

Unraveling the Mystery of the Tashkent Bombings: Theories and Implications

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Although the international community has given some attention to Islamic extremism in Uzbekistan and to Uzbek president Islam Karimov's latest crackdown on the religious opposition in his country, the explosions that rocked Tashkent in February 1999 have never been adequately explained. In this article, we analyze several theories related to the terrorist attack, its exploitation by the Uzbek government to justify massive human rights abuses, and its meaning in the context of the threat of Islamic extremism in Uzbekistan. We conclude with some policy recommendations for the U.S. government on how to deal with this strategically located country.

The Explosions in Tashkent

On 16 February 1999, six bombs exploded in Tashkent, killing sixteen people and injuring more than one hundred. The attack, which targeted key government buildings, called the stability of the nation into question for the first time. Two hours after the explosions, before an investigation had been started or any arrests made, President Karimov and the heads of the Uzbek security service and police announced that Islamic militants were responsible. They soon named militant Islamic leaders in exile, including the political head of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Tohir Yoldosh, and its military commander, Juma Namangoni, as the masterminds behind the explosions. Less than two weeks later, the Uzbek authorities expanded their list of suspects to include Muhammad Solih, leader of the opposition Erk (Freedom) Party, who has lived in exile since 1993. All three men were accused of conspiring to forcibly take over the government.

The IMU responded by calling for the Uzbek government to be overthrown and for government officials to be put on trial. In August 1999, it declared a jihad (holy war) against the Uzbek government. In summer 1999, IMU fighters invad-

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ed the Batken area in south Kyrgyzstan, aiming to reach Uzbek territory and set off an Islamic revolt there (described in further detail below). The IMU and another radical Islamic group, Hizbi-Ut-Tahrir (Party of Freedom),¹ claimed that Karimov is “a Jew and an enemy of Islam.”²

On 5 August 2000, clashes between Uzbek government forces and Islamic fighters in mountainous areas of southern Uzbekistan resulted in about fifteen reported deaths and many more casualties. The IMU claimed responsibility for the operation. The same day, dozens of armed militants, supposedly also IMU fighters, invaded Batken area in southern Kyrgyzstan, marking what could be the beginning of a new stage in the conflict between Uzbek authorities and Islamic fighters. A week later, fighting occurred in a mountainous area sixty miles from the capital city of Tashkent. In Uzbekistan, official reports said that government troops lost at least twenty people; Kyrgyzstan reported thirty deaths. There have been no credible reports on losses among Islamic fighters.

The 1999 explosions in Tashkent occurred over a period of one and a half hours, in several locations in downtown Tashkent. According to official information, four or five armed men drove a car packed with explosives to the main entrance of the Cabinet of Ministers building a few minutes before the expected arrival of Karimov to speak before the country’s top leadership.³ The bombers parked the car there and escaped, after which the bomb went off. Several minutes earlier, reports indicate, another car explosion and shootout had already occurred a hundred meters away, distracting the guards.

According to the official version, the terrorists fled the scene of the attack,⁴ and some were able to leave Uzbekistan (downtown Tashkent is just twelve to fourteen miles from the Uzbek-Kazakh border). The authorities responded by arresting hundreds of individuals, without providing sufficient evidence by international norms. In most cases, the only evidence to support the charges was confessions and other forms of testimony. In light of numerous incidents—documented by Uzbek and international human rights groups—of Uzbek law enforcement agents’ obtaining confessions and testimony through torture and police planting weapons, narcotics, and antigovernment leaflets on suspects, such evidence should be viewed with suspicion.⁵

In January 2000, on the eve of the holy Moslem holiday of Ramadan, the Uzbek government announced the execution of several alleged participants in the 16 February bombings.⁶ The alleged terrorists were sentenced to death in summer 1999, after a partially closed, unfair trial, which even their relatives were not allowed to attend. Confessions were the only evidence presented at the Supreme Court hearings that determined their fate. The defendants described their own roles in the attack, as well as those of IMU leaders Yoldosh and Namangoni. Others testified about suspicious meetings and connections between Solih and the IMU leadership. Most defendants declared that they took part in the bombings and were planning to forcibly establish Islamic rule in the country.

Responding to journalists just after the death sentences were handed down, Karimov expressed what seemed to be his dissatisfaction with the court’s decision, saying that “these young men are our children and we have to treat them accord-

ingly.”⁷ Though most independent observers believe that Karimov himself determined the court’s ruling, the statement caused some hope that he would commute the death sentences to long jail terms. However, the men were later executed.

As human rights groups have extensively documented, the judiciary in Uzbekistan exhibits little independence from the executive branch, especially in political cases. Judges tend not to require proper investigative techniques or adequate evidence to support charges, and they usually ignore testimony that contradicts the conclusions of the police or prosecutors. Typically, claims by defendants that their confessions were obtained through torture and that evidence was planted by police are also ignored.⁸ Because of these critical flaws in the country’s judicial system, there are serious doubts about the extent of the guilt of the accused terrorists.

Who Is behind the Bombings?

Because information in Uzbekistan is under tight government control and because the county’s nonfree media circulate government propaganda, the full truth about the 16 February bombings may never be known. Karimov detailed the purported sequence of events in a 19 February statement:

A GAZ-21 car produced in 1960 drove up to the entrance to the building of the Cabinet of Ministers, the government building at 10:50 [local time]. This car stopped at the main entrance to the building and the attackers got out of the car. Pretending that the car engine had broken down, they opened the trunk of the car and started to move away from the car quickly. Guards standing close by, sensing something was wrong, followed them. In the middle of Independence Square, the young men pulled out two sub-machine guns and started firing back [at the guards]. Of course, there were casualties, but as yet there was no explosion. . . . [T]he previous explosion took place at a distance of about 200 meters further down near the *Iskra* cinema; it was not as powerful, but this explosion was intended to divert attention. Generally speaking, all five explosions . . . apart from [the main] one were to divert attention.⁹

Possible explanations or theories for who is behind the bombings immediately focused on five major groups of suspects. First, the Uzbek government’s official explanation pinpointed Islamic militants who, together with some opposition figures previously considered secular and democratic, were attempting to assassinate Karimov, take over the government, and establish an Islamic state.

The official Uzbek government version leaves much to be desired. The bomb allegedly aimed at Karimov exploded in an area protected by tight security, outside the Cabinet of Ministers’ building, during a meeting of the country’s top leadership, which Karimov was to address. It is hard to imagine that a car full of armed men and explosives could get anywhere near the building during such an important meeting. In addition, the car that carried the bomb, a GAZ-21, is a cheap, old model dating from 1960, nothing like the sleek, newer cars that are usually seen dropping off high-rank officials there. Nevertheless, the bombers reportedly drove up to the building’s front entrance just a few minutes before Karimov’s arrival, left the car and the explosives, then somehow escaped the scene of the crime.

On 3 March 1999, the Uzbek ambassador to the United States, Sodik Safaev, presented quite a different version. He explained that police and security guards

were distracted by gunfire coming from a nearby government building.¹⁰ Because of that diversion, the bombers were able to break the police cordon, deliver and set the bomb at the main entrance of the Cabinet of Ministers building, then escape. Why only one and not several security cordons protected Karimov and the rest of the government's top leadership from such an attack remains unclear. Even if the explanation is taken at face value, it is hard to imagine how the bombers escaped through what must have been a large security detachment in Independence Square (*Mustaqillik Maydoni*), a wide-open, public space, in broad daylight. It would be analogous to terrorists driving a rusty old Volkswagen van to the front entrance of the Capitol building during the president's annual State of the Union address, exploding a bomb, and getting away.

Of course, it is possible that the bombing and the bombers' escape were made possible by extreme incompetence on the part of Uzbek security forces and police, who had never faced such a serious threat to the country's leadership before. Also, the IMU's open call for violence against the Uzbek government and its subsequent armed incursion into Kyrgyzstan show that its leadership is capable of violent acts. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that the IMU's worst rhetoric and its invasion of Kyrgyzstan took place after the bombings, largely as a reaction to the government's crackdown on religious dissenters.

Second, some have suspected that the bombings are the responsibility of Russia, which may have been retaliating for Uzbekistan's decision, just a few weeks before the bombings, to pull out of the CIS Collective Security Treaty. Moscow may also have been attempting to re-establish tighter control over Central Asia.

Suspicious of Russian complicity can in this case safely be dismissed as a knee-jerk reaction common among some Western experts and in many former Soviet states, some of whose leaders, with varying degrees of credibility, regularly accuse the Russian government of trying to destabilize the "near abroad" to further their imperialistic aims. Ironically, of all those suspected of being behind the bombings, it was Moscow that benefited the most from the terrorist attack in Tashkent, which helped Russia to considerably strengthen its influence in Central Asia.

Before the explosions and the Batken incident in August–October 1999, Tashkent was clearly decreasing its dependence on Russia and establishing closer ties to the West, especially the United States. However, as a result of the real threat to the Tashkent regime posed in 1999 by the Islamic opposition, Karimov was forced to re-establish his weakened partnership with Moscow. The reason for this is simple: Although the United States and NATO support the fight against international terrorism and Islamic extremism, Western governments have publicly urged the Uzbek president to soften his repressive policies and tolerate more political and religious freedom.¹¹ Karimov has often indicated that such freedom could lead only to more instability and could be a big step toward turning his country into another Tajikistan. In addition, the Islamic opposition is the only indigenous force outside the government capable of toppling him from power, and Karimov has consistently shown that he is not at all willing to accept even peaceful, democratic challenges to his position.¹²

Russia does not express such human rights concerns. It is more than ready to provide support that is not in any way linked to Uzbekistan's progress in what Karimov feels are dangerous democratic reforms. In addition, Russia's second war in Chechnya, which it portrays as a war against Islamic fundamentalism, has brought Moscow and Tashkent closer together, as have allegations that Chechen fighters supported Uzbek extremists.

During Russian president Vladimir Putin's visit to Tashkent in May 2000, Karimov stated that "his country cannot defend itself and therefore needs Moscow's military help." Putin responded by declaring that any threat to Uzbekistan is a threat to Russia.¹³ In late May, Russian officials warned the Taliban that Russian forces could strike camps in Afghanistan where Chechen and Uzbek rebels were supposedly training. In contrast, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's trip to Uzbekistan, as well as those of the directors of the CIA and FBI, in spring 2000, produced considerably less mutual understanding and no comparable promise of support against Islamic extremism.

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The third possible explanation for the Tashkent bombings is that forces in the Tajikistan government were retaliating against alleged Uzbek support for uprisings in northern and southwest Tajikistan, organized by Colonel Mahmud Hudoyberganov, in 1995–98. There are reasons to believe that Tashkent also supports Dushanbe's former prime minister and current Tajikistan opposition leader Abdulmalik Abdullojonov. Both exiled men are believed to be in Uzbekistan.¹⁴

In addition, Uzbek authorities have accused Tajikistan, particularly the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), which is dominated by the Islamic political movement, of providing bases and training to Uzbek Moslem extremists. UTO leaders, particularly its former chief commander Mirzo Ziyoev, currently the minister of rescue and emergency situations of Tajikistan, have close ties to Uzbek fighters, who until recently were part of UTO armed units and were fighting against Tajik government forces. Juma Namangoni was considered Ziyoev's right hand man and personal friend. In late 1999, in May 2000, and even in August 2000, there were several reports, mainly from the Tajik government, that Namangoni and his troops had left Tajikistan for Afghanistan, where they could seek the support of the Taliban.¹⁵ However, the August 2000 events indicate that many IMU fighters are likely still in Tajikistan.

No proof has emerged that points to direct Tajik governmental involvement in the Tashkent bombings, and the Uzbek government never took such speculation seriously, at least not publicly.

Fourth, some of Karimov's political opponents, such as leaders of the banned Birlik and Erk parties and the IMU, alleged that he ordered the bombings to jus-

tify a crackdown on dissidents.¹⁶ Given the dearth of reliable information and the weakness of the official Uzbek government explanation, that allegation, although it sounds bizarre, cannot be dismissed outright.

Uzbek society today is socially, politically, and religiously polarized. When average Uzbeks compare their wages (\$8–10 per month, only enough for bread and tea) with the extreme wealth of a small group of “new Uzbeks,” mainly high-ranking officials and successful businesspeople who tend to be close relatives of people in the government, they naturally feel resentment. Peasants on collective farms often do not receive their salaries for years, and the rate of unemployment among youth is about 30–40 percent. Some dissidents believe that the Uzbek government, to justify its own legitimacy and ensure its hold on power in such an explosive situation, is trying to create new “enemies of the people,” instigate a new wave of repression against dissent, and strengthen its already huge security and police forces.

Some supporters of the theory that Karimov himself was behind the bombings point out that the six explosions occurred over about one hour in different locations. If terrorists really wanted to eliminate Karimov and overthrow the government, they would have concentrated all the bombs in the one place where he and the country’s leadership were to be.¹⁷ However, there are obvious advantages to mounting a multipronged attack on a city, creating as much panic and confusion as possible to facilitate an escape.

Nevertheless, there is not sufficient evidence that Karimov ordered the bombings himself, and it is not clear how he would benefit by showing the weakness of his security agencies, which are the main pillars of his regime. Additionally, Karimov most likely did not need such an attack to justify to the West or to the Uzbek people his past and current crackdowns against his opponents. Although the harassment of independent Islamic and secular activists in Uzbekistan since 1992 has received some criticism from the international community, the West in general continues to provide at least some support to the Uzbek government, particularly since 1994–95. The West considers Tashkent a potential counterbalance to Russian attempts to dominate the region and evidently sees Karimov’s government, bad at its human rights record is, as better than the perceived alternatives of chaos or an Islamic revolution in the country.

Finally, there is the conjecture that former Uzbek high government officials (the first vice-premier, a few provincial governors, and heads of state agencies) who had been fired during a November 1998 anticorruption campaign initiated by Karimov may have planned the attack, with the help of some colleagues who may have feared that they would be next. Such officials, facing corruption charges, could have collaborated with terrorists to eliminate the country’s leadership and thus save themselves from being prosecuted. At the scene, high-ranking security officers tied to such a group could have allowed the bombers to bypass security. However, there were no reports of large-scale firings or arrests of security officials after the bombing, which, in the face of such gross negligence or dangerous plotting, would logically follow the near elimination of the country’s top leadership.

The first and main author of this theory was Russian journalist Arkady Dub-

nov, who suggested it during an interview with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) the day after the explosions in Tashkent and also in an article published ten days later.¹⁸ Dubnov implicated Ismoil Jorabekov, the former first vice-premier of Uzbekistan, who was considered Karimov's right-hand man until he was fired in November 1998. The Russian journalist also alleged that two wealthy Uzbek businessmen with supposed ties to Jorabekov could be involved in the conspiracy. Though Dubnov's theory may have certain grounds, its weakness is proved by the fact that the individuals he named have not been prosecuted; the two Uzbek businessmen have apparently never even been questioned. Moreover, several months after the Tashkent bombings, Karimov returned Jorabekov to the government as head of the important State Agency of Water and Irrigation. Later, Jorabekov became Karimov's state adviser.

As it seems that few people, aside from Islamic fanatics, would be willing to undertake such an extremely dangerous mission, the Uzbek government's version of the bombings does have some weight. But given the lack of independent information sources in the country, the seriously flawed justice system, and the weaknesses in each of the above-mentioned explanations for the attack, the truth of who was behind the attacks will probably never be known.

Human Rights Implications

As with past instances of alleged antigovernment activity (the murders of officials in Namangan province, in 1996–97; the alleged terrorist training in Turkey of twenty-one young Uzbeks by Erk party activists, reported in 1994), the Uzbek government clearly is using the Tashkent bombings as an excuse to intensify its crackdown on religiously based and, to a lesser degree, secular dissent. There are serious grounds to believe that the Uzbek authorities jailed over five thousand people after the February bombings.¹⁹

Since the government has largely succeeded in neutralizing the country's secular opposition, only Moslems who are not affiliated with the country's officially sanctioned, tightly controlled religious structures remain as potential centers of opposition. In today's Uzbekistan, even wearing a beard, a sign of Islamic piety, or religious clothing can lead to arrest if the person is not a member of the official clergy. With no distinction made between truly dangerous Islamic fanatics and peaceful Moslem believers who do not subscribe to the dogma of the country's official religious structures, and with the near-total suppression of prodemocratic, secular movements, political Islam is the main viable source of opposition to the government. At a time when social pressures are building, the Uzbek government, by seeking to suppress dissent in the name of avoiding an Islamic revolution, may instead be hastening the country toward one.

The Moscow-based Memorial Human Rights Center, the Union of Councils' Central Asian Human Rights Information Network, the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan, the Independent Human Rights Organization of Uzbekistan, and Human Rights Watch documented about a thousand possible political and religious prisoners in Uzbekistan.²⁰ Most of these prisoners appear to have been jailed for nonviolent religious or political activities. Some of them might have

committed minor violations of the law, but it is strongly believed that the severity of their sentences is disproportionate to the severity of their alleged offenses. For instance, suspected Islamists were sentenced to fifteen years of imprisonment for alleged membership in the banned Hizbi-Ut-Tahrir party and for possession of some leaflets and other party literature. There is no credible evidence that most of these prisoners have committed violent or serious crimes, despite government assertions to the contrary. The prosecution of many of them was clearly politically motivated and in most cases was a result of the government's campaign against the independent Islamic movement. There are probably many political prisoners in Uzbekistan whose prosecution has not been reported.

There are disturbing indications that, rather than trying methodically to uncover the identities of the real culprits behind the Tashkent bombings, the Uzbek authorities are engaged in a panicked witch-hunt. Of course, some panic is understandable. One has only to recall the initial accusations of Moslem terrorism in the immediate aftermath of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing to see how even a stable democracy like the United States can succumb to irrational speculation in the face of terrorist attacks. The difference between the United States and Uzbekistan is not only that American law enforcement officials' higher levels of professionalism and technical know-how led to the much quicker discovery of the real criminal but that the United States is a country governed by rule of law.

The Targeting of Muhammad Solih

Muhammad Solih, chairman of the banned opposition party Erk, who was granted the right to run (unsuccessfully) against Karimov in the December 1991 presidential elections,²¹ is now one of the chief suspects in the bombing investigation. The 1994–95 charge that Solih and a few of his supporters recruited twenty-one young men from the Qashqadaryo region of Uzbekistan to come to Chechnya and Turkey for terrorist training²² has resurfaced.²³ Solih and some of his followers are now accused of carrying out terrorist training, once again in Turkey and Chechnya, in 1997–98, and of being behind the February explosions. It appears likely that Solih did recruit young Uzbeks for some sort of bodyguard training in 1994. However, in light of the Uzbek government's practice of bringing unproven charges against dissidents, the current accusations against Solih are suspect.

On the other hand, in an interview with RFE/RL, Solih admitted that he met Tohir Yoldosh several times in Turkey, but he did not disclose the goals of these meetings or any agreements reached there. Solih also said that he introduced Yoldosh to Zelimkhan Yandarbiev, the former acting president of Chechnya. Yandarbiev, who is considered to be a radical Islamist, is a long-time personal and political friend of Solih; they are both writers and became friends in the 1970s. Though such close political connections are not sufficient to prove criminal accusations, they look suspicious for a politician who claims to be a leader of the democratic opposition. In addition, in 1994, Solih made several statements (one of them was aired during an interview broadcast on the Russian Service of RFE/RL in October) to the effect that he considered violence and war possible ways to resolve Uzbekistan's problems.

On 16 March 1999, RFE/RL reported that Karimov had asked Interpol to arrest Solih and extradite him to Uzbekistan.²⁴ However, Solih continues to live in relative safety in Europe. Despite his suspicious behavior, it is important to emphasize that no sufficient evidence has been offered by the Uzbek government to support their claims that he is a terrorist. Uzbek authorities jailed three of Solih's brothers, sentencing them to ten to fifteen years in prison. One of them, Rashid Begjon, was in prison between 1994 and 1996 for disseminating calls to hold democratic elections. Muhammad Begjon, another brother of Solih, was reportedly arrested in Kyiv, with three other Uzbek citizens, members of Birlik and Erk, at the request of the Uzbek authorities. On 18 March 1999, they were extradited to Uzbekistan and charged with participation in conspiracy to forcibly overthrow the government and with involvement in the preparation of the February explosions.²⁵

The Batken Incursion

In August 1999, a few hundred armed IMU fighters entered the mountainous area in the southern region of Kyrgyzstan and announced their intention to reach Uzbek territory. They crossed the Kyrgyz border from Taval-Dara, Tajikistan, where Uzbek Islamic fighters have had bases for the past few years. Their numbers had increased considerably after the mass arrests of Moslems that began in December 1997 and particularly following the postbombing crackdown in 1999. IMU fighters captured several villages and took a dozen hostages, including a Kyrgyz general and four Japanese geologists.

The IMU took responsibility for the invasion and declared a jihad against Karimov's government. The crisis lasted several weeks and led to the deaths of twenty-seven Kyrgyz soldiers and civilians, with many others wounded. The IMU, whose losses were not disclosed, eventually released the hostages and went back to their bases in Tajikistan. A few months later, there were minor clashes between Islamic fighters and local police, this time near Tashkent. Although there were reports that the government of Tajikistan had expelled the IMU and that the IMU fighters had gone to Afghanistan, the threat remained that a repeat of the Batken events could take place, as it did in August 2000, in a very violent and bloody conflict.

Policy Implications for the West

The U.S. government reacted to the threat of Islamic extremism in Central Asia and to the Batken hostage-taking by including the IMU on its list of terrorist organizations and offering \$10 million to Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan to strengthen their borders and fight terrorism, narcotics, and arms smuggling. However, support offered by Washington to these three Central Asian states is meager compared with U.S. support to Colombia, which faces similar problems related to terrorism and the drug trade. Although Colombia and the related Panama Canal issue are much more important to American interests, Uzbekistan's problems—Islamic extremism, the drug trade, and the need to promote democracy and stability—directly bear on U.S. interest in reliable access to the region's significant natural resources. In addition, the United States has a certain amount of political

and moral responsibility for the creation of radical movements in Afghanistan, a country whose problems are intimately intertwined with the civil war in Tajikistan and Islamic extremism in the region as a whole.

Uzbek officials explicitly linked the Tashkent bombings to Osama bin Laden's terrorist network.²⁶ Those allegations were a blatant appeal for U.S. assistance against common enemies. Whether or not the bombings are a result of an international terrorist conspiracy, Tashkent seems to be betting that the United States will turn a blind eye to human rights abuses committed in the name of punishing Islamic terrorists and stemming the growth of fundamentalism in the region. Reportedly, German and American experts on explosives assisted the Uzbek authorities in their investigation of the bombings.²⁷ Certainly, that is a positive step. However, Western participation in the investigation was most likely limited to forensic tests rather than focused on police practices, human rights abuses, and the subservience of the judicial branch.

A 5 March 1999 *New York Times* editorial entitled "Unstable Autocracies in Central Asia" stated that the U.S. policy of supporting dictatorships in Central Asia and the Caucasus to promote stability is shortsighted, because harsh dictatorships tend to be inherently unstable.²⁸ While short-term stability can create a friendly business climate for American firms, the corruption, lack of rule of law, and widespread governmental interference in the economy that are characteristic of Central Asian dictatorships actually drive away long-term investment. Long-term stability is especially critical to the oil, gas, and mineral sectors, the principal potential source of wealth in the region and one of the main reasons for Central Asia's strategic importance.

If present trends continue, Uzbekistan could dissolve into chaos, dragging the rest of the region down with it. Continued economic decline, overpopulation, a dangerously high rate of unemployment, growing wealth inequality, and greater repression of nonviolent dissent may well lead to the further radicalization of the opposition. The greatest fear of both the Uzbek governing elite and its Western backers may become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Supporting stability and a secular regime in Uzbekistan, a key country in an important region, is clearly in the U.S. interest. But the current artificial and perhaps temporary stability, based largely on oppression, is most likely unsustainable. The best way to guarantee stability is not increased repression but gradual political and economic reform and dialogue with what remains of the moderate opposition, both Islamic and democratic. If coupled with legal and reasonable steps to protect Uzbek society from terrorism, that can create opportunities for a nonviolent transition to a more open, prosperous, and stable society.

NOTES

Parts of this article first appeared at www.fsmonitor.com and in the *Turkistan E-Newsletter*, in March 1999.

1. The Hizbi-Ut-Tahrir Party advocates the return of the Caliphate, a theocratic state that united the Moslem world in the Middle Ages. Though this group in Uzbekistan is in radical opposition to a secular form of government, there was no credible report about it committing acts of violence or calling for violence. A significant number of Moslem

activists jailed after the February 1999 bombing in Tashkent are alleged members of this party.

2. See, for instance, the statement of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan aired by Iranian Mashhad radio, in the Uzbek language, 11 April 1999 (available in English from Foreign Broadcasting Information Service, 12 April 1999), in which the IMU leader says: "If one of the reasons for this [persecuting and harassing Islamists] is Karimov's hatred for this religion [Islam] then the other reason is his family upbringing. The real origin of this blood-thirsty [man], who is full of hatred for Islam, is Jewish and it is futile trying to conceal this from the people. The reason why Karimov declared a war against fathers and women was because his father, a Jewish father, is unknown. This is why Karimov has sold himself to godless forces in the world, which are the relentless enemies of Islam and the Muslim families and community."

The statement continues that "in order to keep his post and continue his hostility to Islam and the Moslems, the son of a Jew, Islam Karimov, sold himself for the sake of protecting the interests of Jews and their ally, America. The foreign interests of this outcast Jew are as follows: (1) to give Jews and Christians a chance to secure a predominant economic, political, and military status in Uzbekistan; (2) to implement the policy of eliminating Islam in Uzbekistan as part of a general policy being pursued by America and Israel in the world; (3) to turn Uzbekistan into a country which is hostile to close neighboring states like Russia and China, in particular against neighboring Islamic states like Afghanistan and Iran."

Hizbi-Ut-Tahrir made similar statements several times in its leaflets circulated in Uzbekistan. For instance, the leaflet dated 20 April 1999, available in English at www.hizbi-ut-tahrir.org, says, "He [Karimov] is a Kafir [infidel] who does not believe in Islam. His mother was a Jewess and his father is not known. Thus, he is a Jew." A 14 June 1999 leaflet says that Karimov is a Jewish "enemy of the Koran and Prophet Muhammad and collaborates with Israeli intelligence service." A 9 April 2000 statement issued by Hizbi-Ut-Tahrir in Uzbekistan mentions "the Jewish unbeliever Karimov, brought up by such aggressor countries as Russia and Israel," available in English at www.khilafah.com/culture/leaflet3.htm.

3. Some reports, however, said that there were two terrorists in the car.

4. On 19 February 1999, Karimov stated that the terrorists "left virtually no tracks and escaped." (See "Uzbek Head Tells Press in Kazakh Capital about Tashkent Blasts," BBC Monitoring Service, 22 February 1999.) Some initial reports said that two attackers were killed (see, for instance, the Associated Press report by Timofei Zhukov, "Nine Die in Uzbekistan Blasts," 16 February 1999, available at <http://www.newsday.com/ap/rnmpin0i.htm>), but later it was reported that "officials have since suggested that they [the dead victims] were passers-by" (BBC Monitoring Service, 17 February 1999). No suspect was reported arrested or detained at the scene of the terrorist attacks. Most of the defendants brought to trial on charges related to the February 1999 bomb explosions were arrested at least several days later (many outside Uzbekistan), a few on 16 February at the Tashkent airport. Sodiq Safaev, Uzbekistan's ambassador to the United States, also confirmed, at a conference held at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute of the John Hopkins University, in Washington, D.C., on 3 March 1999, that all the terrorists were able to escape the scene of the attack.

5. See U.S. State Department, "Human Rights Report: Uzbekistan," for 1998-1999 (http://www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/). See also Abdumannob Polat, "Can Uzbekistan Build Democracy and Civil Society?" in *Civil Society in Central Asia*, ed. M. Holt Ruffin and Daniel C. Waugh (Seattle: Center for Civil Society International, University of Washington Press, 1999), 135-57; and Abdumannob Polat, "Trying to Understand Uzbekistan's Dilemma: The Need for a 'New Marshall Plan' for Central Eurasia," *Central Asia Monitor* 1 (1998): 13-20.

6. Reported by RFE/RL, 7 January 2000. See also *RFE/RL Watchlist*, 13 January 2000.

7. Reported by RFE/RL, late June 2000. See also *RFE/RL Watchlist*, 13 January 2000. The report received little coverage in the Western media.

8. See endnote 5.

9. See "Uzbek Head Tells Press in Kazakh Capital about Tashkent Blasts," BBC Monitoring Service, 22 February 1999.

10. At a conference held at the Central Asia–Caucasus Institute of the John Hopkins University, in Washington, D.C., on 3 March 1999.

11. See, for instance, statements made by U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright during her visit to Uzbekistan in April 2000, particularly in her speech at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy, in Tashkent, such as "indiscriminate government censorship and repression can cause moderate and peaceful opponents of a regime to resort to violence." She added that in Uzbekistan, as elsewhere in Central Asia, "governments remain too involved in the economy and the daily lives of individuals" and called for greater media freedom, respect for human rights, and swifter and more effective economic reform. See "Albright Warns on Repression in Uzbekistan," *RFE/RL Newslines*, 17 April 2000, available at www.rferl.org. See also U.S. State Department spokesman James Rubin's press release, 20 August 1999, available at 999/ps990820c.html.

12. Despite Karimov's numerous promises, particularly since 1996, to register non-governmental human rights organizations, peaceful parties, and movements in opposition to his government and to permit independent media in the country, he has not legalized a single independent or opposition group and has taken no steps toward creating a free media. The lack of political freedom in Uzbekistan has been documented in numerous reports, including the U.S. State Department's "Human Rights Report: Uzbekistan."

13. Russian Public Television (ORT), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and CNN aired these statements by Karimov and Putin on 18 May 2000, but they received little coverage in the Western news reports and media.

14. See, for instance, *RFE/RL Newslines*, 9–13 November 1998; see also Bruce Pannier's report published by RFE/RL on 19 June 2000, available at www.rferl.org/uzbek, and a roundtable discussion on the Russian program on Central Asia, 28 June 2000, available at www.rferl.org/russia.

15. See, for instance, *RFE/RL Newslines*, 25 August 1999, 26 April, 5 May, 19 June, and 28 June 2000.

16. Uzbek opposition leaders presented such arguments in their numerous interviews with RFE/RL, BBC, VoA, and Mashhad (Iranian) radio broadcast to Uzbekistan, as well as in some publications. See, for instance, BBC Monitoring Service, 24 February 1999; "Government Organized Bomb Blasts—Opposition Emigré," *Uzbek Weekly Review*, 14–20 February 1999; and Iranian Mashhad radio, 17 February 1999, for the interview with Abdurahim Polat, the opposition Birlik (Unity) party head and brother of one of the authors of this article.

In an interview on Mashhad radio, the Erk leader, Muhammad Solih, stated that "the government of Uzbekistan knew beforehand that explosions were being prepared. [I]f it knew this beforehand then why it did not take measures? Because it did not want to take measures. On the contrary, in my opinion, until February 16, the National Security Service followed these people's every step—the people who carried out the bomb explosions, and after the explosions they were detained one after another."

In a clear contradiction of his own arguments, Solih added, "Ten days before the explosions, a group headed by the deputy chairman of the National Security Service of Uzbekistan arrived in Turkey and asked permission from Turkish officials to arrest Uzbek terrorists." Solih later added that the explosions "could have been organized by an opposition clan in the structure inside the government" or "by a radical group in the structure of the [Uzbek] National Security Service." See "Uzbek Oppositionist Links Government to 16 Feb. Bombing," Foreign Broadcast Information Service, 25 July 1999.

17. Such arguments were presented by Uzbek opposition leaders in exile during interviews with the RFE/RL, BBC, and VoA Uzbek programs.

18. Arkady Dubnov, "Uzbekistan: Lost Image of Stable Government," STINA News Agency, 27 February 1999.

19. Major Uzbek human rights groups and some Russian and Western observers place the number of prisoners whose jailing was likely politically motivated at about five thousand. However, human rights organizations were able to document about one thousand cases of possible political prisoners. See Vitaly Ponomarev and Nikolai Mitroxin, "List of Individuals Arrested and Sentenced on Political and Religious Motives in Uzbekistan in January 1999–April 2000," Memorial Human Rights Center and Central Asian Human Rights Information Network, Moscow, May 2000. See also Abdumannob Polat, "Uzbekistan: List of 14 Possible Political Prisoners Who Died in Jail, 5 Disappearances, and 505 Possible Political Prisoners," Union of Councils' Central Asian Human Rights Information Network, in cooperation with the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan, 9 September 1999, available at www.fsumonitor.com, http://www.eurasianet.org/cen_eurasia/resource/uzbekistan/links/uzrt916.html, and www.birlik.net.

20. *Ibid.*

21. The elections were considered by most observers to be neither free nor fair.

22. See Abdumannob Polat, "Pursuing Dissidents in Exile: Illegal Activities of Central Asian Security Forces," *Central Asia Monitor* 2 (1995): 33. Shortly after the reports about alleged terrorist training organized by Solih in Turkey, dozens of Erk party members were arrested, and several were imprisoned.

23. *RFE/RL Newswire*, 5 March 1999, www.rferl.org, and *Jamestown Monitor*, 5 March 1999.

24. "...While Uzbek President Confirms Arrests," *RFE/RL Newswire*, 16 March 1999.

25. See, for instance, *RFE/RL Newswire*, 22 February and 20 August 1999; Urgent Action Appeal, Amnesty International, 5 August 1999; Human Rights Watch statement, 19 August 1999; or related cases in the "List of Possible Political Prisoners," Union of Councils' Central Asian Human Rights Information Network.

26. The Moscow-based newspapers *Kommersant Daily* and *Segodnya* reported, on 3–4 March 1999, that Uzbek officials were considering Bin Laden's role in the Tashkent bomb attacks. However, these reports did not present a clear source for the information disclosed, and we were not able to find the original statement issued by the Uzbek authorities. The *Segodnya* article stated that Uzbek authorities claimed that Chechen militant leader Khat-tab and even Muhammad Omar, head of the Taliban, were involved in organizing the February explosions in Tashkent. *Kommersant Daily* reported also that Bin Laden had invested \$150 million in the region, citing the Uzbek special services as saying, "[T]his money was used to organize saboteur training camps." The same newspaper repeated Uzbek officials' accusations about Yoldosh and Solih's role in the Tashkent bomb attacks. Sadiq Safaev made a similar statement at the conference organized by the Central Asia–Caucasus Institute of the John Hopkins University, on 3 March 1999.

27. Ambassador Safaev stated, on 3 March 1999, that German and U.S. experts left for Tashkent on 16 February. The next day, accordingly, a U.S. Department of State representative confirmed that the American explosives experts left for Tashkent on 17 February. At the same time, Tashkent refused Moscow's offer of assistance in the bombing investigation. However, to our best knowledge, involvement of German and U.S. experts in the investigation received no coverage in the media, and their conclusions have not been made public.

28. "Unstable Autocracies in Central Asia," *New York Times*, 5 March 1999.