
Islamic Organizations of Central Asia

Abstract

The article deals with the study of Islamic organizations in Central Asia. The author considers the development of Islamic teachings of different origin on the territory of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. Categorical-conceptual analysis of the term «Islamism» and the main transformations of its perception are presented. In the article the case scenarios of Islamist organizations in Central Asia (recruiting base extension, structural changes) are researched. Particular importance is given to the impact of these organizations on foreign and domestic policy, as well as the security and national interests of the regional states.

Key words: Islamism, Central Asia, Uzbekistan, Russia, Islamic Jihad Union¹, Al-Qaeda², Taliban³, Islamic State⁴.

The paper was written as part of the grant 15–07–00001 «International relations in the context of global processes and security and counter-terrorism issues».

Author

Vasetsova Elena

Associate Professor,
Department of Political Science of the East,
Institute of Asia and Africa,
Lomonosov Moscow State University
(Moscow, Russia).



¹ On June 2, 2006, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation determined «The union of Islamic Jihad» as a terrorist organization, its activity in Russia is illegal.

² On February 14, 2003, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation determined «Al-Qaeda» as a terrorist organization, its activity in Russia is illegal.

³ On February 14, 2003, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation determined the «Taliban» movement as a terrorist organization, its activity in Russia is illegal.

⁴ On December 29, 2014, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation determined the «Islamic State» as a terrorist organization, its activity in Russia is illegal.

Islamism is a complex versatile phenomenon with different forms and manifestations. Today there is no standard universal definition of the phenomenon, which often provokes the substitution of concepts, generates confusion and introduces a lot of people astray.

Before proceeding to study the activities of Islamic movements and organizations in

Central Asia, the definition of «Islamism» should be justified. The term «Islamism» most often refers to a radical political activity under the auspices of the «true» understanding of Islam. Such an understanding of Islamism is close to the definitions «Islamic extremism», «Jihadism», «Salafiyya». At the same time the terms «political Islam» and «Islamism» should not be interchanged. In-

deed, Islamism is directed to a militant political action that gives rise to confusion of the matters. But the concept «political Islam» is much broader than «Islamism». Furthermore, political Islam is a neutral concept related to the whole spectrum of socio-political movements in the Islamic world, and therefore cannot refer to Islamism which is the most radical political Islam trend. Famous orientalist G. I. Mirsky believes that «Islamism could be called Islam, converted into a modern ideology that is perceived by its adherents as a response to the challenge thrown to the Muslim world by Western ideologies and social systems both capitalist, and socialist» [4. — P. 25].

Let us consider the phenomenon of Islamism through the identification of inherent traits and features. First of all, the Islamists advocate the strict compliance with unity of religious and secular principles, seeking to revive some of the original Islamic foundations of socio-political life. As a rule, Islamism supporters require adherence to the Sharia in the most rigorous interpretation and deny any possibility of using non-Islamic experience that leads to dissemination of various phobias and aggravation of hostility towards imaginary enemies. Thus, Islamists have set themselves the task of transformation of the governmental system and society under religious slogans. The agitation of the Muslims of moderate wing in the ranks of supporters of Islamism aims at their further involvement in the fight against the named enemies.

Islamists interpret the Muslim Holy texts radically, ignoring the ideas of peace, mercy and tolerance. Many researchers call modern armed Islamism quasi-religious. For example, the political scientist E. A. Stepanova states, that in Islamism, sincere faith and devoutness are used in communicational and propaganda purposes, and also for moral justification and religious-normative legitimization of the violence used to achieve socio-political goals. The author believes that Islamism is quasi-religious in the sense that it sets goals far beyond theology, and essentially

strives for an alternative social order and an overall system of social organization at the global level. Therefore, religious beliefs for most armed Islamists are basis and defining factor of their activities [5. — P. 128]. The ideas of the Islamists are not shared by all the Muslims. Nevertheless, we have to admit the fact of the rapid spread of the radical interpretation of Islam in the Muslim world. A serious threat to security presents the efficiency of many Islamists to violent actions, such as massive terrorist acts. In this regard, particular concerns arise referring to Islamic radicalization of the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, located in the close proximity to Russian borders.

In Soviet years the population of the Central Asian republics professed mostly moderate wing Islam, and radicalization of the social climate on religious bases never occurred. The center of Islamic learning was the madrasa Mir Arab, located in Bukhara, where most of the clerics received the education.

The Islamist movement originated in the underground and in the early 1990-ies reached the new level of political parties. The first Muslim political organization, the Islamic Party of the Revival of the Soviet Union was established In June 1990. It opened its offices in all Central Asian republics and numbered 10 thousand members at the time of creation. The party merged both moderate wing Muslims (for example, the leader of the organization — Ahmad-Kadi Akhtaev), and radicals. So, among the organizers of the party were Sullana Abdullayev (Abu-Sullana), the associate of terrorist Doku Umarov, who later became the first Naib (Deputy) of Amir of the Caucasian Emirate¹ and the Wahhabi, and one of the ideologists of North-Caucasian militants Bagautdin Kebedov.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the republican party structures became indepen-

¹ On February 8, 2010, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation determined «Caucasus Emirate» as a terrorist organization, its activity in Russia is illegal.

Islamic Organizations of Central Asia

dent, focusing mainly on agitation and propaganda. At the same time the process of rapid radicalization of the Islamist movement started, and in 1996 former members of banned in Uzbekistan political parties and movements, such as Adolat uyushmasi («social justice»), „Islam Kay party Revival“, «Islamic Party of Turkistan, „Islam Lashkarlari“ („Warriors of Islam“) founded the Islamic Renaissance Party of Uzbekistan, fully formed in terms of organization by 1998, and that same year renamed the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The head of the Movement was the native of Uzbekistan Tahir Yuldashev, the military leadership executed the native of Uzbekistan Juma Hodjiev (Namangani), and the head of the Press Center and the Deputy of T. Yuldashev was Mahmud Rustamov (Zubair Ibn-Abdurahman). The goal of the organization was to provide an uncompromising armed struggle against the authorities of the republics of Central Asia and, primarily, with the regime of President Karimov in Uzbekistan. The IMU militants did not stay away from the civil war in Tajikistan, acting on the side of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO). Subsequently, the field commanders of the organization refused to comply with the terms of the agreement between the government and the UTO. In August 1999 so-called Batken events took place when armed groups of the IMU invaded from Northern Tajikistan to Southern Kyrgyzstan, and in October of the same year, the militants were forced out of Kyrgyzstan. Later IMU took the responsibility for the acts of terror in Kyrgyzstan, in Bishkek in December 2002 and in the city of Osh in May 2003. A number of the countries, including Russia and the United States, recognized IMU as a terrorist organization.

Since the Uzbek authorities suppressed the activities of the organization and persecuted members of the organization, the headquarters of the movement were transferred to Afghanistan (Kandahar) and remained there until the beginning of the international counterterrorist operation in 2001. In the course of the counterterrorist operation, the IMU fought against the

coalition forces and during bombardment Namanganiy was killed. The death of the charismatic leader undermined the IMU. Not all members of the organization believed in T. Yuldashev military mastership and considered that the group needed to expand and that it was time for an armed confrontation. The controversy reached its peak, led to a split and the formation in March 2002 with the support of al-Qaeda of a new Islamist organization «Islamic Jihad — Jamaat Mujahideen»¹.

The split, which arose a new organization, occurred on the ground of the outlined long ago disagreement in the IMU concerning the goals of the movement. So, the IMU management considered a priority the fight against the Karimov regime in Uzbekistan. As for radical members of the group, they insisted on expanding of its activities throughout Central Asia and then to the Western countries. For the Taliban and al-Qaeda the created structure was a more attractive partner than the IMU, as the Islamic Jihad — Jamaat of the Mujahideen fought against the forces of the international antiterrorist coalition in Afghanistan and unconditionally supported the global goal of al-Qaeda. Meanwhile, the IMU only occasionally participated in the battles the Taliban and their allies waged in Afganistan. At the head of the Islamic Jihad — Jamaat of the Mujahideen stood the native of Uzbekistan Jalolov Najmuddin. He was supported by Bekmirzayev Ahmad (Malik, Salohiddin), a native of Uzbekistan, and Bimurzaev Zhaksybek (Serik-Omar, Akim, Kazakh-ake), a citizen of Uzbekistan and others holding the same views. This organization is recognized as terroristic in Russia, Kazakhstan, the UK and the USA. The activities of the organization on the territory of the mentioned above countries is banned. The organization is included in consolidated list of individuals and entities belonging to the Taliban

¹ On June 2, 2006, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation determined «Islamic Jihad — Jamia of Mujahideens» as a terrorist organization, its activity in Russia is illegal.

and al-Qaeda or related to them, compiled and updated by the Committee established pursuant to the Resolution 1267 (1999) UN Security Council [3].

In fact, the organization became a Central Asian branch of al-Qaeda and had to create a clandestine network in Uzbekistan and in the border areas of the neighboring countries and at the appointed hour to carry out a terrorist attack. The analyses of financial sources of the group showed that militants had built an effective scheme of material support. The funds received from al-Qaeda, came to A. Bekmirzaev, who determined their further distribution, mostly buying weapons, ammunition and components to explosives, and conducting the transfer of members of the organization to different countries of the former Soviet Union. The leaders of the regional offices of terrorist organizations received money from A. Bekmirzaev and used them for the needs of the group.

The scheme of transfer of funds was unremarkable: the fractional time bank transfers were used, often through the Western Union or money was transferred in cash, as a rule, carried by several people and handed at a personal meeting. This scheme was chosen because it is extremely difficult to keep track of small cash transfers. In addition, the funds were forwarded to people causing no suspicions at law enforcement agencies.

The peak of activity of Islamic Jihad-Gaumata of the Mujahideen in Uzbekistan was the turn of 2003–2004. The members of the organization created a network of underground cells on the territory of Uzbekistan and in Southern Kazakhstan. They've been recruiting population, especially religious young people, spread ideas to overthrow the existing state system, made improvised explosive devices and planned to conduct terrorist acts.

Beginners first took basic training at a safe house or houses, and then promising recruits were sent to the camps of al-Qaeda in South Waziristan (Pakistan) for the improvement of various skills of organization and carrying out of terrorist acts, and mastering the

technique of psychological treatment and training of future suicide bombers.

As a rule, the potential suicide bombers were picked from the most suggestible members of the group, giving priority to the relatives of the dead militants, mostly to their widows, to whom regional leaders of the organization often remarried to accelerate psychological treatment. In the spring of 2004 the organization implemented a number of terrorist attacks using suicide bombers in Uzbekistan. Then the group changed its name to the Union of Islamic Jihad (IJU). However, the change of the name is not essential for understanding of the actions of the Islamist organization.

The most important goal of the Taliban and al-Qaeda was the withdrawal of the troops of the allies in the international antiterrorist coalition from Afghanistan. Both the Taliban and al-Qaeda supposed Germany the weakest link of the coalition, and a series of terrorist attacks on its territory would force the government to abandon the placement of a military contingent in Afghanistan. The vote in the Bundestag on the question of staying the troops in Afghanistan was to be held in the fall of 2007, and the IJU planned the terroristic attack on the eve of the vote in order to disrupt the authorizing of the mandate. Fortunately, the terrorist attack was prevented.

A trial was held in 2010, in the result of which The Court of Dusseldorf sentenced four IJU members to the deprivation of liberty for terms from 5 to 12 years, finding them guilty of terrorist activities. Two Germans, Fritz Gelowicz and Daniel Schneider, were sentenced to 12 years of imprisonment; two Turks raised in Germany, Adem Ulmas and Attila Selek, received 11 and 5 years respectively.

In their testimony they confessed that in 2006 they came to IJU training camp in Pakistan based by immigrants from Uzbekistan, where they studied terrorist activities [2].

IJU took the responsibility for the bombings in Andijan region on the border between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in May 2009[2].

Islamic Organizations of Central Asia

After the split of the IMU the organization continued its activities, and in the spring of 2001, the movement changed its name to «Islamic Party of Turkestan»¹ («Hezb and — Islami Turkestan», IPT). Armed groups led by T. Yuldashev withdrew from Afghanistan to Pashtun Pakistan provinces of North and South Waziristan, which became a stronghold of the Taliban, joined the Taliban in its fight with the regular forces of Pakistan and the international antiterrorist coalition troops.

Attempts to eliminate T. Yuldashev occurred repeatedly, and the information about his destruction appeared in the media regularly. The most probable date of his death is August 2009 due to injuries from a missile strike of American drone apparatus. Then a series of changes of the organization leaders followed, and, according to the latest data from 2012, it was led by Usman Ghazi. IPT claimed responsibility for organizing a series of terrorist attacks in Kyrgyzstan, committed in Bishkek in December 2002 and in Osh in May 2003. In the middle to the end of 2000-ies the terrorist activity of the IPT began to decline until it drew attention with an attempt to organize a major terrorist attack in Moscow. In the spring of 2013 the Federal Security Service of Russia destroyed in Orekhovo-Zuyevo a group of terrorists preparing a major terrorist attack in the Russian capital, and on June 6, 2013 arrested their leader. The members of the group were Russian citizens, residents of the Republic of Bashkortostan, who received terrorist training on the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan in 2010–2013, which pointed to activation of the IPT and to internationalization of its activities.

In the summer of 2015 the information occurred that IPT sworn to the Islam State (ISIS) [1] recognized as a terrorist organization in a number of countries (banned in Russia). The ISIS claimed «the Khorasan province» including parts of the territories of the Cen-

tral Asian countries, Afghanistan and Iran, one of its regions and the establishment of the Khilafah in these lands determined one of the goals of the organization. The IPT head Usman Ghazi has announced that the organization will now exist in the format of the state formation. U. Ghazi also accused the leadership of the Taliban of lying, cooperation with intelligence services of Pakistan and of going the wrong way. Obviously, this statement demonstrates the struggle between ISIS and the Taliban for a leading role in the region. U. Ghazi urged the Taliban to join the ranks of ISIS, and mitting the refusal began to fight with them. In December 2015 the information was distributed, the authenticity of which is still in doubt. The Taliban spread photos, supposedly of Zabul U. Ghazi killed in Afghan province, close-cropped and shaved, to escape easier from his pursuers.

What are the reasons for joining the IPT to the ISIS? First of all, the ISIS patronage means large cash flows, the IPT needs. The result of it can be an outbreak in terrorist activity in the region since the militants will have to «work out» the money they received. Second, the ISIS membership opens new perspectives for the consolidation of groups in the region. At the time of the oath taking by the IPT it was a conglomerate of heterogeneous, often decentralized national units. During its existence the organization has not approached its goal — to overthrow the regime of President Karimov, to damage substantially the secular authorities or seriously destabilize the situation in the region. Therefore, the transition of the IPT under the auspices of the ISIS brings much opportunity to reach a new level, to get a number of advantages over other groups, and become much more serious threat to Central Asian countries. Third, ISIS is popular in certain circles of the population of the Central Asian republics, and, obviously, the recruiting base of the organization will significantly increase. Thus, in the near future we can presuppose the spurt of activity of Islamist groups in Central Asia.

¹On February 14, 2003, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation determined «The Islamic pariah of Turkestan» as a terrorist organization, its activity in Russia is illegal.