

“hd Study

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Humanitarian engagement with armed groups

The Central Asian Islamic opposition movements

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Humanitarian engagement with armed groups

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Executive summary

This paper offers for consideration issues affecting humanitarian action in countries of Central Asia (mainly Tajikistan, Uzbekistan) with an emphasis on the relationship between humanitarian organisations and Islamic opposition groups. The Islamic opposition groups matters to humanitarian organisations because they have strong views, particularly on the western interpretation of humanitarian action, and they can exert influence over public opinion. Humanitarian organisations need to devise strategies to overcome negative perceptions, which can cause their work in the region to suffer.

This paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of dynamics at play between religion, local culture, and humanitarianism. An analysis of three Islamic opposition groups: the Islamic Renaissance Party, Hizb ut-Tahrir, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, serves as background information to understand some of the political and religious dynamics in the region. Humanitarian organisations share the same political and social space, whether or not they have direct contact with those groups. In most cases, there is no contact, nevertheless, humanitarian organisations are observed and judged by these groups.

For the purpose of the survey, the Centre interviewed more than a hundred religious and political leaders, some of whom were self-proclaimed *Wahabi* and/or members of Islamic opposition groups as well as former military leaders, mainly in Tajikistan. Negative perceptions of humanitarianism seem to be shared widely, particularly since the appearance of a more radical brand of Islam among opposition groups.

Central Asian people expect humanitarian actors to be neutral and independent of government structures while respecting the internal affairs of state. They suppose humanitarian action to be impartial, reaching the people most in need, and hope that humanitarian activities would also encourage local initiatives. Among the most interesting aspects of the views researched are the religious references and, as a corollary, the suspicion that humanitarian action actually has missionary goals. They seemed almost unanimously wary of hidden agendas and intelligence gathering by foreign humanitarian organisations.

The findings of the case study lead to the conclusion that humanitarian actors must intensify their effort to better understand local dynamics and, conversely, be better understood by the local people. Donors must understand the importance of investing in such an effort, which is paramount to future effective and safe humanitarian action.

This paper is part of a wider series of case studies on humanitarian engagement with armed groups. The first case study – humanitarian engagement with Colombian paramilitaries – was completed, shared and discussed with interested organisations in October 2002 and can be obtained from the Centre.

1 | Introduction

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of Islamic opposition groups in Central Asia, and of their relationship to humanitarianism. The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue believes that this understanding is necessary for effective humanitarian action in the region.

The former Soviet Central Asian region, defined for the purposes of this paper as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, has opened up to international humanitarian action only in the last decade. With the demise of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian republics unexpectedly reached independence in 1991. International organisations had little or no knowledge of the political, social, and cultural nature of this region. Other than a few enlightened specialists, no one knew about a region that had lived under completely different conditions and rules for over seven decades.

Ten years on, from being almost unknown to outsiders, the region has become one where international presence is normal. The United Nations, including its specialised agencies, as well as international NGOs,

Western and Islamic, have been working in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan for several years.

War broke out in Tajikistan in 1992, within a few months of independence, and humanitarian organisations started to arrive on the scene to alleviate the suffering of the victims of conflict. Initially few, the humanitarian organisations in Tajikistan increased rapidly in number after 1996. From the beginning, the culture shock was intense. The local people had no notion of Western humanitarianism and its principles. Conversely, the humanitarian organisations were unprepared to meet a population whose cultural references and values were different from those known in most other parts of the world.

In the early phase of the humanitarian effort, emergency action took precedence over careful cultural preparation. Humanitarian staff did not have much time to explain their action to the people in need and to disseminate knowledge and understanding about their mandate, motivations, working methods, and structures to the local population. It was hoped that the good intentions of humanitarian action would be self-evident. A lot of effort has been made since those early days but a survey conducted by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue shows that misconceptions are still current and potentially dangerous.

We do not intend to suggest that there is continued danger of an outbreak of renewed conflict in Tajikistan or elsewhere in the future. In addition, our intention is not to suggest that religious movements represent the only threat to stability in the region. Other factors such as commercial interests and disputes over natural resources also present a potential for conflict.

We have chosen to analyse the Islamic movements for two reasons:

- 1) they are potentially capable of expressing the growing popular discontent with the social and economic situation in the area, and
- 2) their opinions, including on humanitarian action, have some influence on people and might shape the relationship with humanitarian organisations.

Therefore, we believe that it is necessary to examine the perception of humanitarianism by political and religious leaders, as well as by the wider population.

Although this case study focuses on Islamic opposition groups, governments are also essential players in the political arena of Central Asia. Not only do governments exert considerable control over humanitarian activities, and largely disapprove of humanitarian contacts with banned Islamic opposition groups, they, or their agents, also commit abuses of Human Rights or International Humanitarian Law (during the civil war in Tajikistan). A separate study on the relationship between humanitarian actors and government forces would be a welcome addition to the present study.

¹ Transliteration for most foreign words and names (mainly Arabic, Russian, Tajik or Uzbek) follows common usage except in quotes where the original spelling has been retained.

² Olivier Roy argues that the Islamic movements in Central Asia are based on regional interests and identity rather than ideology and religion. The Tajik–Uzbek divide has often affected Islamic movements, and Islam confers only ‘ideological coherence on an ethnically defined [as opposed to religious] mobilisation’. Olivier Roy, *L’Asie centrale contemporaine*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 2001, pp71–73.

For the purpose of this survey, the Centre interviewed over 100 religious and political leaders, some of who were self-proclaimed *Wahabi*¹ and/or members of Islamic opposition groups as well as (former) military leaders, mainly in Tajikistan. Certain negative perceptions of humanitarianism seem to be widely shared, particularly but not only since the appearance of a more radical brand of Islam² among opposition groups. Humanitarian organisations share political and social space, whether or not they have direct contact with political groups. In most cases, there is indeed no contact, but humanitarian organisations are nevertheless observed and judged by these groups. Former programme co-ordinators of humanitarian organisations confirmed that the specific theme of opposition forces has not been part of their brief. Organisations tend to consider that their personnel’s previous experiences and on-the-job training provides sufficient learning to deal with these issues.

The Centre’s previous work on the relationship between humanitarian action and non-state actors, in particular armed groups, includes a generic study on humanitarian engagement with armed groups, and a case study on humanitarian engagement with Colombian paramilitaries. In Central Asia, the term ‘humanitarian engagement with armed groups’ is directly applicable only to the past experience in Tajikistan when humanitarian organisations were regularly in contact with field commanders of the opposition forces. The relationship between opposition forces and humanitarian actors, however, remains relevant.

This paper considers the Central Asian situation, from both political and sociological points of view. Section II presents the historical context of the region, and the nature of religious influences in Central Asia. Section III is an analysis of three key opposition groups – including those who do and do not use violent means.

Section IV focuses on perceptions of humanitarianism, beginning with a brief description of the international humanitarian presence in Central Asia, and then analysing numerous interviews conducted in the region between July and October 2002. Experienced local and expatriate researchers conducted interviews concentrating on former field commanders (in Tajikistan), political opposition leaders, religious dignitaries, and believers, including in small neighbourhood mosques and other public places.

Section V is a summary of the past and current experience of humanitarian engagement in Central Asia, and presents specific recommendations for future activity. Section VI summarises the learning presented in this paper, and highlights key recommendations. Finally, the questionnaire used to conduct the interviews can be found in Appendix I, and Appendix II contains maps of Central Asia.

2 | Historical background

A. Pre-Soviet and Soviet times

Before 'sovietisation', the many Central Asian ethnic groups were integrated in three principalities: the emirate of Bukhara, the khanate of Kokand, and the khanate of Khiva. These principalities, headed by an emir or a khan, were ruled by Islamic law, and the society was organised according to Islam, brought into the region in the 8th century. However, it took many centuries before all the remote areas of Central Asia had completely turned to Islam. Zoroastrianism for example continued to co-exist. Some nomadic tribes on the steppes did not espouse Islam until the 19th century and, even then, they preserved some of the shaman traditions of their ancestors.

From the mid-19th century onwards, the conquering army of imperial Russia took hold of Muslim territories from the distant steppe. Tashkent became the seat of the General Government of Turkestan, placed under tsarist military responsibility. Thereupon the three principalities were progressively reduced to a protectorate despite Muslim resistance led by Sufi brotherhoods against the 'infidel invader'.

An indigenous resistance movement proved the last barrier to assimilation of Central Asia into the Soviet Union. In the first half of the 1920s, more than 20,000 people still fought Soviet rule in Central Asia. The Russians applied a derogatory term, *Basmachi* (which originally meant brigand in the Turkic language of Central Asia), to the groups. Although the resistance forces did not use this term, it nonetheless entered common usage. Except for remote pockets of resistance, guerrilla fighting in Tajikistan ended by 1925 and the defeat of the *Basmachis* caused as many as 200,000 people to flee the region.

Between 1924 and 1936, Stalin created the five Central Asian republics,³ by emphasising cultural and linguistic differences between the various ethnic groups, with the aim of eliminating all forms of a united Muslim political elite.

B. Religious repression and resurgence

As a result of Soviet manipulation of national and religious identities and the weak nation-building experience of the now independent Central Asian countries, the population has been experiencing a profound identity crisis since the early 1990s. This partly explains the resurgence of radical Islam in the region.

Traditionally, Central Asian people practice Sunni⁴ Islam of the Hanafi School, under significant influence from Sufism. Sufism preaches direct communion with God and tolerance towards other forms of worship. According to Sherzod Abdullaev, an expert at the Institute of Philosophy at Tajikistan's Academy of Science, Central Asian Islamic practice is characterised by its tolerance towards local traditions: 'Our religiosity is

³ The aim of Stalin's partition of Central Asia was to 'create nations', as described in: Olivier Roy, *L'Asie centrale ou la fabrication des nations*, Seuil, Paris, 1997.

⁴ There is a small Shiite minority living in the cities of Bukhara and Samarqand. The Shiite Ismaeli community, whose spiritual leader is the Aga Khan, populate the poorest part of Central Asia, the Tajik Nagorno-Badakhshan, a plateau in the high mountains of the Pamir.

⁵ BBC interview, September 2000.

⁶ IK Usmonov, 'Some specifics of religious worship in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan', in *Islam and Society in Central Asia*, conference proceedings 14–15 April 2002, Cimera Publications, Dushanbe, p59.

⁷ The founder of this tariqa, Muhammad ibn Baha ad-Din Naqshband, lived between 1317 and 1389. His tomb outside Bukhara is still a place of pilgrimage for Central Asian Muslims.

⁸ BBC interview, September 2000.

⁹ See Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: the rise of militant Islam in Central Asia*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2002, pp26–31.

¹⁰ See Olivier Roy, *L'Asie centrale contemporaine*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 2001, pp64–66.

¹¹ The Library of Congress Country Studies, on-line publication, March 1996. (<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/uztoc.html>)

¹² BBC interview, September 2000.

expressed through ancestral local traditions and customs.⁵ Another Tajik expert also argues that Islam was sustainable in Central Asia, despite Soviet persecution because, 'religious practices are perceived as national traditions'.⁶

Of the many Sufi brotherhoods, or *tariqas*, the most prevalent in Central Asia is the Naqshbandiyya⁷ *tariqa*. According to Sherzod Abdullaev:⁸

'In contrast with other regions, we do not advocate solitary life (hermits). It is easy to live far away from the people. It is better to live among people and not succumb to material temptations. The local Sufis express this through an often repeated phrase: "the hand is at work... the heart is with God". This is very similar to protestant practice.'

Sufi leaders were immensely powerful, and in the 18th and 19th centuries, the leading Sufi families officiated as political advisers and spiritual guides to many of the khans.⁹ The great Sufi families still enjoy prestige and respect. However, these family ties have only partially survived the Soviet period and today political lines cross family lines. Members of one respected Sufi family can find themselves on opposing sides in a conflict.¹⁰

The Soviet assault on religion resulted in the loss of what Islam had accumulated over the previous centuries. While the Soviet authorities were ostensibly promoting Islam (mainly through the Muslim Board of Central Asia, the official, Soviet-approved governing agency of the Muslim faith in the region) they were also working hard to eradicate it through official anti-religious campaigns and severe crackdowns on any hint of an Islamic movement or network beyond the control of the state.¹¹ Sherzod Abdullaev has concluded that 'our traditional sheikhs who derive their genealogy from the great Sufis of the past don't have a deep understanding of the theory and practice of Sufism anymore'.¹² The wider population's general knowledge of the foundations and subtleties of their religion is very patchy.

The Islamic renaissance in Central Asia in the 1980s and 1990s was undoubtedly a reaction to the religious persecutions of the past decades but also to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Located just across the Amu Darya river, the military campaign in Afghanistan was a first opportunity for many Central Asians – soldiers, civilian specialists and translators – for contact with their neighbours which reminded them of their religious and, in the case of Tajiks, their national and ethnic roots. They returned home as changed men.

The emissaries of foreign Islamic organisations offering propaganda material, religious literature, and financial support also played an important role in the 're-Islamisation' of Central Asia. For example, it was with financial support from abroad – mainly from Saudi Arabia – that a significant number of mosques were built in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a time when Central Asia showed first signs of an economic crisis. In 1989, only 17 mosques were active in Tajikistan but three years later

there were almost 3000. Without the support from abroad, this frenetic construction effort would not have been possible. The Islamic clergy made no secret of this financial support and claimed that it was coming from private sources – mainly Saudi Arabian citizens of Central Asian origin.

In parallel, religious literature from abroad started to appear in Central Asia. Saudi Arabia donated 50,000 copies of the Koran in March 1990, and in 1992 an Iranian bookstore, *Al-Hoda* opened in the centre of Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan. This shop occupies the same premises as one formerly selling books for communist youth organisations, and, on the wall where a picture of Lenin used to hang, there is a portrait of Ayatollah Khomeini.

The weakened foundation of traditional Muslim identity among the local people, coupled with a dramatic downturn in economic and social security, created open and fertile ground for new Islamic ideas, however foreign these were to the local traditions.

C. The civil war in Tajikistan

With the disappearance of the Soviet structure, the Central Asian people found themselves independent nations. The transition was not easy. The Central Asian Soviet republics had been entirely dependent on the rest of the Soviet Union for most of their markets and vital infrastructure, including electricity and transport. Trade and supply links broke down, and poorly organised but highly corrupt privatisation processes were introduced. The result was an impoverished and disoriented population ruled by the same, now rich, ex-neo-communist elite. In those days:

‘A Kalashnikov and a Molotov cocktail constituted a strong argument in a political dispute and could turn anybody into an influential figure in national history. Any armed man, however powerful, could easily burst into the office of a high-level government official and – swearing and waving a rifle – demand what he considered his due.’¹³

¹³ Interview with a local journalist, August 2002

In Tajikistan, the transition was mired in a bloody civil war. One of the main reasons for the armed confrontation in Tajikistan between 1992 and 1997 was the profound and long-standing rivalry between different regional clans. These clans had not ceased to exist even during the Soviet period although, under Moscow’s pressure, they functioned only covertly. With the demise of the Soviet Union, they rapidly re-surfaced.

Four clans can be identified in Tajikistan: the Northern clan from Khujand, the Southern clan from Kulyab, and clans from Garm and the Pamir. This division does not account for all of the ethno-regional differences of this small mountainous country where more than 100 ethnic groups and nationalities live together. For example, ethnic Uzbeks make up more than 15 per cent of the total population but do not participate in the local clan structure. The Tajik regional clans are not based on blood and family ties but on regional solidarities and utilitarian networks that emerge according to need. The Soviet collective farm

(kolkhoz) system, for example, continues to define regional allegiances. An ex-communist director of a collective farm in Garm, for instance, will not hesitate to adhere to the ideas of the Islamic party and join forces with the local mullah to fight against an enemy from another region.¹⁴

¹⁴ Olivier Roy, *L'Asie centrale contemporaine*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 2001, p50

From the 1940s, power in Tajikistan was controlled by representatives of the economically better developed Northern region. When Soviet influence drastically weakened in 1991, the other regional clans, who considered themselves as having been deprived of their rightful shares of wealth and influence, expressed their demands for more power and a fairer distribution of the country's riches. This was the starting point of the conflict in Tajikistan.

The conflict also had a religious aspect – between partisans of an Islamic government and those who favoured a secular model. Among the former, members of the Garm clan were a majority. Religious tradition among people from Garm is relatively strong, and it can be argued – more cynically – that Islamic ideas and religious arguments were used by the leaders of the Garm clan to strengthen their leadership role in the country. When the Kulyab and Khujand clans rose to defend their prerogatives, they could not claim religious ideas as a driving force for their struggle, as these ideas had already been 'taken' by the Garmi. They therefore resorted to post-communist slogans and symbols. The regional identity of the parties to the conflict was so strong that during the civil war the term '*Kulyabi*' was synonymous with 'neo-communist supporting the government' and 'Garmi' with 'Islamist'.¹⁵

¹⁵ Olivier Roy, *L'Asie centrale contemporaine*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 2001, p63.

On 7 May 1992, after a marathon political demonstration that turned into a confrontation between government loyalists and demonstrators, the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) was granted seven ministerial posts and entered government.

In their official press statements, the opposition leaders more than once stated that their goal was to educate the people in the Islamic spirit, which in their view would take 50 to 60 years, but many had the impression that the opposition was not going to wait that long. The events of May 1992, when a coalition government composed of Pamiris and Garmis was put in place while their rivals from Kulyab and Khujand had to leave Dushanbe, only reinforced this impression. Remembering those days, one of the then leaders of the Islamic movement, Davlat Usmon has said:

*'The mistake of the Islamic opposition was that at the beginning it expressed its opinions too clearly. It frightened Russia and neighbouring Uzbekistan, who started to set Tajikistan's regions against each other. What had started as a confrontation of ideas turned into a confrontation between regions.'*¹⁶

¹⁶ Interview, August 2002, Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

In the regions, the Garmis mounted a blockade around Kulyab and expelled the Kulyabis from the Vakhsh Valley. In September 1992, the

Kulyabis prepared their counter-attack and the Garmis and Pamiris were ethnically 'cleansed' from the Vakhsh Valley. Their houses were systematically burned down and an identity card mentioning a place of origin in the Garm Valley or the Pamir meant a death sentence. One woman interviewed in Kulyab recounted:

*'During the war they come to get my husband who fortunately wasn't home at that time. They wanted to kill him because his roots are in another region that was against our city. He had never lived there and had no connections with that region. They recognised him by his face and his nose. Many people were executed like that. We could not turn to international organisations because they were only just appearing at that time.'*¹⁷

¹⁷ Interview, Kulyab, Tajikistan, 42 year old woman

In December 1992, thousands of Tajik refugees, most of them Garmis, crossed the Amu Darya into Afghanistan. In November the Southern clan from Kulyab together with the Northern clan from Khujand as well as ethnic Uzbek supporters had re-entered Dushanbe, defeated the coalition government and installed at the helm of the state the, as yet, largely unknown Emomali Rakhmonov, a former director of a kolkhoz from Dangara, near Kulyab.

The conflict produced up to one million refugees and IDPs. Tens of thousands died, although the number of victims has never been officially established (estimates vary from 50,000 to 100,000 dead). The fighting caused huge damage to the economy of the country, and official sources estimate that the damage was worth \$6 billion, a huge burden for this tiny country.

From their refuge in Afghanistan, the Islamic opposition leaders launched attacks in the high mountain areas of southeastern Tajikistan and re-conquered some territory. They were joined at that time by a small group of democratic forces with which they formed the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), under the undisputed leadership of the IRP.

In December 1996, the Russian Federation, decided to support the signing of a peace agreement between the Islamic opposition forces and the Tajik government, brokered by the United Nations. The terms of the agreement – signed in 1997 by the President of Tajikistan, Emomali Rakhmonov, and the leader of the UTO, Sayed Abdullo Nuri – granted the opposition access to the state structures of Tajikistan, this in itself was a unique experiment in the recent history of the region. According to the agreement, the opposition was to receive 30 per cent of all government posts; the armed forces, police and security apparatus were to be reformed; the democratic processes in the country were to be improved, leading to elections (including the legalisation of banned political parties) and the formation of a new government. In a separate protocol, the parties agreed on mechanisms for the integration of UTO fighters into the armed forces of Tajikistan. The Tajik refugees and IDPs were also to be repatriated.

D. After September 11, 2001, and the ‘war on terrorism’

The events of September 11, 2001, put Central Asia suddenly at the forefront of international attention and world politics. The international military intervention in Afghanistan that led to the defeat of the Taliban has left US and European military forces stationed in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. They are also using Tajikistan’s air bases for military action in Afghanistan. The establishment of a Western military presence in the region, and the increased funding available for military and non-military co-operation programmes targeting the Central Asian states, have modified how the governments of the region deal with what they perceive as security threats. Governments in Central Asia are inclined to consider that Western governments would support any anti-opposition operation labelled as ‘anti-terror’ action.

Before September 11, 2001, ‘Islamic terrorism’ had already made its appearance in Central Asia. In 1999 and 2000, there was a series of bomb blasts in Tashkent, and military incursions in the border regions of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan were attributed to radical Islamic groups, mainly the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, whose links to the Taliban have since been established. The Uzbek authorities reacted swiftly and launched a repressive wave of law enforcement measures against Islamic elements, putting hundreds of suspects in jail under sometimes dubious charges. This represented an intensification of the government repression of Islamic forces, which had started in the early 1990s.

Central Asian terrorism drove the regional states apart. Despite repeated calls for increased co-operation in order to fight terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism more efficiently, the governments of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan became increasingly opposed to each other. Borders were closed, trade routes and diplomatic relations were severed and mutual accusations of aiding and abetting terrorists were frequently voiced, including by the respective heads of states.

3

The actors: opposition groups in Central Asia

Opposition groups in Central Asia come in various forms. This section does not aim to present a comprehensive picture of the many groups and subgroups forming the political arena of Central Asia. Instead, we concentrate on three groups that had or still have a specific opposition role in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and, to a lesser extent, Kyrgyzstan.¹⁸

The three cases analysed in this section are very different from each other. The Tajik civil war gave rise to the United Tajik Opposition (UTO),

¹⁸ For particularly useful information on the three armed groups mentioned in this study, see Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: the rise of militant Islam in Central Asia*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2002.

formed of several political movements of which the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) was the most important driving force. Although the civil war in Tajikistan was settled in 1997 and the country has experienced a period of stabilisation since 2000, the analysis of the IRP and its role in the civil war enables understanding of local belligerent dynamics.

The second group, Hizb ut-Tahrîr, is a political party advocating a change in government to create the original caliphate under which all Muslims of the world would be united. The most important feature of this group is its stated non-violence. Hizb ut-Tahrîr has strong views on humanitarian action and shares political and social space with humanitarian actors. It is included in this analysis because its views are relevant to humanitarian organisations.

The third group, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), is outlawed by the Uzbek government and included on the US list of terrorist organisations. Unlike Hizb ut-Tahrîr, it uses violent means to achieve its goals, one of which is to overthrow the Uzbek government. Despite the fact that there is no direct contact possible with members of the IMU, humanitarian organisations must be aware of its ideology as, again, they share the same political and social space. While the IMU has been weakened by the war on terrorism and the military campaign in Afghanistan, most analysts agree that there are remnants of the organisation that have survived and might be regrouping.

A. Tajik Islamic opposition

As a political movement, the Islamic opposition was born in Tajikistan in the late 1970s. It was at that time that clandestine schools teaching the Koran appeared and clandestine mosques were created, often in the form of traditional Oriental tea houses (*Chaikhana*). In opposition to the official pro-government Islamic clergy, the 'bearded' mullahs made their appearance. Already a few cells of what was to become the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), were established at that time.

At first, their leaders did not express any radical goals. Their main preoccupation was a battle for a purer Islam, a return to the old religious roots, freed from all alien rules imposed by the Soviet authorities. It is argued that the IRP's initial aspirations were of an economic nature and that it was economic and not political Islam that was at the origin of the Islamic opposition in Tajikistan.¹⁹ Their call for the application of Islamic rules was an attempt to end the erratic tax legislation that changed constantly. The Islamic rules on tax would have been, they argued, a fairer alternative. It is indeed important to remember that the first leaders of the Islamic opposition never advocated that Tajikistan leave the USSR and always proposed that the reform process should happen within the structure then in place.

Less than a year after its official registration in November 1991, the IRP claimed more than 30,000 members in Tajikistan. This figure was articulated in 1992 by the then deputy head of the party, Saidibrahim

¹⁹ Stéphane Dudoignon, presentation at the Graduate Institute of International Studies, Geneva, 24 January 2003.

Gadoev. The IRP was the second strongest party in Tajikistan after the Communist Party.

The martial spirit of the IRP appeared later, during the fight with the government. As Davlat Usmon, the former Chief of Staff of the armed Tajik opposition explains:

*'Before May 1992 we did not think of taking up arms. But, when on April 27–28 a rumour appeared that the government was preparing an armed militia we also started to act. We armed the first 40–50 people. All they had for weapons were one pistol, two grenades and 30–40 hunting rifles. We then started to prepare Molotov cocktails. Before the attack on the Presidential Palace, during the night from May 4, when two officers of the government forces come to the demonstration, I asked one of them: 'Major, do you see a war?' and I asked the demonstrators to show their weapons. They showed bottles with inflammable oil. There were about 1500–2000 bottles.'*²⁰

²⁰ Interview in Dushanbe, August 2002

The troops of the Tajik opposition were made up of volunteers coming together in April 1992. They were part of the demonstration on Shahidon Square in front of the Presidential Palace, and were then unarmed. Marching along the Square, they were showing their determination to fight and defend themselves. One of their leaders, Eshon Kiomiddin (Said Gaziev), publicly declared that 27,000 fighters were prepared. 'It was a bold rather than a realistic number. But his declaration ignited rumours that both sides were arming their people, which forced each side to think about the need to actually arm their people', said Sul-ton Hammad, former security adviser to the leaders of the Tajik opposition²¹.

²¹ Interview in Dushanbe, August 2002

Other sources reported that the opposition started to form its militias long before the civil war started. One former active opposition fighter reported that on February 1992 in Garm, some such uncoordinated odd units were created. They were a combined group of 185 men. In villages, informal leaders recruited people they personally knew or who were family members. The number of these units increased as the Tajik civil war developed. Their task was to defend their village against the government forces.²²

²² Interview, August 2002

The history of Hakim, one person interviewed by the Centre, is revealing. He had no connections to politics in his country, and worked as an accountant in the South of Tajikistan: '[My] job was to count money. I took up arms in September 1992, when I saw with my own eyes that the Uzbeks living in our area were arming themselves.' Hakim saw a white car driving into the region every night. This regularity made him suspicious and, one night, Hakim and some friends stopped the car and discovered that it was carrying weapons. Hakim is convinced that 'if we hadn't taken these weapons for ourselves they would have killed us like they have killed a lot of people in Garm'.²³

²³ Interview, August 2002

Local representatives of the Islamic Renaissance Party as well as some Islamic religious leaders played an important role in the formation of the armed units of the opposition. Some mullahs, close to the IRP, preached about each Muslim's duty to fight for the jihad. Later, when many people were forced to flee to Afghanistan or Russia, many refugees became fighters, not necessarily voluntarily. Many young people seemed to have no other choice. Had they refused they would have been shunned by their community.

The Islamic opposition's initial weakness and defeat of 1992 can be partially explained by its lack of a unified command structure, no central training facility and no experienced military personnel. Sulton Hammad has reported that the opposition started to improve its military strategy when the fighters, together with tens of thousands of civilians, took refuge in Afghanistan, and when a return within a short time seemed impossible.²⁴ With the help of the then Afghan authorities and Afghan *mujahidin*, including ethnic Tajiks (one of whom, Ahmed Shah Massud, was then Minister of Defence in the Afghan government), training camps were organised for the Tajik opposition fighters.

²⁴ Interview, August 2002

Former field commander, Mirzo Zioev recalls that the three months' training course under Ahmed Shah Massud was 'as good as the training at the military academy'²⁵. The instructors were Afghan *mujahidin* as well as Arabs and Pakistanis. Although difficult to assess in detail, it seems that Iran also provided some financial and material support for the military training of the Tajik fighters. Later, after the Islamic opposition forces had managed to push the government out of the territory they had lost at the beginning of the war, the training camps were transferred back to Tajikistan and set up in the Tavildara Valley.

²⁵ Interview, August 2002

According to Davlat Usmon, former chief of staff, during the entire civil war between 1992 and 1997, the Tajik opposition had about 5000 men under arms, although only about 2000 took an active part in combat.²⁶ While formally united in the UTO, the military autonomy of field commanders controlling a territory (mainly valleys) was high. UTO military formations had the character of self-defence forces set up to protect a region or a village from the attacks of the government forces. These local groups were later reinforced or complemented by fighters trained in and/or coming from Afghanistan or Uzbekistan. The central command of the UTO was only a loose political structure rather than a military one. Occasions have been reported when field commanders openly defied decisions of the central leaderships. This meant that authorisations received from the leadership of the UTO did not mean automatic humanitarian access to all areas formally under UTO control. Local commanders needed to be consulted too.

²⁶ Interview, August 2002

If the opposition's arsenal was initially nothing more than a few hunting rifles and some Molotov cocktails, it quickly developed. For example, when they occupied the Presidential Palace, the opposition forces already had 250 automatic weapons and one tank. Also, on May 5, an entire OMON unit (Special Forces) of the Ministry of the Interior joined the

opposition. This contributed 12 tanks, and 600 Kalashnikovs. Local police stations also quickly became a good source of weapon procurement.

²⁷ Unconfirmed sources maintain that in August 1992 the Russian military contacted the Islamic opposition to offer support, which was declined. One Islamic leader's response was: 'we had already prepared the pilaf ourselves and didn't need any advisers [i.e. the Russian military] to dish it out and sit at the table'. Interview, August 2002.

Representatives of the opposition like to explain that the distribution of weapons was also covertly encouraged by Moscow,²⁷ interested in regional conflicts on its periphery in order to weaken the now independent former Soviet republics. This would reinforce their dependency on the former centre. A number of field commanders also acknowledge that some Russian military personnel proposed weapons deals to the opposition fighters. These deals were probably proposed on a personal basis. Even Davlat Usmon recognises that such deals happened, although he considers that they did so rarely. Others acknowledge that they received weapons from a group of Afghan *mujahidin* supported by Pakistan. There is also testimony that automatic rifles and ammunition were delivered by Iran. One international observer witnessed an Iranian helicopter landing near a Tajik refugee camp near Qonduz, Afghanistan, in 1995, from which automatic rifles were unloaded.

²⁸ Statement to journalists in 1992, and repeated in public several times since.

In a conversation with journalists in May 1992, Jurabek Aminov, the deputy head of the Tajik KGB, supposed to be sympathetic to the Islamic forces, said that only about 10–15 per cent of the opposition's weapons were from Afghanistan.²⁸ The weapons from Afghanistan came mainly through Ahmed Shah Massud. It is established that after the signing of the peace agreement in 1997, the Islamic fighters repatriated from Afghanistan took back 182 tons of weapons. Unfortunately, it is said, this not insignificant amount of weapons was 'lost'. Nobody can say what happened to it or where it is hidden. It is possible therefore that at least part of this weaponry is hidden away to be available in future.

Since the signing of the peace agreement in 1997, the government and the opposition have been able to implement a process of integration of opposition military forces into the official security and military structures and, at the same time, to marginalise or eliminate the majority of those opposition commanders refusing integration. According to Davlat Usmon, former chief of staff of the Tajik Islamic Opposition, more than half ('if not 70 or 80 per cent') of the former fighters have put down their arms and turned to work or have been integrated into the structures of the government armed forces.

²⁹ Interview, August 2002.

Only a small number of former opposition fighters remain opposed to the peace agreement. In the last two or three years, however, these remaining elements of opposition have either been physically eliminated or, in the case of a few small armed groups, have gone underground and are hiding.²⁹ These local armed groups have thus lost many of their followers and they currently operate as small groups mostly surviving through criminal activities. It seems that these groups have dropped their social or political agendas, and are currently trying to survive economically, tapping into the resources made available by the growing role of the criminal, or at least grey, economy of Tajikistan.

B. Hizb ut-Tahrîr (the Liberation Party)

The ideological basis of Hizb ut-Tahrîr is the idea of re-establishing the original caliphate of a powerful and unitary government that would unite all Muslims worldwide, using non-violent means. In the words of the party's representative in Western Europe: 'Hizb ut-Tahrîr's goal is to recreate the original caliphate where the entire Muslim *umma* would live under the authority of one Caliph'

³⁰ Telephone interview with Hizb ut-Tahrîr representative in Western Europe, December 2002.

*'Hizb-ut-Tahrîr is clearly against using violence to achieve its goal. Our method is to work with the people, open their eyes and work on their awareness of how corrupt the regimes are. Once that change has happened in the minds of a majority of the people, they will automatically call for the caliphate to be restored.'*³⁰

It is not made clear how exactly the caliphate would be established, how its economy would work, how equality among citizens would be guaranteed, or how it would relate to non-Muslims.

The aims of Hizb ut-Tahrîr have been described by Ahmed Rashid as:

*'probably the most esoteric and anachronistic of all the radical Islamic movements in the world today. The HT has a vision of uniting Central Asia, Xinjiang Province in China, and eventually the entire umma under a Caliphate that would re-establish the Khilafat-i-Rashida, which ruled the Arab Muslims for a short time after the Prophet Muhammad's death in 632. Under the Khilafat-i-Rashida, which lasted until 661, the message of Islam spread rapidly across the Middle East and Africa through conquest and conversion. This period is revered by many radical Islamic movements, including the Taliban, as the only time in Islamic history when a true Muslim society existed.'*³¹

³¹ Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: the rise of militant Islam in Central Asia*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2002, pp115–116.

According to Muslim belief, the world is divided into two areas: Dar al-Islam (the land of Islam) and Dar al-Kufr (the territory of the unbelievers). The first is where the government is based on Islamic precepts and the power is protected by Islam and the people. The notion of Dar al-Islam is not limited to Hizb ut-Tahrîr. It is widely shared among Muslims and has a long history. However, as is with many radical Islamic movements, Hizb ut-Tahrîr interprets the concept in its own way; it has for example determined which were the countries that belonged to Dar al-Islam and which ones were part of Dar al-Kufr. Today, even the governments that pretend to be 'Islamic' are not eligible, according to Hizb ut-Tahrîr, to be considered Dar al-Islam because the Islam practiced there is not pure. Criteria for inclusion in the Dar al-Kufr are the existence of: a constitution (the Koran is the only legal document admitted); parliament (the caliph has the supreme power); presidential election (the caliph is a descendant of the prophet³²); secular laws regulating social relationships (the Islamic law is divine).

³² It is interesting to note that only one of the four original Caliphs was a relative of the Prophet.

³³ Bakhtiar Babajanov, *OSCE report on religious extremism in Central Asia*, 25 April 2002, p59.

The financial sources of Hizb ut-Tahrîr are not clear. Analysts consider that they are 'rather solid. This claim is supported by the extensive international network of the Party and its abundant literature.'³³ It can

³⁴ ICG Asia Briefing Paper, 30
January 2002, p6.

also be said that the party does not need many financial resources to run its activities in Central Asia. The International Crisis Group believes that foreign missionaries were instrumental in setting up the first Hizb ut-Tahrîr cells in Central Asia.³⁴

It is generally considered that the first Hizb ut-Tahrîr cells appeared in Central Asia around 1992–1994, principally in Uzbekistan’s Fergana Valley, Andizhan and around Tashkent. It seems that the party is divided into cells, or *halk*, generally composed of five members who, with the exception of their leader, do not know the members of other *halk*. Thus, in case of arrest and interrogation by the police, the risk that other *halk* be discovered and dismantled is minimal. Each member has in turn the duty to recruit potential new members and form a new *halk*. In this way, the membership could theoretically increase exponentially. For the survival of the party, this cell structure is ideal, particularly in Uzbekistan. In the case of so-called non-official or alternative imams, the authorities can easily find them, arrest them, close their mosques, and isolate their followers. In the case of Hizb ut-Tahrîr, this is more difficult.

Before February 1999, Hizb ut-Tahrîr was virtually unknown in Central Asia. Its existence was noticed only after the explosions of 16 February in Tashkent, which the authorities blamed on radical Islamic groups, although not on Hizb ut-Tahrîr directly. In a very short time, Hizb ut-Tahrîr extended its influence over most of Uzbekistan’s territory but also over some border areas of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, particularly in those regions where the population was mainly Uzbek. Therefore Hizb ut-Tahrîr is seen in Central Asia as an ‘Uzbek phenomenon’ despite the fact that this political organisation has long gone beyond Uzbekistan’s borders.

It is difficult to determine the regional centre of the organisation, although one view is that this is in the city of Kara-Su, on the Uzbek–Kyrgyz border. Kara-Su is traditionally considered more religious than other cities of the region, and is the home of one of the most important institutions teaching the Koran. According to a local journalist, Kara-Su can be considered Hizb ut-Tahrîr’s centre within the Fergana Valley.

‘Among the 25,000 inhabitants of this city, two or three thousand are members of Hizb ut-Tahrîr, 85 per cent of which are ethnic Uzbeks, including those who settled here recently because of Uzbekistan’s policy of repression. Those members of Hizb ut-Tahrîr still living in Uzbekistan come here to pray at the local mosque.’³⁵

³⁵ Interview August 2002.

The structure of the party as described above is such that it does not need a strong commanding centre. Even if all followers of Hizb ut-Tahrîr in Kara-Su were in prison, it would not affect the rest of the Central Asian cells.

³⁶ Interview with Jumaboy Niyazov, Deputy Head of the Democratic Party of Tajikistan and co-ordinator for that party in Sogd region, August 2002.

‘Despite the numerous arrests among Hizb ut-Tahrîr members in recent months, at the beginning of August 2002, their literature and leaflets started to reappear around the Central Mosque in Khujand.’³⁶

According to Davlat Usmon, if Hizb ut-Tahrîr has displaced the traditional Islamic opposition in Uzbekistan, in Tajikistan it has contributed to the discredit of the Islamic Renaissance Party:

'After 1997 we would enter government. Many people concluded that the leadership of the opposition had sold out to the government. As a result, Hizb ut-Tahrîr grew even stronger. Under the current circumstances of corruption in the country Hizb ut-Tahrîr's emphasis on social justice is very appealing to the people'.³⁷

³⁷ Interview in Dushanbe, August 2002.

However, Hizb ut-Tahrîr's success cannot be solely explained by its effective structures and the appealing idea of Muslim unity and social justice. It is often argued that, in some ways, the Central Asian governments, particular Uzbekistan's, have contributed to Hizb ut-Tahrîr's rapid expansion. The repression of opponents of all kinds has swelled the numbers of frustrated and resentful people among which Hizb ut-Tahrîr recruits its followers.

As far as can be established, a majority of Hizb ut-Tahrîr members are young people, an important aspect because in Central Asia more than half of the population is under 30. In general, these young members are unemployed, students or young professionals. The relatively high percentage of young people among Hizb ut-Tahrîr members is one of the factors that allowed the Party to survive and develop.

A man interviewed in Sogd region recounted how his 18-year-old son became involved with Hizb ut-Tahrîr:

'He suddenly changed and started to be critical of many established things in our family. For example, he was against putting up a New Year's Tree³⁸. He explained in somewhat strange words that this was against Islam. We studied together the entire Koran and could not find anything prohibiting the New Year's Tree.'³⁹

³⁸ During Soviet times, the traditional Christmas tree was replaced by a New Year's tree in order to circumvent the prohibition on celebrating Christmas. In non-Christian communities, the New Year's tree also became a traditional way of celebrating the New Year.

The father acknowledged that it took a considerable effort to keep his son away from Hizb ut-Tahrîr. He added however that Hizb ut-Tahrîr's influence often wins over parental authority.

³⁹ Interview in Sogd region, August 2002.

It can also be observed that many young followers of Hizb ut-Tahrîr were previously educated by 'alternative' or 'un-official' imams until the latter were ostracised by the authorities. Hizb ut-Tahrîr can therefore count on a number of relatively competent members who have extensive links with the local community and are able to demonstrate a solid adherence to their ideas.

However, Jumaboy Niyazov, deputy leader of the Tajik Democratic Party, has expressed the view that Hizb ut-Tahrîr 'is not a force capable of shaking the foundations of society'. Nevertheless, state persecution of Hizb ut-Tahrîr members tends to increase the regard in which they are held. 'In court, they behave with dignity and this gives hope to many people who feel humiliated and insulted by the authorities. This helps swell the popularity of this organisation.'⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Interview in Dushanbe, August 2002.

Similar worries are expressed by members of the official Islamic clergy (recognised by the government), who see Hizb ut-Tahrîr as a successful and dangerous competitor. An influential Kyrgyz theologian recognises that among the official imams there is not one who could successfully stand up to Hizb ut-Tahrîr⁴¹. The imam at the Isfara Mosque in Tajikistan admits that: ‘the “Hizb ut-Tahrîr problem” is not yet clear to us. We don’t know who is who among them.’ In this confrontation, new for the region, against Islamic movements, the official clergy would like to count on the government’s support. The same imam has also said that ‘if the government does not protect us from them, there will be a problem similar to the one posed by the Taliban in Afghanistan’.⁴²

⁴¹ Interview, August 2002

⁴² Interview in Isfara, August 2002.

Hizb ut-Tahrîr is also opposed by the traditional Islamic opposition in Tajikistan, in particular the (Tajik) Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP). A former advisor to the head of the IRP has reported that: ‘Our leadership considers Hizb ut-Tahrîr a rival, condemns its activities and its stated goals. But some of us are ready to collaborate with them or – at least – not oppose them.’⁴³

⁴³ Interview in Dushanbe, August 2002

A widely held view is that Hizb ut-Tahrîr is still in its initial stage of development: setting up cells and establishing funding, distributing leaflets and religious literature. However, some analysts fear that at least some of their members could turn to violent means if the political situation is exacerbated. A former security advisor to the IRP has confirmed that ‘this risk really exists. For now, they are waiting until the situation has worsened enough. When the situation is ripe, a radical part of Hizb ut-Tahrîr’s members might take up arms.’⁴⁴ The International Crisis Group (ICG) also considers that:

⁴⁴ Interview, August 2002

‘There is little information available about the Hizb ut-Tahrîr’s future plans...[but] there should be some concern in that regard. Many feel that the potential for the Hizb ut-Tahrîr, or at least of those now within its ambit, to resort to force is considerable.’⁴⁵

⁴⁵ ICG Asia Briefing Paper, 30 January 2002, p8.

One sign of internal disagreement on the tactical choice of non-violence is the split within the Party, which occurred in Tashkent in 1999. Observers think that the main argument of the dissidents was that methods should be radically changed, given that many members had been arrested due to almost open distribution of leaflets, and that it was time to resort to radical methods.⁴⁶ The dissidents then founded their own party, Hizb al-Nusra (the Victory Party).

⁴⁶ Bakhtiar Babajanov, OSCE report on religious extremism in Central Asia, 25 April 2002, p58.

One event during summer 2000 in Kara-Su may indicate the level of impatience among some Hizb ut-Tahrîr members. As described by a journalist:

‘The day when a border crossing was opened between the Uzbek and Kyrgyz parts of the city it was made public that a Kyrgyz citizen had died in an Uzbek prison. He was a member of Hizb ut-Tahrîr. He was immediately declared a martyr. Shortly after the news had come out, a group of 300 people went to Uzbekistan to demand the return of the

*body of their coreligionist. They came back carrying the dead body. Seeing this angry crowd, the Uzbek border police did not know what to do. They were paralysed. That very day, the Uzbek authorities closed the border post. It is also interesting to remember that over 2000 people from Karasu took part at the funeral ceremony although there had not been any public announcement.'*⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Interview with Elmurad Yusupaev, Radio Liberty, August 2002.

The party denies any formal links with other radical groups but admits that its goals are similar to the goals of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The leaders of the two groups seem to have met, and Juma Namanagani, the leader of the IMU, has expressed his support for Hizb ut-Tahrîr. ICG reports that it is possible that IMU members, who survived the events in Afghanistan, have turned to Hizb ut-Tahrîr for help. The integration of former IMU fighters could have a radicalising effect on Hizb ut-Tahrîr.

An Uzbek journalist claiming many contacts among Hizb ut-Tahrîr members, and who has written extensively about them, is not as categorical and thinks that a lot will depend on the position of the leadership of this organisation. 'They have a military structure in the sense that they obey orders from above. If the leadership does not allow the use of weapons they do not dare disobey, and vice-versa.'⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Interview in the Fergana Valley, August 2002.

Observers maintain that Hizb ut-Tahrîr has diminished its activities in the last year or two. This seemed to be particularly noticeable after the events of 11 September 2001. Under the cover of the US anti-terrorist campaign, and taking advantage of new and closer relationships with Washington, the Central Asia regimes have reinforced repressive measures against opponents including Hizb ut-Tahrîr. In Kyrgyzstan, a national commission had one meeting with Hizb ut-Tahrîr members but there was no follow-up and no dialogue process ensued. Repression is likely to have a counterproductive effect in the longer term, and will strengthen Hizb ut-Tahrîr's position in the region, particularly in Uzbekistan.

C. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

The IMU is a radical armed opposition group that declared the jihad against the Uzbek government and several times in 1999, 2000 and 2001 launched armed incursions in the Fergana Valley. According to the US State Department's classification, it is one of the most dangerous international terrorist organisations.

Officially, the IMU was founded in 1998 although some sources put that date at 1996. It brought together a number of Islamic groupings active in Uzbekistan in the late 1980s and early 1990s and who had been in exile in Tajikistan, Afghanistan or Pakistan. These organisations included for example 'Tovba' (Repentance) and 'Islam Lashkarlari' (Warriors of Islam) based in Namangan, as well as the Uzbek 'Islamic Renaissance Party' and the 'Islamic Party of Turkestan'.

In 1991, long before the founding of the IMU, the Uzbek Islamists under the leadership of Tahir Yuldash challenged the Uzbek government

of President Islam Karimov demanding that Uzbekistan be declared an Islamic state. At the end of that same year, they occupied the Namangan Regional Centre of the Uzbek Communist Party. In response, the local Islamic organisations were shut down and a wave of massive repression began.

Hundreds of Uzbek Islamists sought refuge in neighbouring Tajikistan where some of them formed the 'Namangan battalion', composed of 200 to 350 fighters under the charismatic leadership of Jumaboy Hodjiev (alias Juma Namangani), a former sergeant in the Soviet army. Juma Namangani had fought in Afghanistan in 1988 where his interest in Islam probably originated. His military bravery, his devotion to Islam and his personal character earned him the respect of the people in the Tavildara Valley (Tajikistan).

For a few years, until at least 1997, the trajectory of the future IMU leaders followed closely those of the IRP. In the early years of the IRPs exile in Afghanistan, the future leaders of the IMU, Juma Namangani and Tahir Yuldash, participated in the Islamic war effort. Yuldash had studied for a brief period at the madrassah run by Akbar Turjonzoda,⁴⁹ and Juma Namangani was considered an adoptive son of the IRP leader Sayed Abdullo Nuri.

⁴⁹ Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: the rise of militant Islam in Central Asia*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2002, p140.

This friendship lasted until, on the one hand, the IRP entered into a peace process with the Tajik government, a move opposed by Namangani and Yuldash, and, on the other hand, the Taliban had driven the IRP ally Massud and his government out of Kabul. As Namangani and Yuldash were sympathetic to the Taliban's goals, their relationship with the IRP leadership became a balancing act that could not be sustained indefinitely. In 1999, although relations were no longer close, former IRP leaders intervened with Namangani to convince him to leave the Tavildara Valley in Tajikistan for Afghanistan.

Tahir Yuldash was the political leader of the movement, while Az Zubayr Ibn 'Abdur Raheem, his deputy, was head of the religious leadership and a one-time press secretary. The military leader was Juma Namangani. Most experts agree that, during its height, the IMU amounted to no more than 1500 or 2000 fighters. The organisation's main base between 1999 and 2001 was in Mazar-i-Sharif in the North of Afghanistan where the Taliban granted the use of training camps.

In August 1999, the IMU issued one of its rare public declarations, which in 2003 is still available on the Internet.⁵⁰ It announces the start of the 'Jihad against the tyrannical government of Uzbekistan'. The primary objective of the jihad is 'the establishment of an Islamic state', and another goal is 'the defence of the scholars and Muslim youth that are being assassinated, imprisoned and tortured in extreme manners – with no rights given them at all'. The declaration also calls for the re-opening of the 'thousands of mosques and Islamic schools that have been closed', and the last paragraph invites 'the ruling government (...) to remove itself from office'. The text includes an expression of regret that 'Foreign

⁵⁰ <http://www.marsad.net/arabic/ioc/uzbek1e.htm>.

mujahidin as of yet have not entered [the IMU] ranks'. Ahmed Rashid estimates on the contrary that by 1999 the IMU had been joined by Pakistani fighters and soon became a 'multinational, pan-Islamic force',⁵¹ including Chechen, Uighur and Arab militants.

⁵¹ Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: the rise of militant Islam in Central Asia*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2002, pp175–176.

As a result of the American bombardments in Afghanistan in autumn 2001, the IMU bases in Afghanistan were destroyed. Its fighters were killed and/or dispersed. Their military leader, Juma Namangani, who seemed also to have been a leading commander in the Taliban regime, is reported to have died (although less credible sources say that he was only injured) in November 2001, during an attack in the north of Afghanistan.⁵²

⁵² According to Sulon Hammad's sources, Juma Namangani died on 8 or 9 November 2001, about 20 kilometres outside Qonduz. The Tajik Islamic leader Akbar Turajonzoda reports that a memorial ceremony was held, as required for a deceased Muslim. If this is correct, this is strong indication that Juma Namangani is indeed dead.

Nevertheless, it is too early to write off the IMU entirely. The movement has undoubtedly suffered serious losses, but is probably not entirely destroyed. Its surviving members may be living as civilians, perhaps farming in remote mountainous areas, while also trying to regroup and prepare for the next stage of the fight. Many observers share the view that this is likely.

A former member of the movement, Sharali Akbotoev, captured by Kyrgyzstan Special Forces and sentenced to 25 years in prison on February 2003, told the press in July 2002 that:

*'The main forces of the IMU really have been destroyed and their remaining ranks are scattered. In the absence of a powerful state taking steps to restore the ranks of the IMU, it is unlikely that the movement will ever regain the strength it had from 1999 until last year.'*⁵³

⁵³ www.iwpr.net (RCA No. 129, 12 July 2002)

After the American bombing, it is thought that some of the IMU fighters who survived may have moved to Pakistan and its border regions under the control of Pashtun tribes, to Baluchistan and to Iran. Perhaps the biggest remaining group may be hiding in northern Afghanistan near Qonduz, where Afghani of Uzbek origin live, and among whom they can 'dissolve'. Some of the IMU fighters may also be in the province of Takhar (northern Afghanistan) and in the mountains of Afghanistan's Badakhshan, which the international coalition has not reached.

Intelligence services of Tajikistan, according to non-official sources, consider that after the American bombing campaign about a thousand Uzbek fighters may have survived, of whom perhaps half are now located in the Afghan northern mountains, neighbouring Tajikistan's Badakhshan. The difficult terrain in this area, where none of the usual border installations of barbed wire, border posts and minefields are present, make it relatively safe to pass. According to local inhabitants, it is easy to cross the border here on the river Gunt.

A commander of the Tajikistan Border Guards in interview has said that:

'They are clearly preparing to cross but they haven't crossed yet. I don't exclude that some individual fighters, maybe ten or twenty, might have crossed the border and settled somewhere as civilians but I do exclude that an entire group might have appeared on our side of the river.'

*'...it is Tajikistan's goal to prevent the IMU from coming back to the country. If they do, this would mean a new threat to Tajikistan's relationship with Uzbekistan. Tajikistan still hasn't forgotten Uzbekistan's 'accidental' bombing of Tajikistan's mountainous border regions in August 1999 where it suspected Juma Namangani's people [were hiding].'*⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Interview, August 2002.

The IMU fighters' transit through Tajikistan might be facilitated not only by the porous Tajik–Afghan border in Badakhshan but also by sympathetic local people on the Tajik side. A former Tajik opposition fighter reported that:

*'People still venerate Juma Namangani. When he left for Afghanistan, he left all his belongings to the local population – rice, flour, electrical appliances, and some money. In exchange, Juma asked for support when he returns... In addition, a tradition of fraternal solidarity among comrades in arms might be at work. He or his people might act through former fighters of the Tajik Islamic Opposition forces with whom he had fought in the past. We should also not forget that the second wife of Juma Namangani was from the Pamir and that at some stage extensive clan-based relationships might be activated'*⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Interview in Tajikistan, August 2002.

An anonymous source reported in August 2002 that, about five or ten Uzbek fighters were then crossing the border from Afghanistan every day. Apparently, their task is to integrate with the Islamic clandestine world in the Fergana Valley and join followers of Juma Namangani who managed to vanish and survive after he was driven out of Uzbekistan. The point of assembly may not be the Uzbek part of the Fergana Valley: our source suggested that the fighters might be gathering to build up forces on the Kyrgyzstan border area, particularly the Batken region. According to his information, 400–500 IMU fighters are concentrated there, living among the local people. The information circulates that the IMU has been reconstituted in this region in late 2002, under the name of the Islamic Movement of Central Asia.

Russian non-official army sources maintain that in recent months this movement has been increasingly observed. According to some information, Batken has seen a continuous arrival of not only IMU fighters but also of former fighters of the Tajik Islamic Opposition who are out of work.

Referring to American Intelligence sources, the Central Asia expert Artie McConnell has written that the IMU is still in a position to assemble and train up to 5000 military recruits in one year. He concludes that the IMU, even after the serious losses suffered in Afghanistan, is capable of posing a threat to the future security of Central Asia.⁵⁶ The figure of 5000 recruits seems exaggerated. Even during its most 'prosperous' period in Afghanistan, when the IMU could count on generous financial and material support and access to training camps provided by the Taliban, it could not enlist more than 5000 fighters. Could it acquire that same strength again today? Most experts are doubtful of this, but point out that the IMU should not be considered entirely destroyed.

⁵⁶ www.eurasianet.org: 'Islamic radicals regroup in Central Asia', 15 May 2002.

4

Perceptions of humanitarian activity in Central Asia

This section offers a framework for analysing the perception of humanitarian action in Central Asia. After considering humanitarian needs and actors, we focus on the range of expectations and perceptions of the local people. These perceptions were gathered during extensive interviews carried out from July to October 2002. Experienced local and expatriate researchers conducted more than 100 interviews, concentrating on former field commanders (in Tajikistan), political opposition leaders, religious dignitaries and believers. The political leaders were identified and contacted to request an interview while the religious believers were interviewed wherever they agreed to voice their opinion, including in small neighbourhood mosques, *madrassah* and other public or private places. The interviews initially followed a standard list of questions (see appendix I) but the interviewers were free to expand and elaborate on questions that seemed particularly relevant to specific respondents. The interviews were conducted in Uzbek, Tajik or Russian languages. Most interviews were recorded on tape, transcribed, and, when necessary, translated into Russian.

For the purposes of this study, we have followed the broad Central Asian interpretation of humanitarian action, to include: any charitable act such as helping a neighbour with a meal; humanitarian organisations assisting refugees and victims of floods; and development projects supporting the health system, schools or orphanages.

This section shows that, while humanitarian action as charity is well received by Central Asians, they are very wary of possible hidden religious and political agendas. If humanitarian organisations want to ensure acceptance of their activities in Central Asia, particularly by radical Islamic leaders and opinion-makers, they are confronted with a tremendous task of dissemination of their principles.

A. Humanitarian needs in Central Asia

1. Tajikistan

There has been an international humanitarian presence in Tajikistan since the early 1990s. Few agencies had started programmes during the first phase of the civil conflict, but most humanitarian organisations established operations after 1996. Before that date, the most important need for assistance was that of Tajik refugees in neighbouring Afghanistan.

The first major humanitarian operation targeting the victims of the Tajik conflict was the assistance to Tajik refugees in Afghanistan in 1992 and 1993. The Tajiks still remember the generous assistance they received from the

local Afghan population, as well as Afghan military and clan leaders, and the Islamic government of Afghanistan. International humanitarian organisations – first Islamic NGOs and then Western agencies – started to assist Tajik refugees in Afghanistan in 1993.

In 1996 and 1997, humanitarian programmes were mainly concentrated in the main conflict areas, in the Vakhsh and Karategin Valleys, and food aid was the main commodity provided. In the immediate post-war period, a major humanitarian activity was providing for safe return of Tajik refugees to their homes. Refugees had to be resettled, and their belongings brought back, and important infrastructure needed repair.

Since the signing of the Tajik Peace Agreement in June 1997, the demobilisation and reintegration of former fighters into civil society has been a major concern for humanitarian organisations. The UN, which brokered the agreement, was responsible for parts of the implementation process. It was planned that combatants would gather in agreed assembly areas where they and their weapons would be registered. These areas were also to serve as health centres and sources of other support services to fighters in the process of demobilisation. However, for almost two years there were no concrete initiatives other than some very poorly executed efforts to support the assembly areas. By early 1999, these assembly areas had largely disintegrated and there were considerable tensions among the armed groups in the Karategin Valley.

Although the issue of demobilisation was foreseen under the peace agreement, and limited resources were initially available to support the process, it has received very little attention from most humanitarian organisations or major donors. Despite being central to the core of political and military stabilisation, demobilisation is considered controversial by international humanitarian organisations and donors.

The main worry in Tajikistan was the need to involve (former) local commanders and armed groups directly in project activities. Most organisations were reluctant to ‘hire’ former fighters – even for a good cause – doubting their independence. Their fears stemmed from the particularities of the Tajik reintegration process. Instead of requiring disarmament and official demobilisation as preconditions for reintegration activities, the parties in Tajikistan were in fact willing only to cease fighting but not to disarm, and many fighters retained their weapons.

Since 1999, humanitarian programmes have been moving away from a focus on emergency relief measures, and also emphasising longer-term development. It is important to note however, that the 2003 Consolidated Inter-agency Appeal (CAP) for Tajikistan still puts an emphasis on food aid, with almost 70 per cent of the requirements (US\$62 million) dedicated to food.⁵⁷ The CAP, although recognising the shift towards development programmes, argues that the:

⁵⁷ Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeal for Tajikistan 2003, OCHA, 19 November 2002, p2.

‘almost stalled progress towards economic reform and sustainable growth will not change soon.... There are no reasons to believe in a dramatic

⁵⁸ Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeal for Tajikistan 2003, OCHA, 19 November 2002, p7.

improvement in the enabling environment for economic activities that might alleviate [emergency] needs.’⁵⁸

The shift towards development is explicitly called for by local leaders and the population:

⁵⁹ Interview with a former anti-Islamic combatant, age 34, in Shahrinov, Tajikistan.

‘We need no more humanitarian aid; we need micro-credits over 5–6 years.’⁵⁹

Some Islamic leaders voiced their concern that humanitarian organisations are not adapting to this new reality:

⁶⁰ This is the analysis of a Tajik researcher who was commissioned by the Centre to conduct a number of interviews with the Islamic leadership on this subject.

‘Too much humanitarian aid for too long might inhibit further local development. Therefore, humanitarian organisations should reorient their activities according to socio-economic realities in the region. Rational use of people’s potential and local resources; for example through micro-credits, the creation of new jobs; take steps to alleviate poverty; reinforce local economy and entrepreneurial activities; co-operation with local NGOs.’⁶⁰

One of the main preoccupations of the local people interviewed for this study is schooling for their children:

⁶¹ Interview with a woman, age 42, Kulyab, Tajikistan.

‘Schools need help. Many children don’t go to school because they have no shoes nor coat. In winter, they cannot go to school because there is no heating at the school. And then there are no books, no pencils. The government doesn’t have any means to provide the school with the necessary material.’⁶¹

This preoccupation with schooling is unsurprising given that education was a strong social priority during the Soviet period, and the educational level of most people in Central Asia, including the more remote areas, was relatively high. The loss of this ‘social benefit’ is deeply regretted by many Central Asians.

2. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan

Priorities in the rest of Central Asia, in the absence of a major armed conflict, continue to be programmes of technical and financial assistance rather than emergency humanitarian operations. In Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, humanitarian aid programmes are mostly relief operations following natural disasters. (Tajikistan has also experienced regular small-to medium-scale natural disasters.) Other programmes address the negative health impact of the Aral Sea ecological disaster, or target general health systems. As a result, most of the personnel of international organisations in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have been slow to react to the occasional outbreaks of armed confrontations in recent years, having shifted their priorities from relief to development activities.

Another major humanitarian concern of many Central Asians, particularly in Uzbekistan, is the breach of human rights, focusing mainly on conditions in prisons:

*'My husband is in prison since two years. He was sentenced to 16 years as a member of Hizb ut-Tahrîr. They said he had invited members of Hizb ut-Tahrîr to his house and had driven them in his car. This is not true.... He only recognised that he was a member of Hizb-ut-Tahrir, otherwise he didn't recognise any fault.'*⁶²

⁶² Interview with the wife of a young prisoner, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

The methods of the Uzbekistan government campaign against members of Hizb ut-Tahrîr (and others labelled as extremists or *Wahabis*) include torture in both pre-trial and post-conviction facilities, as well as intimidation and arbitrary arrest of family members of suspected extremists to obtain co-operation and confessions.

A two-week inspection of Uzbekistan's prisons by a special rapporteur of the UN Human Rights Commission revealed the 'routine use of torture on prisoners', and that 'confessions are gained by use of torture and other forms of callous treatment, and are then used as evidence of guilt at trials which deliver harsh sentences – including the death penalty'.⁶³ The practices revealed during this investigation were use of electric-shock treatment, extended water immersion, kicking, rape, the tearing of fingernails, injection of drugs and the physical and mental persecution of prisoners' relatives.

⁶³ IWPR, RCA No. 169, 13 December 2002.

In Kyrgyzstan the status of human rights has been gradually declining in the last two years, after a relatively democratic decade since the country gained independence. Since 2000, Kyrgyzstan's human rights record has become closer to that of Uzbekistan. Increasing numbers of Muslims – including those who fled religious repression in Uzbekistan – are rounded up by the police, mistreated and sentenced to long prison terms.

B. The humanitarian actors

The international presence in Central Asia is limited to a relatively small number of international agencies, non-governmental and inter-governmental⁶⁴. Among the NGOs, those most often cited by the local people interviewed were: ACTED, Médecins sans Frontières (MSF), Mercy Corps, German AgroAction, the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the local Red Crescent, Save the Children Fund, Care International. Also active in the region are Pharmaciens sans Frontières (PSF), Merlin, Oxfam, Action Contre la Faim, Caritas and CESVI. These organisations implement a mixture of humanitarian and development projects focusing on schools, orphanages, health structures and the poorest people.

⁶⁴ Organisations that are based in Tajikistan but work mainly in Afghanistan are not taken into account for this case study.

Inter-governmental humanitarian agencies are present through the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Food Programme (WFP), the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) (emergency unit), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The European Commission's Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) has also maintained a field presence in Central Asia since the mid-1990s.

The most interesting, but little explored, aspect of international humanitarian activity in Central Asia is the presence of a number of important Islamic organisations providing much appreciated assistance. A teacher at a local madrassah said that they:

*'work with the Khomeini Fund. Every day between 10 and 20 women (widows) come here and ask for help. They have sometimes 5–6 children. We then turn to the Khomeini Fund and they help those women every three months with 5 litres of oil, 10kg of rice and pasta.'*⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Interview with a teacher, age 42, Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

Formal Islamic humanitarian activity worldwide has grown considerably since the 1970s and 1980s, and Afghanistan was the first major field experience of Islamic humanitarian NGOs. Islamic solidarity with all Muslims of the *umma* commands that Muslims around the world carry out some form of jihad in defence of Islam, threatened by the atheist Soviet regime.⁶⁶ The jihad in this sense was to be carried out either fighting at the side of the Afghan *mujahidin* or as doctors and humanitarian workers bringing assistance to suffering people. Both actions are equivalent in their significance in terms of performing duty as a Muslim. The same phenomenon has been at work in Central Asia since the end of Soviet control. Because the Muslims of Central Asia are part of the *umma*, are poor, and suffer great hardship, they are legitimate recipients of Islamic charity.

⁶⁶ The Western interpretation of 'jihad' as a holy war is too restrictive; the Muslim understanding of the word is as the defence of Islam. The means to accomplish this can be offensive and destructive (violence and destruction of anything threatening Islam) or constructive and tolerant of others (charity and social solidarity). See, for example, Abdel-Rahman Ghandour, *Jihad humanitaire, enquête sur les ONG islamiques*, Flammarion, Paris, 2002, p30.

The very first encounters between Islamic opposition fighters and humanitarian organisations took place in Afghanistan in 1992 and 1993. Before Western humanitarian agencies arrived to provide aid to Tajik refugees in Afghanistan, the humanitarian organisations working there were mostly Islamic. The assistance was well organised and had an important impact.

Refugees occupy a particular place in the Islamic doctrine, not just because they are legitimate recipients of assistance according to the Koran. Fleeing from a country governed by an impure or corrupt government is seen as an honourable act and as testimony to refugee's piety. Muslim refugees are Muslims who try to protect their faith and they must therefore be cared for and assisted by other members of the *umma*. The virtuous nature of fleeing from one's home is underlined by the fact that the Prophet himself had to leave his home town to seek refuge in Medina where the new religion was better accepted than in Mecca.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Abdel-Rahman Ghandour, *Jihad humanitaire, enquête sur les ONG islamiques*, Flammarion, Paris, 2002, p43.

With peace negotiations underway, and the return of part of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) leadership to Tajikistan in 1996, Western humanitarian organisations increased their presence in Central Asia. From then on, Islamic humanitarian assistance gradually diminished, and almost stopped after the signing of the peace agreement in 1997. In the post-conflict period, the humanitarian organisations active in Tajikistan were mainly Western. As one local analyst summarised it, 'the Afghan-Islamic humanitarian period was followed by a western humanitarian period.'⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Interview in Garm, September 2002.

However, the interviews conducted for this study revealed a continued presence of Islamic organisations in Central Asia, although it was difficult to establish an accurate and exhaustive list. In the interviews, local people as well as some religious leaders mentioned some Islamic organisations:

⁶⁹ No information available; even experts have never heard of this organisation.

⁷⁰ A prominent Saudi-funded organisation, established in 1962, which founded a humanitarian organisation, the International Islamic Relief Organisation'. Rabitat is now accused by the American authorities of close links to Al-Qaida.

⁷¹ Interview with the former local mufti, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, August 2002.

⁷² Interview with Akbar Turajonzoda, opposition leader, Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

⁷³ Interview with the former mufti, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, August 2002.

⁷⁴ Interview in Istarafshan, Tajikistan, 55 year old person.

*'I have contacts with Islamic humanitarian organisations. From Kuwait, there is Awal Qaida al-islami al'alami [First Islamic World Base⁶⁹]. I am an honorary member. In Mecca there is also an organisation called Rabitat al-Alam al-Islami [World Muslim League⁷⁰]. I have lots of contacts with those organisations and I regularly collaborate with them.'*⁷¹

One important category of humanitarian actors should not be forgotten: the local elite. Several leaders interviewed described in detail their own humanitarian activities:

*'In my family, the humanitarian tradition is very strong. Since my childhood I remember my father helping poor people, orphans – and despite his old age he is still doing it. I myself provide support every year for many simple people, orphans, children, schools and hospitals.'*⁷²

Several famous and respected leaders, including Sayed Abdullo Nuri and Davlat Usmon, have created their own charitable organisations. The Nuri Fund, for example, distributes food and material aid on a monthly basis to over 1000 orphans.

The former mufti of Tashkent explained:

*'I am helping a group of poor families. I support a family whose daughter is getting married and they don't have the means to pay for an appropriate ceremony. Today we plan to buy books for poor children who are going to school. Last week the house of a neighbour burnt down and we decided to help.'*⁷³

Despite the local humanitarian traditions, it was widely deplored that these rules are no longer well respected: 'Most people share those values but they don't apply them in reality'⁷⁴.

C. Expectations of humanitarian action

In Central Asia, humanitarian organisations operate in a space that they know very little about, and where local people have never or only rarely been exposed to international humanitarian action and its principles. The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue conducted numerous interviews with local people, including religious and political leaders. The results of this survey are analysed here, to further the understanding of expectations of people in Central Asia concerning humanitarian action.

Central Asian people expect humanitarian actors to be neutral and independent of government structures while respecting the internal affairs of the state. They suppose humanitarian action to be impartial, reaching the people most in need, and hope that humanitarian activities would also encourage local initiatives. Among the most interesting

aspects of the views researched are the religious references and, as a corollary, the suspicion that humanitarian action actually has missionary goals. With Sovietism as their cultural heritage, Central Asian people are almost unanimously wary of possible hidden agendas (spying) held by foreign humanitarian organisations.

1. Neutrality and independence

Asked about the fundamental principles of humanitarian action, many people mentioned that they should be free of any political aims. Humanitarian organisations must carry out only their charitable mission. Many interviewees insisted that such organisations should not subordinate themselves to any political force or group. They do not have the right to interfere with the political process in any country. In turn, political structures should not interfere with humanitarian activities.

⁷⁵ Interviewee, aged 59, Asht, Tajikistan.

'Humanitarian organisations must be neutral and free of politics'.⁷⁵

⁷⁶ Interviewee, aged 48, Asht, Tajikistan.

'Humanitarian organisations do not have the right to interfere with politics'⁷⁶

Respondents also felt that humanitarian agencies should be able to demonstrate or prove their neutrality, for example by maintaining independence from government structures:

⁷⁷ Interviewee, aged 58, Istarafshan, Tajikistan.

'Humanitarian organisations must prove their principles [such as neutrality] by their everyday actions.'⁷⁷

⁷⁸ Interview with woman, aged 42, Kulyab, Tajikistan.

'They mustn't trust local authorities. They must do everything themselves, from beginning to end'.⁷⁸

The involvement of local government structures in humanitarian activity was criticised by many interviewees including leading figures of the Islamic opposition.

Somewhat in contradiction to the call for non-involvement with government structures, interviewees also said that humanitarian organisations:

⁷⁹ Interviewee, aged 57, Isfara, Tajikistan.

'should not interfere with the internal affairs of the State, where they are present'.⁷⁹

This statement also indicates that humanitarian organisations are sometimes seen as no more than distribution agencies of assistance and material or financial support.

The sensitivity to external interference with internal affairs is a recurrent theme in the discussions we had with local opinion-leaders. Whether the interference was political, religious or cultural, it was vehemently rejected by everybody.

2. Impartiality and provision of aid according to need

Without ever using the word ‘impartial’, everyone interviewed insisted that humanitarian organisations should provide assistance according to need.

*‘A humanitarian organisation helps the people in need, only the people in need’.*⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Interview with madrassah student, aged 24, Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

*‘Humanitarian organisations did not bring serious changes to the country. Only important families got an opportunity to improve their living conditions’.*⁸¹

⁸¹ Interviewee, aged 48, Istarafshan, Tajikistan.

Corruption is one of the most frequent criticisms made of humanitarian organisations. Top leaders of the Tajik Islamic opposition expressed worries at the widespread corruption in international humanitarian organisations, or at least in their field offices. The interviewees maintained that they knew of numerous cases of complaints about specific representatives of humanitarian organisations providing assistance only in return for bribes.

These complaints are widely made but the fact that the national leaders unanimously and openly share them should be read as a strong signal regarding the image of international organisations. The remedy proposed by these leaders is that international humanitarian organisations should not allow local staff to handle the distribution of assistance and must increase central control within their organisations. At a minimum, it was suggested local field offices of humanitarian organisations should be run by expatriate staff.

While interviewees expected organisations to be impartial, or at least felt that they should be, there was widespread recognition that organisations and especially individuals were biased in their choices of recipients. Some people felt that private benefactors should be free to favour ‘their own’ people, while formal organisations should be impartial and neutral.

*‘If a man goes to a complete stranger and asks for food, the stranger will give him the old and hard bread and keep the fresh one for himself.’*⁸²

⁸² Interview with a Tajik researcher, Sogd region, Tajikistan.

*‘I must help my family, my close friends. I am not obliged to help people I don’t know. There are people and organisations that do that officially. I have different obligations.’*⁸³

⁸³ Interview with Uzbek religious orientalist, aged 25, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

*‘Islam says that one has to help one’s family, parents, brothers, and children first and then only help others.’*⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Interview with Uzbek madrassah student, aged 23, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

Indeed five of the six examples given by a national leader, of cases in which he helped to secure humanitarian assistance, were located in a single region.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Interview with opposition leader, Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

3. References to Islamic beliefs

A fundamental aspect of the perception held by Central Asian Muslims of humanitarian action is their constant reference to religious precepts to describe, justify or criticise humanitarian action in their countries.

*'Islam, long ago, even before the Geneva Conventions, has introduced the obligation to help those who have fallen into poverty.'*⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Interview with the former mufti, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

It appears from the interviews that a charitable act is fundamentally seen as a religious gesture and finds its justification in the precepts of Islam and the teachings of the Prophet. Charity is one of the five pillars of Islam, together with the declaration of faith, five daily prayers, the hajj to Mecca and fasting during Ramadan.

References to religion were numerous in almost all of the interviews, for example when respondents were asked about the definition of a humanitarian organisation.

*'Humanitarian organisations carry out charitable activities under the auspices of God.'*⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Interviewee, aged 33, Khojand, Tajikistan.

*'Humanitarian assistance is fair if it is given for the sake of God.'*⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Interview with Tajiko-Uzbek mullah (aged 28) at the Central Mosque, Isfara, Tajikistan.

Respondents regarded charity as an essentially religious act, but also a duty.

*'Allah said that the people who would go to paradise were of three categories: those who knew the entire Koran by heart; those who died in the war; and those who helped the poor. In our Islam, it is important to help the poor. Therefore, humanitarian work is very good and true to God. That is why I think those people who organise humanitarian assistance are going straight to paradise.'*⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Interview with Tajik peasant, practising Muslim, aged 39, Navabad, Tajikistan.

*'People who help with a clear heart cannot have bad intentions. I have always respected and supported people who help in the name of God.'*⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Interview with mullah, aged 35, Namangan, Uzbekistan.

The leaders of religious institutions, while maintaining that the mosques are not humanitarian institutions, recounted many instances of humanitarian acts towards the poor. For example, the main mosque in Istarafshan every month provides financial aid for 60 poor citizens, distributes carpets, and organises weddings for orphans.⁹¹

⁹¹ The Prophet himself was an orphan from an early age which might explain why Islamic humanitarian organisations have invested heavily in projects for orphans, including in Central Asia. Abdel-Rahman Ghandour, *Jihad humanitaire, enquêtes sur les ONG islamiques*, Flammarion, Paris, 2002, pp44–45.

Those interviewees who hold more radical views about Islam and the world order, expressed the religious foundations of charity more vehemently.

*'Humanitarian aid is only good if it is provided according to Shari'a law. That so-called democratic humanitarianism is only a bluff and simply cheating the world.'*⁹²

⁹² Interview with woman (aged 60), arrested for fundamentalist activism and released, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

Most respondents could not say exactly what humanitarian principles were. Only one young man understood their essence. Quoting the Prophet, he said accurately that:

*'The Prophet said that those fighting the Jihad mustn't kill old people and women, take children as prisoners, cut trees, trample the harvest in the fields, destroy bridges, obstruct water channels, and dig up wells. These are also humanitarian rules.'*⁹³

⁹³ Interview with imam (aged 32) of a small neighbourhood mosque, Namangan, Uzbekistan.

Humanitarian rules cover treatment of prisoners, civilians and other people affected by combat. In order to widen the scope of the interviews, specific questions were asked about the treatment of prisoners. In the answers, most references were made to Islam.

*'The prophet has said that prisoners were to be treated well. Prisoners weren't executed and they were good to them.'*⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Interview with Tajiko-Uzbek mullah, aged 28, Isfara, Tajikistan.

*'Prisoners are also people and they should not be abused. One mustn't beat or torture them, starve or rape them.'*⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Interview with Tajiko-Uzbek woman, choreographer, aged 44, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

The selling or exchanging of prisoners was not regarded as unacceptable, and in fact was perceived as humane.

*'We studied the way the Prophet treated the prisoners. When after the battle the prisoners were taken to the Prophet he did not order their execution or torture but simply exchanged them or let them be bought back.'*⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Interview with Uzbek religious orientalist, aged 25, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

A financial value of prisoners was seen as an accepted norm. Asked whether he would take prisoners if he was fighting, one interviewee said: 'No, why? I don't need money. Why would I take prisoners?'⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Interview with Tajik peasant, aged 37, Navabad, Tajikistan.

The 'exchange value' of prisoners was understood, and examples were offered.

*'[In Tajikistan] those who had a gun fought, but those who didn't were taken prisoner. Then they started to exchange the prisoners and that is what made them take more prisoners.'*⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Interview with Tajiko-Uzbek student (aged 28) at the Islamic institute in Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

*'In my village, during the war, they had taken 20-30 people hostage. They had no weapons. They kept them for 10-20 days and then exchanged them. That is why they had taken them hostage.'*⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Interview with madrassah teacher, aged 42, Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

A more refined interpretation of the 'humane treatment' reserved for prisoners was offered by this religious teacher:

*'Islam says that prisoners must be treated humanely. First you have to try to convert them to Islam and if they don't want to, you can release them against money.'*¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Uzbek retired religious teacher, aged 55, Namangan, Uzbekistan.

In a few cases, some severe inclinations were expressed. Asked how he would treat prisoners, one young man, who had also learned about the Geneva Conventions at school, answered:

*'I would not beat or torture them. If among the prisoners there are fighters who have killed people for nothing, of course, that is different; why discuss? Against the wall, and that's it.'*¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Interview with Uzbek religious orientalist, aged 25, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

The issue of blood revenge, a pre-Islamic tradition in Central Asia, can be related to the treatment and killing of prisoners. This question is very complex and is beyond the scope of this paper. Some respondents felt that wrongs against their family should not be personally avenged.

*'If some people killed a member of my family I wouldn't kill them on the spot. I would have some kind of a trial and collect all the evidence against them and then transmit it to the government. I myself do not have the right to punish. There would be a wish to seek revenge but one shouldn't do it. If my family member is killed, killing somebody else will not bring my parent back. That is how Islam is looking at these things.'*¹⁰²

¹⁰² Interview with Tajik peasant, aged 42, Kafirnikhon, Tajikistan.

Other respondents felt that local traditions should take precedence over Islamic principles.

[Interviewer: 'Would you take prisoners?'] 'No, God doesn't allow that.'
['Would you seek revenge if a family member was killed?'] 'Of course!'¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Interview with Tajik religious teacher, aged 28, in Navabad, Tajikistan.

4. Views of Christian missionary activity

Respondents' mostly positive references to Islamic precepts may hide the fact that Central Asians are generally suspicious of Western, therefore by definition mostly Christian, humanitarian organisations that carry out missionary goals while distributing humanitarian aid. Many respondents felt that humanitarian aid should not attempt to impose values different from those of local people, and some were explicitly critical of the promotion of Christianity in combination with humanitarian activity.

*'They spoil our youth. Their principles are not good for us Muslims because they have a hidden agenda... because they bring alien ideas, distribute foreign to us literature, and pornographic tapes.'*¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Interviewee, aged 48, Khojand, Tajikistan.

*'We are asked by the people why, in some places they find bibles mixed with humanitarian aid. For us, this is not helping but might lead the population to conflict and disagreement.'*¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Tajiko-Uzbek mullah, aged 28, Isfara, Tajikistan.

*'For example, in Isfara the missionary organisation Sonmin distributed flour while disseminating religious Christian literature. This provoked anger among religious Muslims.'*¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Tajik researcher, Sogd region, Tajikistan.

The most important and adamant critic of Western humanitarian action is Hizb ut-Tahrîr.

*'Most Western humanitarian organisations have in fact a missionary mandate. In the party's view, it is a perfidy to take advantage of the misery of others to attempt to convert them to Christianity. Most humanitarian organisations take sides in conflicts and support one or the other side. Sudan is a flagrant example where humanitarian organisations delivered weapons and/or provided logistical support to one party to the conflict.'*¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Interview with a Hizb ut-Tahrîr representative in Western Europe, December 2002.

Hizb ut-Tahrîr also expresses strong opinions about Islamic humanitarian action. It criticises Islamic humanitarian organisations, which work in countries where repressive regimes are in place.

*'In our Islamic conception, a state not only guarantees the freedom and rights of the people but it also must ensure the population's material well-being. In many Islamic countries today, the state does in no way fulfil this obligation and lets humanitarian organisations do it instead. As long as the present repressive, highly corrupt regimes are in place, humanitarian action only helps them to continue their exploitation of the people.'*¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Interview with a Hizb ut-Tahrîr representative in Western Europe, December 2002.

The perception that humanitarians have a hidden religious agenda is reinforced by the fact that many missionary groups distribute humanitarian aid to their followers. Islamic political and religious leaders are deeply worried about international missionary activity and see it as a potential contributory cause of instability in Tajikistan.

5. The perceived hidden agenda

Another striking and recurring theme of the interviews was respondents' mistrust of foreign organisations and their hidden political agenda. The accusation of religious proselytising has been described in the previous section. Here we will look at the perception of political agendas and spying activities of humanitarian organisations. Some respondents were sceptical about the work of foreign organisations in Central Asia, and some expressed more mixed opinions.

¹⁰⁹ Interviewee, aged 48, Asht, Tajikistan.

*'[they] help people and in parallel collect information about our country.'*¹⁰⁹

¹¹⁰ Interviewee, aged 51, Khojand, Tajikistan.

*'Free cheese only comes in mouse-traps. By giving us something they also take away a lot.'*¹¹⁰

¹¹¹ Interviewee, aged 55, Istarafshan, Tajikistan.

*'Humanitarian organisations have good and bad influence. They bring help for the poor but they also collect information about our country.'*¹¹¹

¹¹² Interviewee, aged 53, Istarafshan, Tajikistan.

*'Humanitarian organisations work in Tajikistan because they have their interests in the region. But they also want to help the government solve social problems'*¹¹²

The Western military contingent based in Central Asia and carrying out operations in Afghanistan increased local mistrust and suspicion of Western organisations. Some people see a link between humanitarian organisations and the Western troops, particularly when military assets are used for humanitarian operations.

¹¹³ Interviewee, aged 59, Isfara, Tajikistan.

*'There is a link because they work together and the goals of their activities are to defend their interests in our region.'*¹¹³

¹¹⁴ Interviewee, aged 55, Istarafshan, Tajikistan.

*'There is a clear link. Humanitarian aid is provided in Afghanistan with the help of military assets.'*¹¹⁴

The independence from government that the interviewees expect from humanitarian organisations is not extended to the organisations' home governments. It could be argued that the Soviet heritage has left people in Central Asia with the perception that all governments exercise Soviet-style control.

¹¹⁵ Interviewee, aged 32, Istarafshan, Tajikistan.

'Humanitarian organisations co-ordinate their goals and tasks with their governments at the highest level'.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁶ Interviewee, aged 45, Khojand, Tajikistan.

'Humanitarian organisations are acting in the name of their government.'¹¹⁶

¹¹⁷ Interviewee, aged 33, Khojand, Tajikistan.

'Charitable organisations carry out activities that they previously discuss with the governments of their countries.'¹¹⁷

¹¹⁸ Interviewee, aged 29, Khojand, Tajikistan.

Transparency is the proposed answer. Available information about international organisations is quite meagre.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁹ Interview with orientalist (aged 32), imam of a small neighbourhood mosque, Namangan, Uzbekistan.

'[We want] humanitarian organisations to explain their activities and how they work.'¹¹⁹

¹²⁰ Interviewee, aged 59, Isfara, Tajikistan.

'We would want them to meet the people more often.'¹²⁰

Mistrust and suspicion was most evident in the views of the more radical Muslims interviewed. They expressed very strong views on the hidden agenda of humanitarian organisations and the perceived benefits to the organisations of working in Central Asia.

¹²¹ Interview with wife of young prisoner, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

'I think humanitarian organisations come here, take something and go back home where they receive money for that. They don't help us. Either they cheat on us or they help but we don't see anything. They always say: "I was in Geneva; your case is proceeding", but we don't know whether this is true or a lie. I think they only work for their own interest; to feed their children, to receive a salary from the government, they make interviews with us.'¹²¹

¹²² Interview with Tajiko-Uzbek woman, choreographer, aged 44, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

'At the UN, I only see those very serious and smart-looking men who receive a big salary and live and work in the best circumstances – air conditioned and cold drinks – but I also see that nobody respects any of the laws and resolutions they adopt.'¹²²

The Islamists interviewed were particularly disappointed by Western organisations in the field of human rights.

¹²³ Interview with wife of young prisoner, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

'They don't keep their promises because they fear for their posts. I would like them to say the truth about the conditions in prison and to say it loud and strong. I want them to help prisoners to have normal rights, so that in prison they are treated like people. We turned to many different organisations. They all gave us their business cards. It was all useless. All those organisations serve the President. Nobody speaks out against him.'¹²³

¹²⁴ Interview with woman (aged 60), arrested for fundamentalist activism and released, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

*'Humanitarian workers simply receive a salary from the international community and get rich. Western humanitarian organisations can never be truly humanitarian. They only do this out of personal ambition. They are all against Islam. That is why I don't trust any of those humanitarian organisations. They say that they help the Islamic world, that they help the population. On the contrary, they worsen the tragedy of those peoples who suffer under despotic regimes. They make money with the tragedy of the people.'*¹²⁴

5

Humanitarian engagement

Humanitarian engagement with belligerents in Central Asia was necessary for the successful implementation of relief operations during the Tajik civil war. In this section, we outline the relationship between humanitarian organisations and armed groups in Tajikistan during the war, in particular the United Tajik Opposition (UTO). From the experience some lessons can be learned, and combined with the findings of the previous section, they provide an outline of how humanitarian organisations can best move forward.

A. The experience of the 1990s

In the period from 1993 to 2000, armed groups, the UTO and its constituent parts became natural interlocutors of humanitarian organisations, as these groups controlled territories where humanitarian operations were needed. At the beginning of their operations in Tajikistan, only a few agencies had a specific policy regarding their contacts with armed groups. According to one former UN programme co-ordinator: 'our engagement with armed groups in Tajikistan was based on a mixture of previous practical experience [of the expatriate field staff] and common sense'.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Interview with former UN staff member in Tajikistan, May 2002

Contact usually began with the local commanders, or directly at checkpoints. When a humanitarian organisation had developed a relatively stable relationship with the groups and communities, the level of contacts moved up to reach the military and political leadership.

In the initial phase, the primary goal of the contacts was to ensure security and access to the target areas. The period between 1996 and 1999 was particularly precarious. Major security incidents such as the kidnapping of UN and other international personnel in 1997, and the murder of international staff in 1997 and 1998, resulted in the suspension of programmes and the evacuation of international staff. On security, most interviewed organisations had a similar position: the armed groups were made aware that any security incident in the area under their control would trigger the suspension of programmes, while good security and collaboration by local commanders would result in

increased project assistance. This approach was usually regarded as successful.

*'[Commanders of areas considered as unsafe] would also not insist for [us] to go there as they were aware that any incident in their area would have serious consequences. Through such tacit understandings, everybody could therefore save face.'*¹²⁶

¹²⁶ Interview, May 2002

The fact that such arrangements are a threat to the impartial provision of humanitarian aid and, in effect, confer increased decision-making power on the field commander seemed to escape this humanitarian worker.

Most operators have reported that military groups have regularly tried to secure direct support or benefits for themselves and their constituencies. Cases have been reported of agreements made between local authorities, commanders and local employees of organisations to divide the humanitarian aid among themselves. Discussions with the armed groups about such expectations, or even practices, have been a recurrent part of the activities of programme managers. Some commanders were unhappy about the humanitarian organisations' reluctance to 'make deals'. At least in one documented case it led to the robbery of the stocks of the organisation 'guilty' of stopping the practice, which caused the suspension of the whole operation in the region.

Humanitarian organisations have been confronted with a choice between allowing some aid to go to the military group, and not being able to reach target populations at all. It seems that a pragmatic approach was the most common strategy: at the beginning of their programmes, organisations would allow that parts of the aid would directly benefit the fighters but then gradually move to community development programmes in order to decrease the access to direct support for the military. At the same time, all organisations have used a number of shields such as putting the decision-making authority in the hands of international staff, and arguing that the final decision was made by headquarters or the donors: military commanders could therefore not be served.

In hindsight, it seems logical that humanitarian organisations, UN or NGO, established and maintained contacts with local commanders. However, the interviews carried out for this study revealed that these contacts were initially unofficial. One interviewee even emphasised that his head office was not aware of his discussions with IRP commanders. The government's disapproval of such contacts was certainly one of the main reasons for withholding this kind of information.

After the signing of the peace agreement in 1997, contacts with the opposition were less problematic. UN agencies such as the UNHCR for example had a mandate within the agreement in leading the reintegration programmes for the Tajik refugees.

Today, after the peace agreement has been implemented and the reintegration process completed, most armed groups have officially been

disbanded. Humanitarian organisations therefore would have difficulty justifying a policy of humanitarian engagement with (renegade) armed groups. The majority of organisations are now dealing as much as possible with only civil authorities.

This trend towards exclusive contacts with government authorities, and reducing contacts with the renegade armed groups, has of course the advantage of conveying to the local people that ‘the war is over’. It also meets with government approval. However, it can be argued that, even in times of peace, carefully designed contacts with irredentists or radical opposition groups can prove useful for humanitarian organisations in order to maintain access to all groups. It can also be useful to ensure security, however reduced the risks. Therefore, maintaining a minimal amount of contact with armed groups may be a useful strategy for humanitarian organisations.

B. Contacts with Hizb ut-Tahrîr and the IMU

Contacts with radical and banned Islamic organisations are particularly difficult. Direct contacts with their members are dangerous, and humanitarian organisations have not been able (or willing) to establish sustained relationships. The fear of being identified by the authorities is far too important for members of these groups to allow outsiders into their confidence. Only a few journalists can claim sporadic contacts with Hizb ut-Tahrîr members.

Because Hizb ut-Tahrîr has representatives in Western Europe, however, this has enabled contact with some humanitarian organisations. While these European contacts are certainly useful, it remains uncertain how close the links are between the European representatives and the local cells of Hizb ut-Tahrîr. Central Asian cells seem to operate in relative isolation from the rest of the party, and so it is difficult to assess whether contacts at the European levels are effectively relayed to Central Asia. In addition, Hizb ut-Tahrîr representatives in Europe do not trust Western humanitarian organisations, as the interview conducted by the Centre revealed. For Hizb ut-Tahrîr, the missionary goals of humanitarian organisations are an established fact and ‘*there is no humanitarian organisation that is trustworthy. They all have missionary goals*’.¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Telephone interview with a Hizb ut-Tahrîr representative in Western Europe, December 2002.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) has virtually disappeared from the scene since late 2001. For obvious security reasons, no humanitarian organisation has publicly recognised any contacts with the IMU, and there probably are none in reality. It is however possible that humanitarian workers unknowingly meet members and/or sympathisers of the IMU.

C. What needs to be done?

Humanitarian action can benefit from a variety of measures and policies that organisations active in Central Asia should seek to put in place. The following points are offered as recommendations. Many of these points are not specific to Central Asia but they can all be considered important in the region.

1. Long-term investment

Trust is a key factor in the effective implementation of humanitarian activity, and can only be built if an organisation is present and active in the field over time. The organisation should continue contact during and after conflict, must be able to maintain the contacts and discussions over time, and must be perceived as impartial. The usual one-year (or faster) turnover of international staff is a serious obstacle to building sustainable relationships based on mutual trust and understanding. A long-term investment (in contrast to the short-term working options sometimes necessitated by uncertain funding and erratic donor behaviour) is the only way to ensure that local perceptions of humanitarian action in Central Asia do not deteriorate further.

2. Local staff as intermediaries

Tajik individuals or local institutions have played a key role as intermediaries between aid organisations and armed groups in Tajikistan. Local personnel are often the main source of information about the security situation in a region. During the active phase of the war, trusted local staff usually carried out the first discussions on security and access, laying the ground for meetings between commanders and international staff. In many cases, the local staff person was a well-respected leader familiar with the people and issues in the regions where he or she lived.

3. International staff

International programme managers also play a key role. While local personnel are essential for the whole operation and presence in the region of operation, they are also exposed to pressure from various sources. It is thus the international staff members who actually negotiate with the armed groups, present to them programme-related decisions, or deliver sensitive messages such as a refusal to allow commanders to appropriate part of the aid intended for the general population. To avoid corruption and embezzlement, it is necessary (although not necessarily sufficient) for international staff to retain control of aid distribution.

In the Tajik context, 'men with grey hairs' have a cultural advantage. Younger staff would not have the necessary social acceptance and authority to deliver sensitive messages. Another interviewee saw a similar advantage in having a Western woman as project manager, Central Asians having certain obligations of politeness towards women. Having young men as project managers seems to be a disadvantage, yet the staff profile of many of the organisations operating in Tajikistan is predominantly young and male.

It has also been suggested that humanitarian action might best be carried out by expatriate Muslims. Given that our survey showed that Central Asians are very suspicious of the hidden political and religious agendas of humanitarian workers, the fact that the overwhelming majority of international humanitarian personnel are Western, and therefore automatically categorised as Christians, reinforces the negative

perception. More expatriate staff of Muslim faith, including senior staff within field missions, would add credibility to the message that Western humanitarian aid is truly impartial and disinterested.

5. A non-missionary approach

The claim of international Western NGOs to be secular deserves attention here. Experts from a variety of backgrounds argue that the notion of secularity is relatively alien to Muslim thinking. The Western understanding of secularity as the separation between the state and the Church has no meaning for Muslims, as there is no Church in Islam. In theory, Islam does not leave any room for reinterpretation of its precepts and imposes its laws on all of society. Secular laws and secular social structures are therefore not conceivable to those Muslims who follow a literal reading of the Koran.

One reason for the wholesale rejection of the current Central Asian governments by Islamic movements in the region is precisely the governments' secular status and therefore their impurity in Islamic terms. Many Central Asians therefore do not understand the Western claim of secular humanitarian action. To the astonishment of many NGOs that often think that emphasising their secularity might increase their chances of acceptance by Islamists, this claim might on the contrary be interpreted as cunning or, worse, 'godless'.

It is much more important for Westerners to debunk the perception that their humanitarian action has a missionary goal. As shown in previous sections, moderate religious leaders are ready to accept humanitarian action if it is truly 'disinterested'. Disinterested here means non-missionary; it does not necessarily mean secular.

The numerous missionary organisations active in Central Asia have damaged the image of humanitarian organisation working there. The fact that some missionary organisations do indeed distribute humanitarian aid to (potential) followers makes it difficult for the non-missionary organisations to assert their standard of disinterest. Generalisation is a natural tendency of most people, particularly in the circumstances of very limited information flow prevailing in Central Asia.

In the former Soviet Union, secularity has an additional aspect. One of the dogmas of the Soviet state was its secular character, and the associated view that the open practice of religion should be curtailed in order to prevent proselytising (which would be a violation of the freedom of religious conscience). This was interpreted by Soviet authorities as requiring anti-religious campaigns and, at moments, fierce repression of religious expression. Devout Muslims in the former Soviet Union have, in part, interpreted secularity as being anti-religious. Simultaneously, and confusingly, the Soviet regime, over the years, largely secularised Central Asian culture. While secularity is therefore acceptable to a large portion of the population, many devout Muslims are opposed to it.

6. Transparency

Despite a strong tradition of hospitality in the region, 'Sovietised' Central Asians have a deep-seated suspicion of foreigners. Humanitarians do not escape that category, and the accusation that they are spying for their country, or at least tacitly conniving with their government, is difficult to deflate. Transparency is the most effective response to these accusations. In the interviews, the lack of transparency of humanitarian organisations was mentioned repeatedly. Interviewees said that they did not know what the goals of certain organisations were because their staff seldom explained them, and rarely met with the people to discuss them.

The use of military assets to carry out humanitarian operations often results in a damaged image, which outweighs the logistical advantages. Once a negative perception is established, it is difficult and takes a long time to overcome. Increased transparency is the only way to do this. It should also be noted that the actions of one organisation have repercussions for all others in the area.

If most people in Central Asia have a positive view of the United Nations because of its role in bringing peace to Tajikistan, the Islamists are very negatively inclined towards international multilateral organisations. The perception in these circles is that 'all organisations are working under the same umbrella because they share information and co-ordinate their action'.¹²⁸ This view is not specific to Central Asia but the Islamic movements in this region have very little information at their disposal by which to judge and understand humanitarian organisations. Their isolation reinforces negative perceptions of humanitarian organisations.

¹²⁸ Interview with Hizb ut-Tahrir representative, December 2002.

7. Engaging with local people

Accusations of both missionary goals and spying activities must be taken seriously by humanitarian organisations working in Central Asia. It is paramount to maintain an open and transparent attitude, although this is too often neglected by foreign humanitarian workers who consider that their action is self-evident and does not need any explanation.

We suggest that engagement with a wide range of interlocutors is necessary to overcome negative perceptions, and to achieve demarcation from the missionary organisations. This can be achieved through numerous conversations with: community leaders at different levels, religious leaders, and also local people more generally, including at teahouses, *madrassahs*, and schools. This effort demands a long-term investment in relationship building (not humanitarian preaching). Numerous and frequent conversations also with groups of beneficiaries, or with those who are not recipients of humanitarian aid, can also help to build an adequate sense of transparency. Donors must be aware that this investment is an essential part of humanitarian activity and should not be curtailed for budgetary reasons.

A strategy of engagement with various interlocutors must be preceded by a careful analysis of the message and the arguments. These must be

adapted to: the cultural background of the people, the cultural and social position of each individual interlocutor, the mandate and the programme priorities of the humanitarian organisation, and the circumstances and place of the meeting. The attitude and body language of humanitarian workers must also support, and not undermine, what they are professing. Too often, humanitarian workers use the same arguments in all situations, and ‘import’ ready-made arguments without assessing their appropriateness for a specific situation.

There is also a tendency to use messages developed in different contexts. From a survey conducted by the ICRC, Islamists prefer to be given a clear message about the identity (name, country, etc.) and motivations (faith, values, etc.) of a humanitarian worker, rather than an abstract slogan about the mandate of a humanitarian organisation.¹²⁹ A personalised conversation with a (radical) Muslim is likely to achieve more than a catchphrase wrapped in humanitarian jargon. It is paramount to strip humanitarian action of any humanitarian ideology. A humanitarian act will speak for itself if it is carried out in a transparent and humble manner.

¹²⁹ Jean-Nicolas Bitter et Jean-Claude Risse, *Radicalisme islamiste et action du CICR*, Geneva, March 1994, p77.

It has been argued that humanitarian principles are included in Islam, and that arguments quoting the Koran are the most powerful tool of persuasion for Muslims. Experts however point out that some radical Islamists disapprove of Christians and non-Muslims referring to the sacred text, considering it a sacrilege. More importantly, however, referring to the Koran to convince is reminiscent of a well-tried (Christian) missionary tactic whereby the traditions of the people to be converted are used to prove that the Christian faith is compatible with local customs. It can then be argued that the community to be converted was in fact ‘just waiting’ to accept the new faith and that espousing it would be a natural step forward. This approach denies the other culture its proper identity and is easily resented as ‘cultural rape’.¹³⁰ Radical Islamists may react very negatively to such attempts.

¹³⁰ Jean-Nicolas Bitter et Jean-Claude Risse, *Radicalisme islamiste et action du CICR*, Geneva, March 1994, p85.

6 | Summary and conclusion

Opposition groups in Central Asia are important in humanitarian work because they have influence on public opinion and strong opinions about humanitarian action in their region. The humanitarian organisations do not operate in a political void; their action is scrutinised by local opinion-makers, including members of opposition groups.

This study has looked in detail at three such groups, the Tajikistan Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) and its alliance, the United Tajik Opposition (UTO). This group fought in a civil war against the government of Tajikistan between 1992 and 1997. During that time, humanitarian actors had regular contact with field commanders at various levels, mainly informally, and these contacts proved necessary and facilitated

humanitarian action during the war. After the signing of the peace agreement in 1997, the UTO entered government, many of its fighters were integrated into the government armed forces, and contact with the UTO became more formal. In the post-conflict situation of today's Tajikistan, humanitarian operations have become more development-oriented and require less contact with armed elements and more capacity-building efforts with the civilian authorities.

The second group studied in this paper is a pan-Islamic political party, Hizb ut-Tahrîr (the Liberation Party) that advocates the restoration of the original caliphate by non-violent means. Hizb ut-Tahrîr is banned in Central Asia and its members are often sentenced to long prison terms. It rejects Western humanitarianism, arguing that humanitarian aid not only helps the corrupt and impure Central Asian governments to maintain themselves in power but it also carries missionary goals. Under the cover of humanitarian aid – they argue – Western organisations try to convert the Central Asian Muslims. Contacts with Hizb ut-Tahrîr are possible only under very difficult security conditions. The few reported humanitarian contacts mostly happen in Europe to avoid putting the Central Asian members at risk and to protect the humanitarian organisation from being expelled.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is a radical Islamic group listed as a terrorist organisation that fights against the secular government of Uzbekistan. Its call for a jihad against President Karimov's government has resulted between 1999 and 2001 in a series of terrorist attacks in Uzbekistan, and military incursion from neighbouring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Since the late 1990s, the movement seemed to have had been close to the Taliban and also bin Laden. After 11 September 2001, the IMU fought with the Taliban against the Coalition Forces in Afghanistan. The IMU leaders and most of its fighters were reportedly killed and the remaining troops dispersed. Most experts consider that the movement has been weakened and will have difficulty regaining its former strength. However, the IMU cannot be completely dismissed, information circulating that its members are trying to regroup to continue the jihad. Humanitarian contacts with this group are unknown and improbable.

This study has also analysed perceptions of humanitarian action in Central Asia, through numerous interviews conducted by specialised researchers in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. In general, Central Asians welcome humanitarian aid if it is provided on a neutral and impartial basis, by organisations that are independent, reaching the people most in need. Many respondents viewed humanitarian activity in a religious context, and suspected that humanitarian action can have missionary goals or serve as a cover for spying activities. These two accusations can be frequently heard in Central Asia, and it appears that humanitarian organisations do not put enough effort into countering these misconceptions.

We conclude that the humanitarian organisations active in Central Asia should pay particular attention to the following aspects of their operations:

- Foreign organisations would be well advised to invest in a long-term presence in the region, in order to build trust and lasting relationships with relevant interlocutors.
- Local contacts and personnel have an important role to play, providing necessary relays to the local population and being well informed about local security and political circumstances.
- Expatriate staff members are also important, to serve as a shield against attempts at corruption and political interference with the impartial provision of humanitarian aid.
- The most important tool for humanitarian organisations is transparency, and engagement with a wide range of local people. It is essential that humanitarian organisations spend more resources, mainly time, to establish relationships and improve their public image.
- Donors should be aware of the vital importance of such an investment, because improving the perception of humanitarian organisations in Central Asia is vital for future effective and save humanitarian (and development) operations.

This study has analysed some specific aspects of Central Asian expectations and perceptions of humanitarian action. We hope that it will contribute to the design of further improved strategies for humanitarian organisations in the region.



Appendix I: Interview questionnaire

Humanitarian organisations

1. Have you ever had contacts with a humanitarian organisation?
2. How would you define a humanitarian organisation?
3. What do such organisations do?
4. Why do you think they call themselves ‘humanitarian’?
5. What are the differences between international, national actors, inter-governmental (UN etc.) and non-governmental (NGO) actors?
6. Why are these organisations in your country?
7. Do you see a link between the presence of humanitarian organisations and the Western military presence in Central Asia?
8. What are the effects of the presence of the humanitarian organisations in your country?
9. Are humanitarian programmes bringing any changes (positive / negative)?

Humanitarian principles

10. What are the principles at the foundation of these ‘humanitarian’ organisations?
11. What do you think of these principles?
12. Should these principles be applicable to all people without distinctions of race, nationality, gender or age?
13. Do you think these organisations are neutral, or are they supporting specific groups of people? Why?
14. Do you think that these principles are compatible with your culture?
15. Why / why not?
16. Are humanitarian principles compatible with Islamic charity teachings? Why?
17. Is this view shared by the government? Why?
18. Do you think belligerents should take prisoners?
19. How should prisoners be treated?

If the interlocutor is a member of an organisation/formal group

20. Have you had contacts with humanitarian organisations? When did you first meet?
21. With international organisations, or local organisation?
22. Who initiated the contacts? You or the organisation?
23. Why did you accept these contacts?
24. Were these contacts sustained / one-off?
25. Who (in your group) took the decision to enter into contact with humanitarian organisations?
26. Were there members of your group opposed to such contacts? Why?
27. What was the content of your discussions with the humanitarian organisations?
28. Which arguments did they use? Were they convincing?
29. Did you come to an agreement with the humanitarian organisation(s)?
30. What were the reasons for the organisations to contact you?
31. If you entered into an agreement with the humanitarian organisations how would you ensure respect for the terms of the agreement by all members of your group?
32. Did the humanitarian organisation respect the agreement? Why?
33. How did relations with the organisation develop?
34. Do you trust individuals in the organisation rather than institutions?
35. Were they useful / successful in their operations?
36. Were there any positive effects for you?
37. Were there any negative effects for you?
38. Do you think there were positive and / or negative effects for the humanitarian organisations as a result of contacts with your group?
39. Would you welcome more contacts? With whom? Which organisations?
40. After this experience, did your perception of humanitarian organisations change?
41. Do you know of other groups/people like your(s) (also in other countries) who have contact with humanitarian organisations?

Appendix II: Maps of Central Asia



Map of Central Asia



Map No. 3770 Rev. 3 UNITED NATIONS
August 1998

Department of Public Information
Cartographic Section

Map of Kyrgyzstan



Map No. 3777 Rev. 3 UNITED NATIONS
August 1998

Department of Public Information
Cartographic Section

Map of Uzbekistan



Map of Tajikistan

