metrics of similar reform for the Muslim Ferghana Valley

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(indeed, for Central Asia as a whole). America's anti-terrorism strategy in the countries of that region ought to be focused on the promotion of political pluralism (i.e., gradual liberalization), advocacy for the evolution of moderate and traditional Islam, allowance for the unimpeded functioning of conventional opposition parties (including moderate Islamic parties) and, equally important, the introduction of economic reforms and implementation of massive multilateral economic assistance programmes in Central Asia in general.

In the absence of such policies, challenges to the continued stability and, indeed, to the very survival of the regimes of the Ferghana Valley promise only to escalate in the coming months and years. Toward the end of March 2005, the rule of President Askar Akaev of Kyrgyzstan was suddenly ended as a result of a strong political protest. Then in May 2005, there was a political demonstration in the Andijan region of Uzbekistan. Even though the government of President Islam Karimov put down that demonstration, the future of his government looks uncertain, due to the resultant major loss of life (unofficial sources reported the number of deaths to be between 700-1,000, including women and children).

The growing economic pluralism in the People's Republic of China is putting inexorable pressure on political pluralism. China, though still a communist state, is slowly opening up its political system. The countries of the Ferghana Valley may be able to pursue a similar path if the United States continues its steady pressure on them to introduce measures aimed at promoting economic and political pluralism. That might be the best defense against terrorism that remains a major source of turbulence and instability in the Ferghana Valley.

Section I: The Study

What is the Problem?

The Ferghana Valley is where the battle of Talas was fought between the Arab warriors of Abbasid Caliphate and those of the Tang Dynasty of China. This battle marked the victory of Islam. During Soviet days, it was purposely divided in such a way "that Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Kyrgyz were found on all sides". This policy also enabled the Soviet authorities to be continuously "called upon by the people in the region to help them manage conflicts that were bound to emerge as a result of these artificial divisions".¹ Since the implosion of the Soviet Union into five independent states in Central Asia, this valley straddles three countries, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Today, the Ferghana Valley comprises seven administration provinces: three Uzbek (Andijan, Ferghana and Namangan), three Kyrgyz (Batkan, Osh, and Jalalabad), and one Tajik (Sugh, which was formerly known as Leningrad). The best way to profile the Ferghana Valley is by outlining a cumulative picture of three countries that formulate it.²

Uzbekistan is the world's second largest exporter of cotton, and a large producer of oil and gold. Since its independence in December 1991, the inequality of income in that country has sharply increased. Its economy still follows the Soviet pattern of command economy, with subsidies and tight control over production and prices. The government of Uzbekistan

has shown a marked and sustained reluctance to remove export and currency controls within its already closed economy. The unemployment rate is listed as six percent. "While this figure appears relatively low by international standards," according to one source, "the significant informal sector (estimated at between a third and a half of the economy) engaged in less productive activities suggests that there are bottlenecks in labor absorption, including impediments to private sector development." It goes on to add, "Employment growth during 2004 remained stagnant."³

Tajikistan has the dubious distinction of having one of the lowest per capita gross domestic products among the 15 former Soviet republics. Sixty per cent of its population is reported to live in abject poverty. Cotton is also the most important crop. The civil war (1992-1997) has seriously damaged an already weak industrial infrastructure, which led to a marked decline in industrial and agricultural production. Tajikistan has reported a sustained economic growth since 1997, its economy is still quite fragile, with high rates of unemployment estimated at 40 per cent in 2004,⁴ weak governance and uneven implementation of structural reforms.

Kyrgyzstan is also a poor country with a predominantly agricultural economy. Its government has been quite receptive to carrying out market reforms and land reform. It also reported a high estimated unemployment rate of 18 per cent for 2004.⁵ However, this country's economic reforms has been interrupted as a result of a political coup in March 2005.

The Ferghana Valley remains one of the potential hotspots of Central Asia. What happens there "for better or worse has widespread ramifications for the region as a whole". Because of its "ethnic diversity, the highly concentrated and growing population including a high percentage of youth, high rates of unemployment and widespread economic stress, complex borders in a region occupied by parts of three newly sovereign states, and its recent history of tensions," this region remains a potential source of regional instability.⁶

The Ferghana Valley has the largest population in Central Asia (up to 250 inhabitants per square kilometre, as compared to an average of 14 inhabitants per sq km in Central Asia.⁷ The political consciousness of the general population toward Islam is on the rise. It is also a region where there have been several outbreaks of conflict involving different ethnic groups and the IMU, which was labelled as a "terrorist" organization by the US government in 2000. Regarding the Ferghana Valley a Central Asian specialist wrote, it "exhibits the most vivid example of the Islamic evolution taking place throughout the region and exposes Afghanistan's ideological impact on Central Asia. This is a hard, rural place, with cotton fields worked with sweat and picked by hand. The people are desperately poor. They see little that the new national governments have done to help their lives. Dissatisfaction is high, the lure of Islam as an answer to their dreary existence is strong."⁸

Islamist and terrorist organizations, the nature of their strategic goals and the threats they pose

All Islamist political groups in Central Asia base their perspectives of political change on Islam. The work of at least four Islamic thinkers stands out as highly relevant in this regard. The first one is Sayed Qutb of Egypt, whose notion of battle against *Jahiliyya* (state of ignorance) is at the heart of the stated rationale for global Jihad of al-Qaida and all Islamist groups that emulate it.⁹ Any political system that is not based on the Quran and *Hadith* (statements of the Prophet of Islam), said Qutb, is not operating in accordance with the *Shariah* (laws of Islam), and is based on *Jahiliyya*. *Jahili* societies, he argued, intend to crush true Islam, and should be annihilated by *Jihad bil saif* (holy war by sword) and be replaced by true Islamic regimes. He reinterpreted Jihad to mean the permanent conflict between the Islamic system and all contemporary political systems. Two South Asian Islamic scholars, Abul Ala Maududi and Abul Hasan Ali Nadvi, also describe Islam as a perpetually revolutionary ideology, with the power to change contemporary societies and rebuild them in conformity with its own tenets and ideals. Another Egyptian Islamist, Abul Salam Faraj, the founder and the theorist of Egyptian Al-Jihad, raised the status of militant jihad to the sixth pillar of Islam.

What emerges from the preceding are the notions of militancy, absence of compromise and flexibility, and an insistence on creating a society of Islamic Puritanism by radically altering the extant power structure. The basic strategy of all Islamist groups is to alter political status in the Ferghana Valley. The two pan-Islamist groups determined to bring about political change are HT and the IMU.

Hizb ut-Tahrir-e-Islami or Hizb Tahrir (HT)

The founder of HT was a Palestinian named Taqi-Uddin Al-Nabhani. This party was initially established in Jordan in the early 1950s in East Jerusalem. Like all *Salafi* movements (i.e., movements that pursue a reliance on the traditions of the salaf, or the pious ancestors of the days immediately following the death of the Prophet of Islam), HT staunchly believes that the sanctity of Islam was shattered because of a general tendency in the world of Islam to deviate from the practices of the Prophet of Islam and his companions. Thus, its strategic objective is to revitalize that glory by returning to the purest form of Islam. For this reason, HT advocates the establishment of a Caliphate. As explained in one of its press releases: “The *Khilafah* is the global leadership for all the Muslims in the world. Its role is to establish the laws of the Islamic Shari’ah and to carry the call of Islam to the world. It is a model completely distinguished from any other ruling style such as democracy, theocracy or monarchy. The Shari’ah that is applied in founding the ruling, in caring for the citizen's affairs, and in the external affairs is from Allah. It is a system of unity not a system of union. The system of government in Islam, which is the system of *Khilafah*, is a unitary system of one state and not a federal system. Muslims all over the world are not allowed to have more than one Islamic State.”¹⁰ Thus, HT “has a vision of uniting Central Asia, the Xinjiang Province in China, and eventually the entire Ummah [Islamic world community]....” under the Caliphate.¹¹

At least in Central Asia, HT is very secretive, largely as a result of highly repressive practices of the Uzbek regime of Islam Karimov. Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid, who is considered one of the most authentic

sources on HT and other matters regarding Central Asia, states that this movement “is so secretive and decentralized that its leaders haven't revealed themselves even to their own supporters, and only one member of each of the organization's five-man cells is in contact with a member of another cell.”¹² In his book, *Jihad*, Rashid further elaborates on the organizational structure of HT. He writes that, at the local level, members of HT are organized in small *Daira* (Arabic for cells; the Uzbek word for it is *Halqa*). Each *Daira* comprises 5-7 members and is headed by a *Mushrif*. Members of each *Daira* only know each other. The *Mushrif* is the person who knows or can contact individuals at the higher level of the organization. Each city or district may have one or more organizations, whose leaders are called *Musond*. *Musonds* are under regional leaders, *Masul* (person in charge). *Masuls* are directly under the country leader, *Mutamad*.¹³

HT operates on the basis of a three-stage tactic

The First Stage: In order to form the party group, this stage is focused on culturing or educating people to believe in the ideas and the methods of the party.

The Second Stage: In this stage, the party members interact with the *Ummah* in order to let the *Ummah* embrace and fully incorporate Islam in their private and public affairs.

The Third Stage: This stage is focused on establishing Islamic government by “implementing Islam generally and comprehensively and carrying it as a message to the world.”¹⁴

How does HT see itself and how does it present its goals for public consumption?

HT perceives itself as a party that is on the right path of establishing a worldwide Islamic Caliphate. As Rashid notes, “Indeed, the group’s aim to create a single, worldwide Islamic government can best be described as Islamic radicalism’s closest equivalent to the Western concept of globalization”.¹⁵ HT envisages the governments of the Ferghana Valley countries as illegitimate, misguided and anti-Islamic in orientation.

In principle, all governments would have problems dealing with political organizations that offer radical change of the magnitude of establishing a Caliphate. The highly authoritarian governments of the Ferghana Valley know no other way of dealing with HT except outlawing it and brutally suppressing anyone who is even remotely suspected of supporting that organization. Consequently, HT has no alternative but to remain highly secretive. This makes it hard for anyone to develop a definitive judgment on whether it has remained a non-violent entity. Indeed, in the highly charged post-9/11 era, the orthodox wisdom is edging toward the proposition that, perhaps, it is not really dedicated to the principle of peaceful change. Such a suggestion also stems from the following two reasons. First, it is hard for anyone to imagine that a radical change of the scope of replacing the existing governments with that of a Caliphate would be entirely peaceful. Second, given the proclivity of the governments of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to suppress the activities of HT by using violent tactics, it is hard to fathom that the

functionaries of that organization would rely on non-violent responses indefinitely.

Viewing HT's ideology from the perspectives of that party itself, it is possible that the party would acquire a large following in Muslim polities, if it were allowed to operate openly and without any obstruction from government. It seeks an educated following, and eschews appealing to the uneducated and rural masses of Central Asia. In that sense it is often described as an elitist organization. Its literature discusses various aspects of Islamic theology in a rather straightforward and thoughtful fashion. It does mention the doctrine of Jihad, but not in terms of a strategy to capture political power. On the other hand, it discusses in detail the notion of *Ijtihad* (renewal and reinterpretation). In the context of Islamic theology, Ijtihad is a concept that promotes peaceful change.¹⁶

How does HT communicate with its audience and its sources of financing? On a worldwide scale, HT communicates with its audience through a heavy use of modern technology, such as fax machines, computer discs, and the Internet. That medium serves as the main channel for the distribution of its propaganda, literature, leaflets and messages. Even within Central Asia, it relies heavily on such technologies as photocopy machines, videos, computers and heavy use of e-mail for propagating its messages to those who have access to such technologies. It communicates with the masses by distributing leaflets, where modern communication facilities are not available. Its favorite propaganda letter, "Shabnama" (night letter) is printed at night and "is pushed under people's doors like a newspaper". "Posters are also slapped up on village walls even on the walls of police stations."¹⁷ In addition, it also relies on social and secretive networks in the Ferghana Valley to distribute its messages. According to one source, "Activists distribute leaflets and books that often contain scathing criticisms of regional governments. They also rely on underground meetings rather than public speeches. These techniques make Hizb ut-Tahrir operatives hard to find and to silence. They also let the Hizb ut-Tahrir members send messages more quickly than the government can suppress or discredit them."¹⁸

According to HT's website, "The organization is entirely financed by its activists and we do not accept any financial assistance whatsoever from any government authority. Since Hizb ut-Tahrir's work relies upon the dissemination of thoughts, the costs of operating are minimal, as thoughts cost nothing."¹⁹ Still, it is also suspected of receiving funds from South Asian and other Gulf and Muslim charities and even some Muslim governments.

How is HT received by its target support audience?

Given the highly closed nature of the region, it is difficult to independently assess the nature and the extent of the popularity of HT in the Ferghana Valley. The media reports on the issue have their own obvious and latent biases. Keeping this in mind, according to reports by RFE/RL, there is limited support for HT in Central Asia.²⁰ But the increased authoritarianism in the region and the brutal style of government is helping that organization. According to David Lewis of the International Crisis Group in the Kyrgyz city of Osh, HT is feeding on discontent, especially among the young who are attracted to it as an alternative form

of political expression. He adds that HT's influence "should not be exaggerated as it has little public support in Central Asia". Its core constituency is the Uzbek territory.²¹ On the other hand, there is another report that describes the increased activism of HT in Tajikistan this way:

Hizb ut-Tahrir, the nonviolent but banned Islamic movement that Central Asian presidents often invoke as a terrorist threat, is increasingly active in Tajikistan, especially in the capital, Dushanbe. Tajik authorities are taking steps to counter the movement's efforts to expand its appeal. The rise of Hizb ut-Tahrir's profile is also a source of concern for mainstream Islamic political leaders, including Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) leader Said Abdullo Nuri, who on September 4 [2002] portrayed the movement as a threat to Tajikistan's stability.²²

A Kyrgyz journalist, Alisher Khamidov, also presents a positive portrayal of the reception of HT among its followers:

Central Asian governments have also employed local media outlets and state-controlled clergy to counter HT's messages. However, such efforts have not yielded significant results, as both the state-supported clergy and the media lack credibility among the wider public... Unlike state supported clergy members and government officials, HT activists enjoy a reputation as highly honest, incorruptible, and determined individuals.²³

A more meaningful way to comprehend how HT is being received by the population of that area is to examine how popular the notions of the separation of religion and politics, and Islamic governance are in the Ferghana Valley. According to one study,

Opinions on the feasibility of the separation of Islam from governance vary throughout the region. The basis for differentiation lies primarily in how people define their identity. Muslim identities are stronger in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and the south of Kyrgyzstan, and less so in the north, where nomadism has been much more significant. The stronger the Muslim identity, the smaller the space tends to be between religion and the state. In all three countries, both government officials and the official Islamic establishments routinely express support for a separation of Islam from the state.²⁴

On the issue of Islamic governance, which is one of the chief objectives of HT, the same study notes, "There is a lack of popular support for Islamic governance in Central Asia, but support for secular liberal democracy also seems fragile."²⁵

Based on the preceding, even though there are mixed reports of the popularity of or the support for HT, the organization operates in an environment where it is capable of bringing its message to the populace. The notion of Islamic governance has a good chance of finding sympathetic ears as long as the existing governments fail to improve the political and economic quality of life of their citizens.

Strengths and weaknesses of HT:

The chief source of HT's strength is its firm belief that it is on the right path. One of its leaflets states, "Hizb ut-Tahrir will never be destroyed, by Allah's Leave... It should be known that it never happened in the past, nor will it happen now, or happen in future that Hizb ut-Tahrir will be destroyed... Despite campaigns of oppression, intimidation, and arrests, and attempts to destroy the Hizb undertaken by the [Muslim] regimes, Hizb Tahrir derives its strength from Allah...and the Ummah, which

increases in strength and popularity day after day.”²⁶ The major reason for whatever popularity HT has in the Ferghana Valley stems from the fact that it is determined to keep the focus of its audience on the political repression in the region. Whatever popularity it currently enjoys is likely to be diminished once political pluralism starts to evolve there. Until that happens, HT is likely to operate in an environment that is not at all hostile from the viewpoint of its audience.

In assessing the popularity of this organization, its critics tend to ignore an important fact. The Ferghana Valley, indeed, the whole of Central Asia, is a region where the orientation and knowledge toward Islam has been systematically suppressed under the former Soviet Union. It is also a region where current governments are systematically ensuring that a controlled version of Islamic education (which is derisively described as “official Islam”) is offered to the general populace.

In such a controlled milieu, HT has assigned itself the task of enhancing the knowledge of Islam. The Islamic knowledge and orientation offered by the religious scholars affiliated to HT are judged by independent sources as decidedly superior to the ones provided by half-educated “official imams”.²⁷ HT’s rationale is that, once Muslims become increasingly aware of their religious heritage and become its practitioners, the chances of the attainment of its own objective of the establishment of the Caliphate would also increase. Such an expectation is based on, at best, wishful thinking, or even naiveté. The increased knowledge or commitment on the part of the residents of the Ferghana Valley, or even Central Asia, provides no guarantee that they would also become supporters of the establishment of the Caliphate.

Another source of strength of HT in the Ferghana Valley is its anti-Americanism. Even though Central Asia has not been traditionally known for a high manifestation of anti-Americanism, that reality might be changing as a result of the general unpopularity in the Muslim world of the continued US occupation of Iraq. There is little doubt that HT is capitalizing on this reality. Thus, despite insisting that it favours peaceful change, its rhetoric is becoming increasingly shrill and vitriolic. One of its leaflets issued in June 2003 states

“America has been seduced by the illusion of power. She gives no credence to anything other than her interests, however much harm she causes to others. She rejects any international agreement, whatever it is, if it does not put her above everyone else. That is why she has refused to sign up to the international court for war crimes, fearing that this may be extended to her soldiers... The United States, encouraged by the unexpected ease in occupying Afghanistan and Iraq, has begun talking openly about reshaping the Muslim world according to her criteria and design. She has begun to draw up plans to break up the Muslims' lands along federal or decentralist forms, which will shake and weaken the unity of the state. What is taking place in Afghanistan and Iraq attests to this. Also talk by politicians in the Arabian peninsula is paving the way for this, under the pretext of preserving security, fighting terrorism, women’s rights and extremist (thoughts) stemming from the education curriculum.”²⁸

In another leaflet entitled, "Annihilate the Fourth Crusade", it says, "O Noble Islamic Ummah! Undoubtedly, George Bush's declaration of war against the Muslims of Iraq is a declaration of war against the entire Islamic Ummah, because the Muslims of Iraq are an inseparable part of the single Islamic Ummah." It adds,

The rulers of the Muslims have betrayed the Ummah and deceived the Muslims by claiming that they are against the war on Iraq. The people did not believe their false speeches as the reality of their actions were plain to see. Despite their alliance with America, America despises the rulers of the Muslims and has no regard for them. Thus she ignored their pleas for a United Nations' resolution, no matter how flimsy, to cover their compromised position and protect themselves from the wrath of the Muslims, revengeful against America and her allies. Despite all of this, America neither paid heed to their pleas nor made allowances for their compromised position. They collaborated with America, Britain and the enemies of Islam, thinking that these forces will defend for them their thrones and save them from this Ummah's retribution. They have forgotten the inevitable doom that awaits them just as it awaits all of the traitors who preceded them in allying with the kuffar [non-believers] and the enemies of Islam.²⁹

HT's decision to exploit anti-Americanism to build its own base of support in the region is a highly tenable tactic, when viewed from its perspectives. It is convinced that the United States would not radically alter its policy of supporting the current governments of the Ferghana Valley anytime soon. Thus, its adoption of contentious anti-American rhetoric is not likely to hurt its cause. If the Bush administration is to adopt the role of a force for change in Central Asia—an unlikely development—HT is also expected to adjust its own rhetoric accordingly.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is a pan-Islamist Jihadist party, whose presence and influence in the Ferghana Valley is felt even in the post-9/11 era. It was declared as a terrorist organization by the United States in 2000. As a Jihadist party, it was originally committed to overthrow the government of Uzbekistan. However, later on, it expanded its scope of violent activities to include the other Central Asian countries. The political leader of this party is Tahir Yuldeshev, a Mullah. He was originally affiliated with the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) of Tajikistan; however, he broke from it around 1998, when that party, at the conclusion of a civil war in 1997, agreed to become part of the conventional political process in that country. Yuldeshev also played a crucial role in establishing a link between the IMU and al-Qaida in 1999, when the Taliban were in power in Afghanistan.

The military strategist and commander of the IMU was Jumaboi Ahmadzhanovitch Khojaev, also known as Juma Namangani. He is described in the Western lexicon as a "born-again Muslim". His commitment to Islam and Jihadism did not have long roots. What he lacked in terms of his long-term commitment to Islam, he made up for by emerging as a committed jihadist, carrying out numerous guerrilla attacks in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

During the US invasion of Afghanistan, Namangani was reportedly killed in November 2001. There is little doubt that Namangani's reported death—if it is true—has caused ample demoralization within the ranks of the IMU. However, the overall environment of utmost political repression, the utter absence of avenues of political participation, a general discouragement or condemnation of even conventional observance of Islamic rituals, proclivities for terrorism, and, above all, acute economic underdevelopment have been serving as sources of sustenance, indeed, limited popularity of the IMU in the Ferghana Valley. This is especially true in Uzbekistan.

The expressed goal of the IMU is destruction of the regime of Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan. The current regimes in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are also its targets, but the toppling of those regimes has not been assigned as high a priority as that of Karimov.

In the late 1990s, the IMU established a strong linkage with al-Qaida and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and thereby became an important player in carrying out regional Jihad in Central Asia, Chechnya, and the Xinjiang province of China. Yuldeshev was reported to have travelled extensively in Pakistan, Afghanistan and in the Persian Gulf region in order to establish networks with al-Qaida and other terrorist groups, and received funding from all friendly sources from countries of that region. Between 1997 and 2001, the IMU worked assiduously to establish its operating base inside Central Asia. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, President George W Bush, in a speech on September 20, 2001, linked the IMU with al-Qaida. As such, targeting and eliminating the IMU leadership and functionaries have become important objectives of the United States' global war on terrorism.

Even though the IMU forces suffered a major setback during the military clashes with the US and the forces of the Northern Alliance in 2001, its own forces are reported to have gathered strength at the time of this writing (August 2005). The strategic objective of the IMU remains to oust the current regime in the countries comprising the Ferghana Valley. In this sense, it also remains an important regional terrorist group.

How does the IMU see itself and how does it present its goals for public consumption?

The IMU envisages itself as an organization that is determined to topple the most corrupt and anti-Islamic governments of the Ferghana Valley and establish an Islamic government (a Caliphate) from the Caspian Sea to Western China (Xinjiang province). In this goal, it fully supports HT. However, unlike HT, it is resolute about using violence to achieve its objectives.

It should be noted that the political objectives of the IMU go well beyond the Ferghana Valley. It has demonstrated in the late 1990s that it aims to establish an Islamic government throughout Central Asia. For instance, in 2000, there were reports of the IMU's alliance with two new groups, the Islamic Movement of Tajikistan (IMT), and the Islamic Movement of Kyrgyzstan (IMK). However, at least the public discussion of those groups virtually disappeared from Islamist websites in the post-9/11 era. There are two alternative explanations for this. First, those groups are still

evolving, but lying low because of the continued presence of US forces in Central Asia, and are biding their time before they strike at existing governments. Second, the post-9/11 political environment is such that those groups, as a tactical manoeuvre, decided to bring about organizational integration with the IMU, and may break away to carry out their own terrorist activities in the future, when they feel less threatened.

In May 2001, Namangani reportedly launched a political party called the Hizb-e-Islami of Turkestan (Islamic Movement of Turkestan), which was expected to serve as an umbrella organization, subsuming all Islamist parties of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. It was reported to be behind several terrorist attacks in Afghanistan, Indian-administered Kashmir, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.³⁰

The IMU, like HT, is fully committed to the Wahhabi doctrine of Islamic Puritanism. Reports of its membership state that it contains Chechens and Uighurs, aside from Uzbeks, Pakistanis, Kyrgyz, Tajiks and “Afghan Arabs (i.e., Arabs who fought in the US-sponsored war against the former Soviet Union, when it occupied Afghanistan between 1979-1989). The pan-jihadist predilections of the IMU are also apparent in the fact that Tahir Yuldeshev traveled to Saudi Arabia in the late 1990s and picked a Saudi of Uzbek origin, Zubyr Bin Abdur-Raheem, as head of the religious leadership of the IMU.³¹

The IMU’s goal of establishing a Wahhabi-style Islamic government was not likely to attract much popular support, if the Ferghana Valley were under democratic rule. However, since it is being ruled by autocratic regimes, people tend to view the IMU as a force for change. Even then, it is hard to imagine that Muslims of the Ferghana Valley would want to bring an end to political repression carried out by the extant secular regime, only to be suppressed under the tyranny of a Wahhabi autocratic rule that the IMU persistently promotes.³²

How does the IMU communicate with its audience and its sources of financing?

The safest mode of communication for the IMU is through the Internet and through the use of various Islamic “chat houses”. Since no one knows who is at either end of the “electronic conversation”, no one knows the significance of what is being communicated. Second, the terrorist groups have become so sophisticated in encrypting their messages that even the spoken words do not communicate the real meaning of the conversation. The upside of such a means of communication is that it remains the safest way to correspond with hard-core supporters without the risk of being exposed to the security forces of Central Asia and elsewhere. The chief disadvantage of using electronic means of communication in Central Asia is that it is simply not widely available. That region of the world still remains in the information “dark ages”, because of the very closed nature of the governments that have little-to-no-use for electronic media.³³

As an affiliate of al-Qaida, the IMU is not likely to have much trouble reaching worldwide groups of supporters. This is especially significant when one considers the latest cyberspace tactic used by al-Qaida, whereby ad hoc websites pop up on the internet giving instructions and

sending messages to its supporters for carrying out terrorist attacks and for conducting related activities. Such websites do not exist for long, to avoid being tracked down by international law enforcement agencies.³⁴

The IMU is the most widespread and well-financed terrorist group. Central Asia's proximity to the "Golden Crescent" (comprising Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran) and the "Golden Triangle" (comprising Myanmar, Laos and Thailand) makes it the most popular route of narcotics trafficking. The IMU has cleverly exploited this reality to earn hard cash. It still uses its connections with al-Qaida, and relies heavily on narcotrafficking over a number of Central Asian routes in order to finance its activities.

In order to fully comprehend the durability of the IMU's sources of financing, one has to keep in mind the role of seven factors idiosyncratic to Central Asia since the implosion of the Soviet Union. First is the common regional language, Russian, that lowers the linguistic barriers to this trade. Second, the proximity of the Ferghana Valley to the Golden Crescent and the Golden Triangle. Third, porous borders and rugged terrain among Central Asian countries and Afghanistan (which has emerged as a major narco-state, with 60 per cent of its economy based on opium) have made the job of anti-drug enforcement quite difficult. Fourth, the central location of conflict-wrecked Tajikistan has made it a place where narco-terrorist forces conduct their business without much fear from the law enforcement authorities. Fifth, "the stricken economies throughout the region that make officials and ordinary citizens easily amenable to bribes".³⁵ Sixth, the long-standing nature of the drug trade in Central Asia that was prospering before the IMU came into existence. Finally, "Government repression of Islamic opposition groups in all five Central Asian republics has promoted an extremist religious-political underworld that has expanded those networks for its own purposes".³⁶

A very good way to understand the strategy of the IMU is to understand the notion of "shell state", which was most effectively used by the late Yasser Arafat first in Jordan in the late 1960s. When the PLO was expelled from Jordan in 1970, he was equally effective in using the shell state strategy in Lebanon in the 1970s. According to that strategy, a terrorist group uses a country with a high state of instability to weaken or even destroy the socio-economic infrastructure managed by the existing government and replace it with one of its own. The infrastructure is then used to further strengthen the presence and popularity of that terrorist group in that state. The terrorist group also monopolizes all other avenues of illegal economic activities. Funds thus created are used to purchase weapons, and to distribute funds to buy loyalty from local politicians or warlords.

The ultimate purpose of this strategy is to confront the existing government, either through a number of guerilla-type attacks aimed at further weakening the government's grip on law and order, or by launching one major attack aimed at "decapitating" the top leadership. Al-Qaida successfully utilized this strategy in Afghanistan during the Taliban rule in the 1990s, and is reported to be using it now in Somalia. Given its powerful ties with al-Qaida, it will be no surprise to find out that the IMU is working assiduously on this strategy and is only biding its time

to strike at an opportune moment of its own choosing, first in Uzbekistan, and then in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.³⁷

How is the IMU received by the target support audience?

Given the sustained high level of political repression, the IMU's message for political change may get a positive reception. However, this may not be translated into automatic support for its advocacy of militant Jihad. According to one ICG report, "only 3.6 per cent of those surveyed in Uzbekistan believed that *jihad* is the use of force to protect Islam from non-believers; 4.9 per cent said that force can be used only in critical situations and 12.9 per cent that it is not acceptable to use force to protect Islam. Furthermore, 9.2 per cent said it could never be used against their own government. A strong majority (60.1 per cent) did not know about *jihad* at all or were reluctant to discuss it."³⁸

The same study notes that 37.8 per cent of the Tajik respondents were unfamiliar with the concept of Jihad, "but the rest usually said that it is acceptable if Islam is under threat, but not against one's own government". It adds, "Nearly a third (32.5 per cent) believed that *jihad* is acceptable to defend one's self against non-believers or in critical situations; 8.4 per cent replied that it is never acceptable to wage *jihad* and 14.8 per cent that it should never be waged against the government." It goes on to note, "More people in Tajikistan think that *jihad* should not be used against the government than in Uzbekistan or Kyrgyzstan, possibly because of the associations of the Islamist factor in the country's civil war".³⁹

Regarding Kyrgyzstan, the same study reports that its survey results "are somewhat different because of the less important role of Islam in general. Many people were unfamiliar with *jihad* (47.9 per cent). Those who knew about it usually considered it acceptable to use force if Islam was under threat by non-Muslims or if otherwise prescribed in the Koran. Nearly 30 per cent believed that *jihad* is not acceptable under any conditions, while 10.1 per cent thought it permissible in critical situations or against non-believers. Some Kyrgyz believe that their fellow citizens think of *jihad* more as warfare than do Uzbeks or Tajiks because of their Mongol heritage."⁴⁰

What emerges from the preceding is that the Jihadist message of the IMU is not getting much positive reception in the Ferghana Valley at large. This reality presents great opportunities for a systematic promotion of moderate Islam and democracy in the region.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the IMU

As a jihadist organization, one cannot speak of the IMU as having strength of its own. Such a characteristic is usually related to conventional political parties or organizations for change. Even HT qualifies to be called an organization for change, especially because—while remaining a party that advocates radical political change in the form of the establishment of the Caliphate—it espouses such a change only through peaceful means.

Keeping this distinction in mind, it is safe to argue that the chief strength of the IMU is that it is operating in closed societies and under autocratic

rules. When people suffer from government tyranny, they may look with hope at other political entities that are offering different solutions to their misery. Even in this context, the IMU does not have much of a political platform to improve the quality of life for the citizens of the region. All that the IMU offers is the establishment of a Caliphate. It says nothing about what plan it has to make the Ferghana Valley (or Central Asia as a whole) an integral part of the increasingly globalized world. When the entire world is becoming increasingly complex, interconnected, and interdependent, no argument for the establishment of a Caliphate from the seventh century is likely to sound like a viable alternative. Only as long as people continue to suffer under deteriorating economic conditions, will they envision the IMU as some sort of alternative. However, the moment political liberalization and economic progress become regular phenomena in Central Asia, the IMU will either have to radically alter its political platform or face the option of becoming irrelevant. In this sense, the autocratic regimes really hold the key.

Section II: What is the Response?

A. From the Ferghana Valley States

The Ferghana Valley countries depict HT and the IMU as “terrorist” organizations. They also describe these organizations as “Wahhabist” entities. By using those phrases, the Central Asian countries want to convey the message that those organizations intend to conduct Jihad. Even though HT is a strong advocate for radical change it does not believe in attaining its objective through violence. As such, it is not generally regarded as a terrorist organization. The IMU, on the other hand, is determined to topple the governments, especially Uzbekistan, through terrorist acts.

The Ferghana Valley countries have adopted a number of internal and external measures to control or even eradicate both HT and the IMU. Domestically, all state activities to cope with the challenge coming from Islamist or terrorist organizations fall under the general rubric of “controlling Islam”. This is an age-old tactic that was fervently used under Czarist Russia, and then by the Soviet Union.

As heirs of the Communist era, the current rulers have demonstrated a great aptitude in implementing the very same policies to tackle the “Islamic challenge”. These rulers remain ambivalent toward Islam. They are eager to use it to legitimize their rule, but want to emphasize only its cultural heritage. At the same time, however, they manifest the Soviet elite’s version of traditional hostility to Islam because of the resolutely secular nature of their regimes. Consequently, one witnesses the demonstration of the Soviet era mentality, whereby there are persistent clashes “with newly assertive religious groups or individuals who claim a greater role for Islam in political and social life”.⁴¹

Uzbekistan (and Turkmenistan) have “the most restrictive legislation on religious activity in the region”. The Committee of Religious Affairs (CRA) is in charge of overseeing all religious activities in Uzbekistan. This is not a decisionmaking body; it only implements decisions made by Karimov. The CRA controls the *Muftiate* (the Muslim Spiritual Board), “which in

turn controls the Islamic hierarchy, the content of imams' [religious leaders] sermons, and the publication of Islamic materials".⁴²

The response of the government of Tajikistan toward Islam and the Islamist party is quite different, since it is the only state where an Islamic party, the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), is legal. However, in the recent past, "many of the same issues that face Uzbekistan have appeared, with growing government interference in religion, and fears that repression and interference will provoke radicalization of small parts of the population". And, "unlike other Central Asian states, Tajikistan has no Muftiate; instead, those responsibilities are placed on the Islamic Centre of Tajikistan..."⁴³

Kyrgyzstan has had the most unperturbed attitude toward the notion of "control" of Islam. However, toward the late 1990s, the government clamped down on the missionary activities of Islamic organizations.⁴⁴

The external (or regional) response of the Ferghana Valley states was to join an organization whose explicit aim was to fight regional terrorism. The Shanghai Five—formed in 1996 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan—emerged as such a body. As members of that body, the countries of the Ferghana Valley became involved in developing a common front to fight "three evils": terrorism, religious extremism, and separatism.⁴⁵ The Shanghai Five changed its name to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in June 2001.⁴⁶

It is interesting to note that the organization was formulated by the two great powers of the region—China and Russia—as a forum to promote their strategic interests and, more to the point, to focus on the major contentious issues that were then part of the great power rivalry. Thus, the communiqué of the SCO in June 2001 expressed concern over the then impending decision of the United States to abandon the 1972 ABM Treaty, and America's resolve to build national missile defence and theatre missile defence systems, and the legitimacy of the PRC as the sole representative of both mainland China and Taiwan. Those issues were of less concern or interest to the Central Asian members of the SCO. However, those countries understood that they would have to go along with the strategic concerns of their powerful partners.

To be sure, China and Russia also were interested in suppressing the secessionist movements within their own borders involving the Uighurs and the Chechens, respectively. However, they were more interested in using the SCO "to eventually build a new regional security architecture that reinforces each other's territorial integrity".⁴⁷ At the same time, Beijing and Moscow wanted to retrench the American interests in Central Asia as a whole.

Thus, the SCO never really emerged as a forum where counterterrorism strategies were developed to fight the IMU. The SCO developed periodic military exercises aimed at counterterrorism. Even then, the thrust of those exercises was to suppress the Uighurs in the Xinjiang province, or to capture or harass the Uighurs who escaped their homeland and took refuge in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. In general, the Western assessment

of the SCO—which is quite accurate—is that it could not marshal any military answer to the problems related to regional terrorism.⁴⁸

Authoritarian regimes are not known for their sophistication about developing strategies to influence the “hearts and minds” of a populace. About the only thing they have been historically known for developing are crude propaganda campaigns, which assume that citizens are uninformed enough to fall for their propaganda. In Central Asia, the propaganda campaigns have only one dominant theme. They adamantly state that all Islamist organizations are terrorists and Wahhabis. As such, if those terrorists/Wahhabis were to come to power, they would take the country back to the seventh century. The Ferghana Valley governments had an effective propaganda tool, the Talibanization of Afghanistan between 1997-2001. They could have effectively used the human suffering under the Wahhabi rule of the Taliban to remind their citizens how miserable their lot would be if the IMU or even HT were to capture power. However, governments have not been able to cash in on exploiting that theme. One predominant reason may be the fact that, considering the low quality of life under the secular but brutal and repressive regimes, the description of life under Talibanization might not have sounded much worse.

B. From the United States

In the immediate aftermath of their emergence as independent states after the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1990, the United States’ involvement in Central Asia was characterized by the absence of any clear-cut and systematic strategic thinking. Washington got involved in the region largely to make sure that Iran did not succeed in implanting its own model of Islamic government. The US supported the entry of Central Asian states into Western organizations and became somewhat involved in eliciting Turkish support in countering Iranian influence and in promoting the Turkish model of secular democracy. Since Russia did not show much enthusiasm for dominating the strategic affairs of Central Asia in the early 1990s, the United States’ involvement in that region was not driven by any urgency to make its own presence felt.

The nexus between the Taliban and al-Qaida, and the resultant activities of pan-Jihadism in the late 1990s in Central Asia and its contiguous areas, slightly altered the picture for the United States. The top decisionmakers paid some attention to Central Asia, but without taking many visible steps to get involved. Even when China and Russia established the Shanghai Five and then the SCO, the United States largely remained on the sidelines. Of course, Washington’s involvement in the pipeline issue related to the Caspian Sea oil reserves was an exception.

It was only when the US needed bases in Central Asia to carry out its military operations aimed at dismantling the Taliban regime of Afghanistan that the administration of President George W Bush decided to alter its strategic approach. The US sought military bases, and Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan were only too eager to provide such facilities. As one study points out, the Central Asian states accepted the Sino-Russian domination of the SCO “more out of need than desire”.⁴⁹ However, they viewed the US’ overtures as opening up new vistas of military and economic assistance. More important, the Bush

administration's clarion call of "either you are with us or you are with the terrorists," was interpreted by the states of the Ferghana Valley as an unambiguous signal that America would spend its military might in eradicating the "terrorist" forces in their region.

Apart from the clarion call, the Bush administration did not bother to elaborate on its counterterrorism strategy in Central Asia. In the absence of an explicit strategy, one has to interpret the meaning of Bush's global war on terrorism for Central Asia. In this sense, it is safe to say that America's strategy had the following features:

Bases in Kyrgyzstan (Manas, where 1,500 US troops were stationed in 2005), Uzbekistan (Khanabad, where 900 US troops were stationed in 2005, and a base for German units in Termez, and a land corridor to Afghanistan for humanitarian aid via the Friendship Bridge at Termez), and Tajikistan (which permitted the use of its international airport in Dushanbe for refueling, and which also hosted a small French unit) were regarded as symbols of America's resolve to stay in the region.⁵⁰

Passage in late 1999 of the "Silk Road" language in Public Law 106-13 served as a source of America's "enhanced attention and aid to support conflict amelioration, humanitarian needs, economic development...democracy, and the creation of civil societies" in the South Caucasus and Central Asian states.⁵¹ The March 2002 declaration of US-Uzbekistan strategic partnership included "nonspecific security guarantees."⁵² Even though the United States is faced with the major issue of developing a strategy to "win hearts and minds" of Muslims all over the world, that campaign is anything but a shining success anywhere in the world of Islam. It will be quite a while before such a campaign will be developed for Central Asia. In terms of developing its public diplomacy campaign, the Bush administration has neglected that region of the world, largely because it has remained preoccupied with crafting such a campaign for the Middle East and South Asia, where it is actively fighting its global war on terrorism. US policies—especially America's war on terrorism—are given from high-to-very-high negative ratings in public opinion polls.⁵³ Despite this reality, Uzbekistan is a rare exception. In that country, according to a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, 85 per cent of the Uzbeks give the US a positive rating, and about 35 per cent "hold a very favourable view of the US."⁵⁴

Effectiveness of America's counterterrorism strategy

The effectiveness and speed with which the United States was capable of dismantling the Taliban regime has created a genuine fear amidst all terrorist forces of that region, and especially in Central Asia. In this particular instance, the United States' military action spoke louder than any proclamation of counterterrorism strategy (or the lack thereof). One of the chief outcomes of the US military operation in Afghanistan is that the IMU has decided to lie low in the Ferghana Valley for the time being. At the same time, it should be clearly understood that the IMU has not at all gone away. Neither has HT. As long as Central Asia and especially the Ferghana Valley remain regions of low economic development and high unemployment, they also serve as fertile places for extremist organizations of all stripes, including terrorist ones. When people live under acute economic misery and intense political repression, they envision other alternatives—including the alternatives offered by the

Jihadist or terrorist organizations—as those worth trying. In that sense, the mere fact that HT and the IMU are offering an Islamist option makes both of them serious challengers to the existing political status quo. As long as people are willing to try those other options, the region will remain potentially highly unstable.

Section III: Conclusions

A. The Islamist Side

Both HT and the IMU used their pan-Islamist ideology to underscore the commonality of Islam as a unifying force among all states in Central Asia. Whatever success these organizations experienced was the outcome of the autocratic nature of the regimes in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and the depressed economic conditions there. Of the two, HT is likely to be more successful because of its continued emphasis on its non-violent *modus operandi*. That is also one reason why HT has gained sympathy among the populace within the Ferghana Valley. The IMU, however, has received palpably less popular support because of its practice of militant Jihadism or terrorism, which is not at all popular.

The greatest disadvantage that both groups face within the political environment of the Ferghana Valley is that they advocate the establishment of a caliphate or an Islamic state. It should be clearly understood that even the most committed and religiously oriented Muslims have a jaundiced view of all suggestions related to the creation of an Islamic government. In an increasingly globalized world—where interconnections and interdependence are a *sine qua non* of daily living—1400-year-old notions of religious purity are not likely to be sold as the major political objective. Besides, there are also high chances that by overthrowing the existing autocratic order and by supporting the Islamist groups, the masses of the Ferghana Valley would be trading a secular but enslaved lifestyle for a religious and still enslaved lifestyle.

Why, then, are HT and the IMU continuing to receive popular hearing or even support? One explanation may be that the people are fed up with their current conditions—i.e. life under oppressive and corrupt and incompetent regimes—and are hoping that the alternatives presented by the Islamist parties may be less miserable and more tolerable.

The Islamist groups explain themselves to their target population by using the language of Islam. HT and the IMU explain away the causes of the backwardness of the world of Islam in general (not just the backwardness of Central Asian countries) as an outcome of—as well as the “punishment” for—deviating from “pure” Islam. And the promise of the return of the golden age of Islam will be fulfilled only when Muslims follow the path of their pious ancestors (*Aslaf*).

In the information age, HT, more than the IMU, relies on the Internet, on the international media to make known its ideological position, and to spread information about the day-to-day specifics of the political brutality and repression that the existing Central Asian regimes are perpetrating. When a political coup ousted the regime of President Askar Akaev in

Kyrgyzstan, HT issued highly publicized statements that the new regime is essentially as anti-Islamic and corrupt as the one it replaced.

The strength of HT and the IMU is the fact that their messages are heavily peppered with the language of Islam. As people's knowledge and orientation toward Islam increases, their messages are likely to be closely scrutinized. At that time, the religion-based strength of the Islamist parties might turn into weakness, when people realize that a heavy dose of Islamic Puritanism may not be a panacea for what ails their polities.

B. The Ferghana Valley States

Any question related to countering terrorism in the Ferghana Valley should be examined by focusing on the countries of Central Asia, the members of the SCO, and the United States. There is little doubt that of the three sets of actors, the countries of the Ferghana Valley themselves have been largely clueless about finding realistic solutions to challenges related to their continued survival. Their leaders remain inside their comfort zone by categorizing all Islamist forces as "terrorists" or Wahhabis. Those phrases were invariably used by the communist leaders to condemn all Islamic forces that challenged the communist takeover of their territory in the 1920s. In addition, they also developed a response typical of leaders of all authoritarian systems in dealing with challenges to their authority and legitimacy. After labelling them as terrorists, they use all their energy and focus to eradicate them. Since authoritarian systems never learned to negotiate or persuade the forces of the opposition into becoming allies, or at least serving as loyal opposition, the only other option is to arrest all the opponents, force them into political exile, or eradicate them. The governments of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan have adopted these measures quite unsuccessfully against HT and even against the most visible terrorist organization of this area, the IMU.

Countries of the Ferghana Valley snapped up the opportunity to join the Shanghai Five. Even though China and Russia—as the major powers in that organization—had more intricate political agendas than fighting the terrorist organizations of their area, the Central Asian states still envisaged the Shanghai Five as the chief tool to fight regional terrorism.

The SCO members had economic cooperation as part of their general agenda. In addition, they focused on military cooperation, building counterterrorism institutions in member states and enhancing the counterterrorism capabilities of the forces of the member countries, and even holding periodic war games to fight and defeat terrorist attacks. Despite these endeavors, the SCO did not prove effective in countering the guerrilla-type attacks of the IMU. It was largely as a result of the US invasion of Afghanistan that the IMU became a weakened entity.

The SCO is an organization that has as its members two very large and militarily powerful states—China and Russia—and four small and militarily weak countries—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. They are all using that organization to promote varied agendas, both regionally and globally. As major states, China and Russia's global agenda, more often than not, is likely to get a major share of that

organization's attention. This reality has remained the Achilles heel of the SCO.

In addition, China and Russia wish to use the SCO to carry out their ongoing strategic competition with the United States. For instance, China wants to use that forum to bring to the world's attention the dynamics of the reunification with Taiwan, an issue of peripheral interest to Central Asian states. In the July 2005 meeting of the SCO, China and Russia publicly asked the United States to establish a timetable for redeploying its military forces from Central Asian military bases. The fact of the matter is that the Central Asian states are not interested in the withdrawal of US forces from their territory.⁵⁵ They know only too well that their mere presence in the region is serving as a major deterrence against the terrorist activities of the IMU.

C. The United States

If the United States did not pay much attention to engaging Central Asian countries prior to September 11, 2001, it has made considerable progress in that direction since. Under the general rubric of the global war on terrorism, the region is emerging as being of utmost significance to the United States. President Bush had rightly observed in 2002 that failing or failing states serve as mushrooming places for the steady growth of transnational terrorism. Afghanistan was the ultimate proof of the correctness of that observation. Considering that all Central Asian countries could be categorized as failing states, there is no way the United States would be able to minimize (much less terminate) the dynamics of its involvement.

The second reason why the US cannot afford to lessen its involvement in Central Asia is the fact that that area is close to two of the most significant regions of global narcotics trade, the "Golden Crescent" and the "Golden Triangle". The direct connection between transnational terrorism and the global narcotics trade has long been established. If the United States is to win its war on terrorism, it has to remain focused on eradicating the opium trade in the Golden Crescent, a region where its forces are currently deployed. It cannot achieve that objective by lowering its presence in Central Asia.

The third reason why the United States cannot afford to leave Central Asia is that an important aspect of America's global war on terrorism is the promotion of public diplomacy to win the hearts and minds of Muslims all over the world. Central Asia is one of the major Muslim regions of the world and one where anti-American sentiments are not high.

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⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ In addition, Turkmenistan provided "blanket overflight and refueling privileges for humanitarian flights," and "Kazakhstan provided overflight rights and expedited rail transshipment of supplies." Jim Nichol, "Central Asia: Regional Developments and Implications for US Interests," Congressional Research Service, updated Jan 21, 2005, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/43391.pdf>.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ "American Public Diplomacy in the Islamic World," Remarks of Andrew Kohut to The Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing, February 27, 2003, <http://people-press.org/commentary/display.php3?AnalysisID=63>.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ It should be noted that, on August 1, 2005, the government of Islam Karimov asked the United States to withdraw its troops from its base in Uzbekistan. The US was given one year to carry out that action. That measure was in retaliation to the Bush administration's criticism of the massacre of civilians in the Andijan region of that country last May. "US told to quit airbase after criticizing protest massacre," *Timesonline*, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,11069-1716162,00.html>.