

## **Central Asia's Islamic Threat**

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Economic hardship is driving youngsters in central Asia into the ranks of militant Islamic forces.

Security forces across Central Asia are locked in a vicious campaign to crush radical Islamic groups, which have threatened to shatter the region's fragile political stability.

In an atmosphere of growing anxiety, the former Soviet republics are stepping up military patrols on their mountainous borders and arresting dozens of missionaries suspected of spreading fundamentalist teachings. Meanwhile, the Uzbek government has launched fierce air strikes against militant bases in the troubled Fergana Valley.

The true scale of the terrorist menace became horribly evident on February 16 last year when 16 people were killed and 120 wounded in five bomb blasts across Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan.

In a single hour, the terrorists hit the Ministry of Finance, the Interior Ministry, the National Security Service and the National Bank. Uzbek President Islam Karimov was quick to blame the atrocities on Wahhabi militants and launched a massive police hunt for the culprits.

Nearly 250 people were later said to have taken part in the plot. Nineteen of these have been executed and 128 jailed. The rest are still at large.

Uzbek prosecutor Makhmud Shaumarov believes the explosions were orchestrated by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, commanded by two warlords, Tahir Yuldashev and Zhuma Namangani.

Shaumarov says the organisation is funded by feared international terrorist Osama bin Laden and boasts links with the Afghan Taliban and Chechen Wahhabi factions. Its aim is jihad - a Moslem holy war -- against Uzbekistan in a bid to spread the Wahhabi doctrines. Founded on the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Wahhabis reject the veneration of saints and holy places, calling for a purification of Islam from later innovations.

The Tashkent bombings sent shock waves through Central Asia, not least because they took place in what was considered to be the most stable of all the former Soviet republics, where Karimov's authority went almost unchallenged.

Mardonov, the Tajik ambassador to Tashkent, said that the explosions demonstrated the existence of extremist forces capable of destabilising the region. "The explosions united our countries in a single effort to combat terrorism," he said.

But this was not an isolated incident. Trouble had started brewing as early as May 1998 when a power station in the Akmola region of Kazakhstan was destroyed by a terrorist bomb. A second explosion ripped through a plant in the Kokshetau region later that year: Kazakh security services believe both attacks were staged by Islamic fundamentalists.

In the same month, Kyrgyz security ministry troops arrested four foreign nationals on suspicion of spreading Wahhabi propaganda and recruiting converts for training in Chechnya, Tajikistan, Afghanistan

and Pakistan.

The Uzbek Ministry of National Security believes that the Chechen camps were set up and run by the Jordanian-born field commander Emir Khattab, who led the ill-starred raid on Dagestan last August.

Paranoia rapidly swept through Uzbekistan's immediate neighbours. Mazhit Isabekov, deputy head of the KNB (Committee for National Security) in South Kazakhstan, reported that international Islamic groups were attempting to spread their tentacles into the region.

Isabekov promptly reinforced police checkpoints in the mountainous Tolebi district, on the Kazakh-Uzbek border. A force of 800 border guards was stationed in the regions of Zhambyl and South Kazakhstan in anticipation of incursions by militant groups.

In September 1999, Kazakh security forces arrested six Pakistanis, posing as tourists, who were accused of disseminating religious books and video cassettes in southern Zhambyl.

Alnur Musaev, head of the Kazakh KNB, urged the government to deport Wahhabi missionaries and close down a religious centre in the Karasai district which served as a base for Afghan and Pakistani fundamentalists.

The paranoia was further fuelled by an armed raid into Kyrgystan in August 1999 when Islamic militants swooped on the Batken district, in the Fergana Valley. Racing across the border with Tajikistan, the fighters seized five villages and took seven hostages, including four Japanese geologists. They claimed their goal was to establish an Islamic state in the Fergana region.

It is thought the majority of the fighters were Uzbeks led by a field commander known as Azizkhan, believed to be a lieutenant of warlord Zhuma Namangani. Both men fought on the side of the Islamic opposition during the civil war in Tajikistan (1992-1997).

Vitaly Ponomaryev, an expert in Central Asian religious movements, says the raid was the latest development in an ongoing conflict between the Uzbek authorities and the Islamic opposition.

The militants, he says, were forced to take desperate action after Tajik and Uzbek authorities signed an agreement calling on armed groups in both countries to surrender their weapons by August 24.

Retaliation was swift. Tashkent dropped 200 paratroopers in the Fergana Valley near the Kyrgyz border, using the incursion as a pretext to strengthen its military presence in the region.

Uzbekistan has shown that it is the only republic in Central Asia with the military capabilities to fight armed terrorists, boasting special units trained in mountain combat.

But the military action almost backfired. Uzbek warplanes indiscriminately bombed the militant camps on Kyrgyz and Tajik territory, killing a large number of civilians in the process. Angry protests from Bishkek and Dushanbe threatened to drive a deep rift between the neighbouring republics.

However, many observers believe that the Central Asian governments have so far failed to tackle the root

cause of the Islamic unrest. Galina Bugaeva, political analyst and lecturer at Tashkent University, says the fundamentalists have been driven to terrorism by a range of social problems.

"They had no way out," she explains. "Prices were going up, their families lived in poverty. Young people were forced to seize any opportunity to earn money. Islamic groups are said to pay in US dollars. Feeling rejected by the government, the recruits were brainwashed with ideas about establishing an Islamic state."

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**Location:** Central Asia  
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