

Strange Case of Disappearing Uzbek Islamists

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IWPR investigation suggests a letter declaring jihad from an Uzbek Islamist in Afghanistan is not all it seems.

A spate of incidents in which Islamic figures in the Uzbek capital Tashkent suddenly disappeared appeared to be cleared up recently when a letter written by one of them turned up, apparently from Afghanistan.

□
Farrukh Haidarov who disappeared on June 25 with his son Abdullo.

The letter, postmarked Kabul and addressed to the family of Farrukh Haidarov, an Islamic scholar and Arabic teacher who went missing on June 25, suggests that the Uzbek authorities are right in saying the missing men – nine at the last count – have fled the country, and are not being held incommunicado by Uzbekistan’s secret services as relatives have claimed.

Yet on closer examination there is evidence that raises serious doubts about this version of events. Inquiries by IWPR indicate that the letter could not have reached Tashkent through Afghanistan’s postal system.

Furthermore, there is evidence that Haidarov had been under police surveillance for some time before he vanished, contrary to the security services’ assertions.

This calls into question Haidarov’s whereabouts and the motives of whoever it was who arranged the letter’s delivery.

The letter contains the potentially explosive news that Haidarov and some associates have left Uzbekistan to escape persecution and wage jihad or holy war against the “regime of unbelievers” at home.

Haidarov’s wife Zuhra Fahrutdinova has said the letter is written in her husband’s handwriting, and is so certain of this that she has turned down offers to have it verified by a graphologist. It is its origin, and the circumstances in which it was written, that worries her.

SWIFT AIRMAIL?

The envelope containing the letter arrived at Haidarov’s family home on August 12, addressed to his brother Ravshan and carrying Afghan postage stamps and franked “9-8-2004 Kaboul”; in other words three days earlier.

□
Envelope from the letter Haidarov's family received.

It also carries a frank from Tashkent’s central clearing office dated August 11, and another from the district post office dated the next day, when it was delivered.

When IWPR showed a copy of the envelope to director of the state postal service in Kabul, Mohammad

Ghulam, he confirmed that the Afghan postmark was genuine.

He also said it was possible for letters to get to Tashkent from Kabul in two to four days.

Experts at Tashkent's International Post Office, IPO, which handles all foreign mail, cast doubt on this view, saying their Afghan colleagues were overestimating the capacity of the system.

Uzbek postal officials said the letter could not have been sent from Afghanistan and must have been posted in Tashkent.

According to a senior official at the IPO, there are technical reasons why a letter from Kabul cannot reach Tashkent in two days.

He explained that all post from Afghanistan currently reaches Uzbekistan via Frankfurt, Germany, as there are no direct mail flights between the two countries.

Postal regulations require that a consignment of mail to a particular country of destination has to wait until it reaches three kilograms in total weight. As there is little correspondence out of Afghanistan, letters to Uzbekistan generally sit around in Kabul for several days, said this official.

The IPO in Tashkent reports that it had only two mail dispatches from Afghanistan in the whole of August. The most recent was received on August 19, and contained letters sent from Afghanistan before August 6.

"We have not yet received letters dated August 9; perhaps they are already on their way," said the official, speaking on September 8.

To test the system, IWPR's Kabul office dispatched four letters to Tashkent on September 6. Two were addressed in the internationally recognised Latin script, the other two in Cyrillic like Haidarov's. By the evening of September 10, they had not arrived.

WRONGLY ADDRESSED AND POSTMARKED

A second problem is that the address on the envelope is given in Cyrillic script and in the Russian language. This clearly raises questions about whether anyone in the Kabul post office could have read it. That is not out of the question, according to the Afghan postal official questioned in Kabul. But the big obstacle is that in Germany, the letter would simply have been returned to sender.

"This letter could not have gone via Frankfurt, where letters are sorted by machine. It would have gone back to Afghanistan with a request to write the address correctly, in the Latin alphabet," said a second official at the IPO in Tashkent.

The conclusion reached by Uzbek postal workers is that the letter was certainly franked with Afghan postmarks, but that it was sent by placing it in a postbox in Tashkent.

"The Tashkent post office postmark bears the letter "d", which means that it was taken out of a postbox in

Tashkent. We have our own postmarks for each district where letters are collected,” said an employee of the Tashkent post office which processed the envelope on August 11.

WAS HAIDAROV LINED UP FOR ARREST?

Law-enforcement agencies in Tashkent say that the letter is genuine and that it confirms their position they take – that Haidarov, like others, has slipped out of the country.

Prior to his disappearance, Haidarov, they say, was not under suspicion and was not being watched.

But the family have received another letter, this time from a man called Dilmurod Turapov, who wrote that in July this year he was summoned by Uzbekistan’s National Security Service, NSS, to give evidence against Haidarov.

Turapov is now away from Uzbekistan, working in Russia. Copies of his letter, in which he renounces the testimony he gave, have been sent to the head of the NSS and to Uzbekistan’s prosecution service.

His mother, 47-year-old Farogat Turapova, told IWPR that she witnessed how her son was forced to give evidence to the NSS. When he was called in on July 14, she accompanied him as he was interviewed by an investigator named Hamrokulov.

“He asked him to sign a formal statement, but Dilmurod refused as he did not believe the part saying that Farrukh Haidarov had advocated extremist religious ideas two years ago. Then the investigator said he had the best of motives for his request, because next time they talked it would be in the basement [well-known as location of detention cells]. We had no choice, so he signed the document,” says Turapova.

Turapova said her son was tormented at the thought of harming the reputation of an innocent man, so before leaving the country he wrote a letter admitting that he had given false testimony.

The NSS press office denied that it had ever questioned Turapov.

MISSING OR HELD INCOMMUNICADO?

According to the Haidarov family’s lawyer, Tatyana Davydova, the testimony Turapov was forced to give shortly before Haidarov’s disappearance suggests that the latter is now being held incommunicado by the NSS.

That would mean Haidarov wrote his “Afghan” letter under duress, said Davydova.

She added that if someone had fled the country secretly and was planning subversive activities, they would hardly announce the fact in a letter that was likely to be intercepted by the authorities. In the letter, “he writes a [court] sentence not just for himself, but his entire family - it’s absurd”, she said.

“The letter from Afghanistan is a pure provocation by the Uzbekistan special services – it is not hard for the NSS to forge an Afghan postmark. There is no doubt that Farrukh has been kidnapped by the special

services,” said Davydova. “The question is why.”

OFFICIALS DENY KNOWLEDGE

Law-enforcement officials insist that they have played no part in Haidarov’s disappearance, and that the letter is all that it seems to be

Oleg Bichenov, the head of the anti-terror department with Tashkent’s police force, who is dealing with cases of missing Muslim activists, said the letter could have reached Tashkent from Kabul in two days.

When asked whether law-enforcement agencies believed it possible that Haidarov had written this letter under duress while in detention, Bichenov said, “Farrukh Haidarov, like the other missing men, was not kidnapped by anyone. The possibility that this letter was written under pressure does not even come into the equation.”

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS ABOUT MISSING MEN

Haidarov is not the only figure connected with Islamic activism to have disappeared without trace in recent months – there are reportedly nine missing men.

Lawyer Davydova says some of them are associated with former leading figures on the Islamic scene. The first case was in April, and involved Husnutdin Nazarov, son of the renowned Tashkent cleric Obid-Qori Nazarov, who fled Uzbekistan in 1998 after he was charged with being the leader of the “Wahhabi movement”.

The term “Wahhabi” is used to describe Muslim activists opposed to the Uzbek government, although it does not generally refer to members of the outlawed group Hizb-ut-Tahrir.

Husnutdin Nazarov’s name features in the “Afghan letter”, as someone Haidarov says he has met recently in exile.

Haidarov’s wife Zuhra is the sister of Ruhitdin Fahrutdinov, who has been on the wanted list since 1998 as the figure the authorities say replaced Obid-Qori Nazarov as head of the “Wahhabi movement”.

“The special services are after the big fish, and they have kidnapped people close to the Wahhabi leaders to take revenge or to hold as hostages,” says Davydova. “The letter from Afghanistan was concocted to make relatives stop looking for them in Tashkent and accusing the special services of kidnapping them.”

According to a western expert with a decade of research experience in Central Asia,

“The letter from Afghanistan is a frightening document if you start to think that it was written by a person under duress, someone who has been tortured.

“It makes you wonder where he is now, what has happened to him, and whether he still looks like his old self.”

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