

Kyrgyz Terror Arrests Questioned

Author: [Sultan Jumagulov](#)

Not everyone believes the government's claim to have foiled an Islamic terror attack on the United States military.

The dramatic news of the arrest of three men on suspicion of plotting to attack the United States-led coalition airbase has caused a stir in Kyrgyzstan. But not everyone believes the government's claim to have successfully foiled a plot by Islamic terrorists.

On November 4, the National Security Service, SNB, arrested three young men, all Kyrgyzstan nationals, on suspicion of planning a terrorist attack on the base, 30 kilometres from Bishkek.

Grenades, a sawn-off shotgun, Kalashnikov rifle cartridges, and plans for a bomb were seized during the arrest, the agency said. The men – referred to by the first names Davlet, Ravil and Kadyrbek – are alleged to be members of the banned Islamic group Hizb ut-Tahrir party, and to have undergone guerrilla training at camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

SNB spokeswoman Chinara Asanova confirmed to IWPR that a terrorist attack had been foiled, and that the men were being held in a pre-trial cell.

The Gansi airfield was set up at Bishkek airport in December 2001 as one of the Central Asian bases that the US and its allies used to fly missions over Afghanistan. Most of the 1,500 servicemen are American, although European and other states have also contributed forces and military aircraft.

A spokesman at the base, Bruce Vidal, would not confirm the news to IWPR. "For security reasons we cannot comment on this incident," he said. "But we thank the Kyrgyz government for its efforts in providing our security."

Hizb ut-Tahrir, which wants to see existing governments overthrown and replaced with Islamic regimes, operates clandestinely in Kyrgyzstan as well as Uzbekistan, where it is most active – and most persecuted by the government.

However, despite the fiery propaganda in the leaflets it distributes, the group says it does not advocate or engage in violence. And evidence that it has done so has been inconclusive. Most arrests to date have been of people who possess or hand out its extremist literature.

In August last year, the authorities said they seized a small arms cache at the home of a Muslim preacher in the southern Jalalabad region, and they subsequently charged him with Hizb ut-Tahrir membership. Another weapons cache was similarly ascribed to the group.

The Kyrgyz authorities have repeatedly underlined that groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and al-Qaeda pose a serious threat to security. Deputy prime minister Kurmanbek Osmonov told a September conference on terrorism that Hizb ut-Tahrir was expanding its operations in Kyrgyzstan.

The news has caused a stir in Kyrgyzstan, with supporters of the government claiming it as a coup for the security forces.

Kyrgyz parliamentary deputy Akbokon Tashtanbekov praised the NSS for preventing an attack. "Can you imagine the damage it would have caused us internationally if there had been an explosion at the foreign airbase?" he asked.

His colleague Toktokan Boronbaeva believes Kyrgyzstan faces a real danger from extremist groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir, and supports tough measures to deal with them.

The more sceptical reactions ranged from doubts about the government's motives for announcing the arrests, to questions about whether there had been a real plot at all.

Human rights activist Tursunbek Akunov told IWPR that few people really believed the claim that Hizb ut-Tahrir was involved.

"It's an old cliché – whatever happens, there are 'Islamic extremists'. And it is beginning to irritate people," he said.

"This is how the security services win political dividends," said Jalalabad human rights activist Abdunazar Mamatislamov.

Rina Prijivoit, a well-known opposition journalist, argues that it is in the government's interests to ascribe crimes to Hizb ut-Tahrir, and that people meet such claims with a healthy dose of scepticism.

"We have grown used to not believing the authorities, as they often serve up as actual fact things they would like to be true," she told IWPR.

Some observers believe that the reported terror plot is significant within the three-way relationship Kyrgyzstan has with its traditional ally Russia and its new friend, America. Last month, the Russians opened military air base of their own, also near the capital Bishkek.

Leading human rights campaigner Topchubek Turgunaliyev pointed out that news of the attack came on the eve of a visit by two US assistant secretaries of state, Elizabeth Jones and Lorne Craner, responsible for Central Asia and human rights, respectively.

The most radical theory was floated by Alisher Abdimomunov, head of the Kyrgyz parliament's foreign affairs committee, who suggested that the incident had been manufactured to scare off the US.

"Bishkek, under pressure from the Kremlin, is letting the Americans know it is time to go home," he said.

According to Abdimomunov, the incident "has nothing to do with Hizb ut-Tahrir – that name is just used to frighten foreigners, in this case the Americans".

IWPR tracked down a Hizb ut-Tahrir member in Jalalabad and asked him about the case.

“We do not know who has been arrested, but it seems to be a provocation either by the authorities – who want to slander us – or by other religious confessions who are jealous of our growing popularity,” said the man, who gave his name as Habibullo.

“They need to prove whether the detainees really belong to Hizb ut-Tahrir, and who ordered them to organise a terrorist act.”

Sultan Jumagulov is an IWPR contributor in Bishkek. Ulugbek Babakulov also contributed to this report.

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