

The Goals of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Its Impact on Central Asia and the United States

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The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) has been an active terrorist organization in the Central Asia region since its formation in 1998, although the IMU existed in a different form prior to then. Its original goal was to overthrow the government of Uzbekistan and establish an Islamic caliphate in the Fergana Valley region. When the terrorist attacks on 9/11 took place, the IMU was operating out of northern Afghanistan. Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) dislodged the IMU from its support areas, and the organization changed its priorities, particularly targeting the government of Uzbekistan. Additionally, Juma Namangani and Tahir Yuldashev, the founding and most capable leaders of the organization, were killed in November 2001 and August 2009 respectively. Despite setbacks to the IMU, it remains operational in and around South Waziristan (Pakistan) and has allegedly carried out attacks against International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) in various regions of Afghanistan. An examination of the history, current operations, and goals of the IMU can help determine what threat the organization poses for the governments of Central Asia, and for the United States while its forces remain in Afghanistan.

History of the IMU

Early Years: 1989-2001

The IMU grew out of a group called *Adolat* (an Uzbek word meaning justice). When small and medium-sized businesses started to develop in the Soviet Union (around 1989-90), racketeers demanded protection money from business owners. In the city of Namangan, Uzbekistan, in the Fergana Valley region, one business owner formed a protection group

(*Adolat*). Tahir Yuldashev, a young mullah, emerged as an important leader in *Adolat* alongside Juma Namangani. Namangani had served in the Soviet Army in Afghanistan during the last years of the Soviet-Afghan War. When Yuldashev became the group's ideologist, *Adolat* took on more religious aspects. New members swore *bayat* (Islamic oath of loyalty) to the group and its men patrolled Namangan and enforced *sharia* (Islamic law). Members acted outside of city law enforcement and eventually took over that role. In December 1991 *Adolat* occupied the local Communist Party headquarters, which prompted a visit from the then head of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (now president) Islam Karimov. In front of a crowd of several hundred people, Yuldashev upstaged Karimov. In early 1992 the government of Uzbekistan banned and cracked down on the group. A number of members fled to Tajikistan and some reportedly to Afghanistan, including Yuldashev.¹

Namangani became involved in the Tajik Civil War (1992-97) and fought alongside the opposition with a small force that had followed him from Uzbekistan. Namangani stayed in Tajikistan (around Garm, near the Rasht Valley) after the Civil War ended and became involved in drug trafficking; this was one way the IMU funded its activities. Yuldashev met up again with Namangani in 1997 and together they formed the IMU in 1998. They declared a jihad against the governments of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, their ultimate goal being to overthrow the government and establish an Islamic state in the Fergana Valley.²

Around 1998-99 the IMU began operating out of a support base near what are now the Tavildara and Rasht Districts in Tajikistan. On February 16 and 17, 1999, several bombs exploded around the city of Tashkent, Uzbekistan, including one near the Interior Ministry. The bombs killed 16 and injured more than 100 people. The government blamed the IMU for this incident, although there were conflicting reports of their involvement.³ On August 9, 1999, IMU

militants infiltrated into the Batken region (now Province) of Kyrgyzstan, took hostages (including the mayor), and demanded a \$1 million ransom and a helicopter to fly to Afghanistan, where Yuldashev had established a relationship with the Taliban and allegedly al-Qaeda. On August 13 the government of Kyrgyzstan granted the militants safe passage out of the country, and reportedly paid a \$50,000 ransom. Uzbekistan responded with air strikes against IMU support bases in the towns of Garm (Rasht Valley) and Tavildara, Tajikistan.

More IMU militants infiltrated Batken (in the villages of Zardaly and Korgon), and on August 23 they took several hostages, including a major-general from the Interior Ministry and four Japanese citizens. The IMU hoped to exchange the Japanese citizens for ten militants previously convicted of terrorism in Uzbekistan. The government of Uzbekistan refused to negotiate, while the Japanese government sent representatives to try to free the hostages. Most of the hostages, except for the Japanese, were released by the end of August. On October 2-3 a Kyrgyz motorized rifle unit conducted an operation against the militants, while Uzbekistan conducted two air strikes on the villages in Kyrgyzstan. Both air strikes (carried out with Su-24 bombers) caused civilian casualties in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The IMU counterattacked in the direction of the town of Kyzyl-Kiya, near the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border, but was eventually repulsed. On October 25 the IMU militants released the Japanese hostages after being paid a ransom estimated at \$2-6 million, and went to Afghanistan.⁴

Around a year later, on August 4-5, 2000, the IMU made simultaneous incursions into the Surkhandarya Province and near the city of Akhangaran (Tashkent Province), Uzbekistan; militants fortified themselves in mountainous areas with hidden caches of weapons and clashed with government security forces. The IMU carried out this operation in conjunction with another incursion into the Batken Province. Around two weeks into the incursions, militants also

infiltrated into the Bostanlyk District (Tashkent Province). The militants numbered an estimated 100-200, and split into a few groups in both provinces. Special forces units (reportedly from the National Security Committee – SNB) with support from Mi-24 attack helicopters killed the majority of the militants by August 25. The government of Uzbekistan reported that more than a dozen soldiers were killed in the operations.⁵

While the incursions into Uzbekistan were taking place, on August 11, 2000, IMU militants crossed into Batken in two groups, one of which almost immediately made contact with Kyrgyzstan's security forces. On August 12 militants captured more than a dozen mountain climbers, including four Americans. Within days the militants either released the hostages or allowed them to escape because of poor security. Security forces of Kyrgyzstan managed to disperse the militants into smaller groups from August 11-14. The IMU responded by launching an attack on an outpost on August 25, but failed. Around September 9-11 another group of militants attempted to enter Batken; however, Kyrgyzstan's forces, utilizing Mi-8 helicopters (an armed variant), managed to hold back the assault. The IMU completely withdrew its forces from the area by the end of October, and most members went into northern Afghanistan.⁶ It was also during this incursion that the United States first declared the IMU a terrorist organization; as of late 2012 the IMU remains so designated.⁷ Sometime after the IMU moved into Afghanistan after the incursions, Yuldashev took an Islamic oath of loyalty to Mullah Omar, leader of the Taliban.⁸

A Period of Organizational and Geographic Changes: 2001-2009

OEF in Afghanistan changed the dynamic of the IMU. Namangani was killed in November 2001, along with a number of IMU fighters, leaving Yuldashev solely in command.

In late 2001/early 2002 the IMU moved into South Waziristan, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan. They appeared to have broken apart during these years, but the organization regrouped and periodically clashed with Pakistan's armed forces.⁹ These clashes, in turn, caused a reaction from the local tribes in Waziristan, who had taken the IMU in as guests and bore the brunt of counterattacks from Pakistan's armed forces.¹⁰

Sometime in 2002 an unknown number of members allegedly splintered from the IMU and formed the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU). The existence of the IJU has been questioned and its membership is difficult to determine.¹¹ In 2004 a series of terrorist attacks took place in the cities of Bukhara and Tashkent, Uzbekistan. While the IMU reportedly claimed credit for the attacks, the government of Uzbekistan blamed members of Hizb ut-Tahrir.¹² In August 2009 a strike by an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) killed Yuldashev, though the IMU waited a year before officially announcing his death. The IMU announced Yuldashev's replacement as Usmon Odil, who had served Yuldashev as a deputy commander.¹³

The IMU in Recent Years: 2009-present

The IMU's Self Promoting Efforts

Changes to the IMU have continued since 2009; these affected not only the leadership of the organization, but also its membership, goals, and operational focus. During the early years of the IMU, 1989-2001, most information about the organization came from Central Asian government press releases or journalists. In the last few years the IMU has been increasingly active in publicizing itself through the website, *Furqon.com*.¹⁴ The majority of the website is written in Uzbek using the Cyrillic alphabet, and while a good portion of what is posted on the

website is propaganda, useful information is available in the announcements, articles, and videos of the IMU's operations and other activities.¹⁵

The announcements section contains several references to Central Asia, but no information about recent IMU operations or attacks in the region. There are a couple of announcements about Kyrgyzstan, which appear to be a show of solidarity with the people there following the June 2010 violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan.¹⁶ One announcement (available in Uzbek and Kyrgyz) references the June 2010 violence, but then digresses to mention conflicts against Islam taking place in other parts of the world.¹⁷ The other announcement mentions the situation in southern Kyrgyzstan, but again diverts to conflicts involving the United States, NATO, and Russia.¹⁸ None of the announcements mentions if the IMU participated in the June 2010 incident or if the organization will carry out an attack on the government of Kyrgyzstan.

There is also some information in several articles on the website about Central Asia. However, like the announcements, they are not specific. One article talks about the life of a martyr named Abdur Rashid from the Andijan Province, Uzbekistan.¹⁹ Two articles are about the central mosque in the city of Andijan, but nothing related to the IMU.²⁰ A two-part series of articles simply recounts the incident in Andijan in May 2005, and the circumstances that led up to it.²¹ One other article recaps the early history of the IMU.²² There is only one video that supposedly includes footage of the incursions in 1999 and 2000.²³ There is no mention in either the article or video sections of IMU operations carried out in Central Asia since 2000.

Like the announcements about Central Asia, there are a few references to the United States, but no information about specific attacks. One announcement roughly translates to "The Biggest Deception of the Infidels," and mentions the IMU's jihad with Mullah Omar and the

Pakistani Taliban. The United States is mentioned several times, but in a broad context of involvement in Afghanistan, the War on Terrorism, Iraq, and how the 2012 election is about the necessary exit from Afghanistan.²⁴ Another announcement mentions Osama bin Laden's martyrdom and the IMU's jihad against the forces of the United States, Israel, NATO, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.²⁵ Two other announcements are responses to two videos that made international headlines in 2012. One talks about the video of four American service members urinating on the corpses of suspected Taliban fighters. The IMU criticizes the men for doing this, but also says that the whole world of infidels is to blame and calls on the Islamic community to join the jihad.²⁶ The other is a response to the video, "Innocence of Muslims"; the announcement notes the attack on the American embassy in Libya and the protests that took place in front of American embassies in other countries.²⁷

There are two articles that include information about attacks on NATO forces in Afghanistan. One recounts an attack that took place in Pakistan on December 7, 2008, where militants destroyed vehicles that were being shipped to NATO forces in Afghanistan.²⁸ The IMU does not claim to have carried out or participated in the attack.²⁹ The other article talks about an IMU martyr who was killed by NATO forces in the Kunduz Province fighting alongside the Taliban.³⁰ The militant may have been a member of the IMU, but the article's author is listed as "Lashkar-e-Khorasan." Lashkar-e-Khorasan (aka Ittehad Mujahideen Khorasan) is a group within the Pakistani Taliban, associated with Hafiz Gul Bahadur in North Waziristan, that hunts down people in the FATA that supposedly supplied the United States with information on militants. The group reportedly had a falling out with Bahadur and was replaced by a group called Saif-ul-Furqan.³¹ Lashkar-e-Khorasan's authorship of the article is questionable, but this also brings up an important point about the IMU: the organization might be

associated with extremist groups in the region, but there is little evidence that it is conducting attacks against ISAF forces on its own. More details about this are given in the summary below on the website's videos. Other articles mention the United States' involvement in Afghanistan, but they are propaganda pieces and not about specific attacks.³²

Lastly, the IMU posts videos of its operations, attacks, propaganda, and interviews in several languages, including Uzbek, Russian, Farsi, Arabic, Pashto, Urdu, and German.³³ Not all of the videos include the date when they were made, but most appear to have been filmed after 2002. A few dozen videos are reposts from *Ummat Studios*, a production company which the Pakistan Taliban set up sometime in 2004.³⁴ The IMU created its own video production component, *Jundullah Studios*, which produced the bulk of the videos on *Furqon*.

A number of the videos simply repeat the messages that come up in the website's articles. However, there are several videos of IMU operations in various provinces of Afghanistan from around 2007 to 2009. In a series of videos titled "The IMU in Afghanistan," the IMU recaps these operations. The first video in a series of eight provides background through narration to the IMU's operations in 1999 and 2000, its jihad against the United States that started in 2001, how the jihad continued in the FATA (the IMU then included the government of Pakistan as a target) and organization's martyrs from 2001-2007. The video also includes a speech from Yuldashev (largely propaganda) and ends with a segment of IMU members planning an attack against a forward operating base.³⁵

The second video starts with a speech by Yuldashev about how American soldiers will leave Afghanistan in coffins and that the result will be no different than the Soviet Union's war there. The video continues with the assault on the forward operating base (mentioned as somewhere in the Zabol Province, Afghanistan), a segment on how the IMU makes and places

improvised explosive devices, and footage of other clashes. During attacks members speak with each other almost entirely in Uzbek; this is important to note compared with later videos.³⁶

The third video follows a similar theme with a speech by Yuldashev and footage of attacks that take place (according to the segment title) in the Argahandab and Daychopon Districts (Zabol Province) with what appears to be the support and participation of local Taliban commanders sometime in 2007-2008.³⁷

The fourth video takes place in the Kunduz Province, Afghanistan (again, according to the segment title) against an unknown target. The video also includes a speech by Yuldashev, although this is the last in the series to feature him.³⁸

The fifth, sixth, and seventh videos are similar in format to the others, except that during segments that show attacks, members do not speak Uzbek with each other. While it is difficult to determine whom the IMU targeted in its attacks, the later videos show members driving trucks taken from the Afghan National Police. These are also the last videos which are narrated in Uzbek.³⁹

The last video in the series (posted to the website sometime in late summer, early fall of 2012) is narrated in Farsi and mostly features martyrs from the most recent operations. The video mentions jihad against the United States, but little footage of attacks.⁴⁰ Also on the IMU's website are lists of martyrs from 2001-2007 and 2009-2011.⁴¹

Additional Considerations

In August 2012 the IMU announced that Odil had been killed and that he would be replaced by Usman Ghoziy, an unknown member of the organization.⁴² These leadership changes to the IMU in the past few years make it difficult to determine the organization's goals.

In an older version of *Furqon* (as recently as February 2011) a rolling script listed the IMU's goals, which talk more about how to be a devout Muslim and about bringing back a caliphate than about specifically overthrowing the government of Uzbekistan or targeting the United States.⁴³ The website now has a different format and does not list a set of goals.

Another consideration is periodic reports that government security services of Central Asia arrest members of the IMU.⁴⁴ While it is possible that those arrested are members of the IMU, there is no verification of their involvement in the organization. When several incidents of violence took place in Kazakhstan in 2011, there were concerns that extremist groups operating out of the FATA had turned their attention to Central Asia.⁴⁵ Sources in Kazakhstan believed that the perpetrators were influenced by extremist groups, but that the connection to other terrorist groups is tenuous. Instead, these sources believed the incidents were the result of hostility against the government, security services, and local police, and that the incidents were localized.⁴⁶ The recent reports of arrests of IMU members in Central Asia could be the result of similar circumstances.

Assessment

The IMU is not the same organization that it once was. The changes that took place in the IMU from its inception in the late 1980s up to 2001 are minor compared to what has happened from 2001 to the present. The death of Namangani in 2001 hurt the IMU, but largely with respect to the organization's tactical abilities. While the IMU could have been responsible for attacks against ISAF forces in Afghanistan, the organization has not conducted an incursion into Central Asia since 2000. Certainly someone has stepped in to fill Namangani's place, but he does not likely have the same support network that Namangani built in Central Asia. The death

of Yuldashev is more significant. There is no question that Yuldashev drove the IMU's goals as an influential speaker and the organization's ideologist. After the start of OEF, Yuldashev and the IMU in general continued to issue rhetoric against the governments of Central Asia, like the examples already noted, but more often incorporated messages that seemed to be from other militant groups operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It appears that Yuldashev only started mentioning the United States as an enemy after the group relocated to the FATA. Yuldashev's death, like Namangani's, means that there is a leadership void in a key part of the organization; as a result the ideology and influence of the organization have changed and are likely diminished.

The fact that the IMU's website is written in Uzbek Cyrillic suggests that it continues trying to recruit members in Uzbekistan. It also means that someone updating the website is probably from Uzbekistan, rather than Afghanistan. Regardless of any connection to the origins of the IMU, the announcements and articles indicate that the organization views Central Asia and the United States as enemies in its jihad, but in a generic context. These sections contain no information that the IMU has participated in any recent terrorist attacks or incidents of violence in Central Asia. They also offer only a few examples of IMU involvement in an attack on U.S. forces.

The videos offer more information than announcements or articles on the IMU's operational focus. In the first few parts of the "IMU in Afghanistan" series Yuldashev talks about the United States in the same video that shows an attack in Daychopon, where American forces could have been based at the time. However, there is no follow-up information on the attack. As the series continued it became even more difficult to determine whom the IMU militants attacked in its operations. It should not be expected that footage of the attacks would

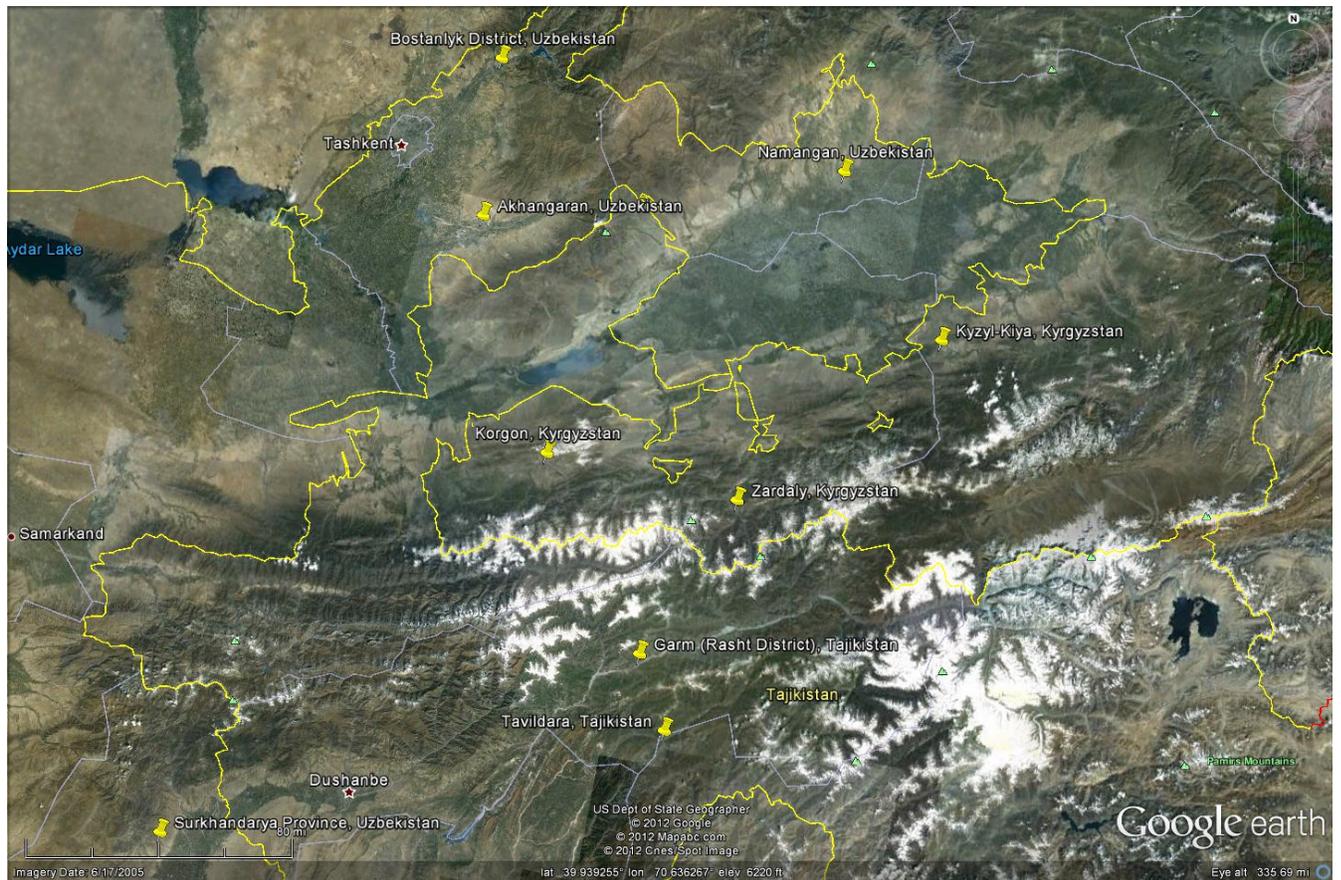
easily show the intended target, but there is no mention in the video of who was attacked. This could have been done during the editing process. The website may have limitations, since not everything the IMU does is necessarily posted to the site. However, the information that is available on *Furqon* shows a viewpoint of the IMU that is available.

Additionally, the language used by the militants involved in attacks shows that the organization has had a turnover of its members. Language may not be the most distinguishing feature of an IMU member, but it does demonstrate that the organization has changed since its creation in Uzbekistan. This is evident in the lists of martyrs (which show fewer members from Uzbekistan or other former Soviet republics), and in the last video, which recaps recent martyrs (from Afghanistan) and shows Odil visiting the FATA, where he attempts through an interpreter to gain support from local groups. The IMU appears to be now made up mostly of members from Afghanistan, and is more frequently partnering with other militant groups.

Finally, the IMU's lack of clear goals makes it difficult to distinguish it from other militant groups. The IMU's original leadership had a precise goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate in the Fergana Valley. Circumstances forced Yuldashev to set aside this goal while the IMU settled and regrouped in Pakistan. After his death the IMU's goals seemed to vanish altogether. A current lack of consistent leadership and subsequent goals has meant that the IMU is difficult to differentiate from other militant or terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan or Pakistan, particularly when the remnants of the IMU rely on others to stay operational. The IMU's goals are now more dependent on and reflective of these other groups. For the United States, the IMU remains a threat while the country's forces remain in Afghanistan, although the threat is more from associated groups with better capabilities. For the governments of Central

Asia, the IMU remains a threat, but a minor one compared to the capabilities of the group in 1999-2000. Ultimately, the group has become more of a misnomer than a threat to stability.

Map and Photographs



In the 1999 and 2000 incursions, the IMU operated out of support bases in Garm and Tavildara, Tajikistan; the incursions took place in Kyrgyzstan (1999, 2000) and Uzbekistan (2000); (Google Earth, November 7, 2012)



Namangan, Uzbekistan, 1991, Tahir Yuldashev (standing, left) and Islam Karimov (seated, center).⁴⁷



Juma Namangani (left) and Tahir Yuldashev (center).⁴⁸



Usman Odil.⁴⁹



IMU members taking *bayat* (Islamic oath of loyalty) to Usman Odil.⁵⁰



Hakimullah Mehsud (commander in the Pakistan Taliban, left) and Usman Odil (right)⁵¹

Notes

¹ Michael Fredholm, "Islamic Extremism as a Political Force, A Comparative Study of Central Asian Islamic Extremist Movements," *Asian Cultures and Modernity* 12 (October 2006) 19-30; Bakhtiyar Babajanov, Kamil Malikov, and Aloviddin Nazarov, "Islam in the Ferghana Valley: Between National Identity and Islamic Alternative," in *Ferghana Valley, The Heart of Central Asia*, ed. S. Frederick Starr (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2011), 317-321.

² Fredholm, "Islamic Extremism as a Political Force,"; Gretchen Peters, *Seeds of Terror* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009), 130-133.

³ Viktor Kurganov, "Terroristy nanesli udar po tsentru Tashkenta, Karimov obshchaet obrubit' im ruki," *Kommersant*, February 17, 1999, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/213169?isSearch=True>, (accessed October 17, 2012); Dmitry Alyaev, Viktor Kurganov, and Boris Mikhailov, "Tashkent prodolzhayut vzryvat'," *Kommersant*, February 18, 1999, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/213278>, (accessed October 17, 2012); Bakytbek Beshimov, Pulat Shozimov, and Murat Bakhadyrov, "A New Phase in the History of the Fergana Valley, 1992-2008," in *Ferghana Valley, The Heart of Central Asia*, ed. S. Frederick Starr (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2011), 221; Vitaly V. Naumkin, "Militant Islam in Central Asia: The Case of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan," *Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies Working Paper Series* (2003).

⁴ Bakhrom Tursunov and Marina Pikulina, "Severe Lessons of Batken," *Conflict Studies Research Centre* (November 1999), www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/ca/K28, (accessed October 17, 2012); Michael Fredholm, "Islamic Extremism as a Political Force, A Comparative Study of Central Asian Islamic Extremist Movements," *Asian Cultures and Modernity* 12 (October 2006) 19-30; Dmitry Alyaev and Boris Volkhonskiy, "Otkryt vtoroy vakhkhabistskiy front islamskie boeviki nachali boi v Kirgizii," *Kommersant*, August 25, 1999, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/224241>, (accessed March 30, 2012); Yuri Stepanov, "Kirgiziya spravitsya s boevikami sama no rossiyskim oruzhiem," *Kommersant*, August 31, 1999, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/224611>, (accessed March 30, 2012); Yuri Chernogaev, "Na pamiirskikh banditov potratili \$15 mln," *Kommersant*, October 20, 1999, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/228154>, (accessed October 17, 2012).

⁵ Fredholm, "Islamic Extremism as a Political Force,"; Yuri Chernogayev, "Uzbekskie islamisty poshli po chechenskoy dorozhke i otkryli vtoroy front," *Kommersant*, August 8, 2000, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/154876?isSearch=True>, (accessed October 17, 2012); "Na Uzbekistan napali tadjhiki," *Kommersant*, August 9, 2000, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/154976?isSearch=True>, (accessed October 17, 2012); "Terroristicheskiy internatsional voyna v Tsentralnoy Azii prodolzhaetsya," *Kommersant*, August 15, 2000, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/155386?isSearch=True>, (accessed October 17, 2012); Ivan Sidorov, "Tashkent stal prifrontovym gorodom," *Kommersant*, August 23, 2000, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/156033?isSearch=True>, (accessed October 17, 2012); Said Dzhangir and Vasiliy Mikhailov, "Uzbekskie boeviki rasseyany," *Kommersant*, August 25, 2000, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/156181?isSearch=True>, (accessed October 17, 2012).

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¹¹ Feruza Zhani, "Shto takoe «Soyuz islamskogo dzhikhada»: Vydumka spetssluzhb ili «dochka» «Al'-Kaidy»?," *Fergana.ru*, September 28, 2009, <http://www.fergananews.com/article.php?id=6311>, (accessed October 17, 2012).

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¹⁴ See: Furqon, <http://furqon.com/>, (accessed October 17, 2012).

¹⁵ In the Soviet education system in Uzbekistan, Uzbek was written using the Cyrillic alphabet (the same alphabet that Russian is written in). After Uzbekistan became independent, the government switched from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet.

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