

The role of education in official Islam and religious movements in Kyrgyzstan

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The activities of violent and extremist Islamic movements in Kyrgyzstan are an existing threat, as perceived by government officials and often also by international actors. In recent years there have been specific events, for example Nookat in 2008, which legitimise the government's strong and occasionally very strong security policy against so-called Islamic violent extremist and radical movements. The Kyrgyz government, together with international actors, have joined their efforts in combating the threats of violent extremism and radicalisation that lead to terrorism (in the OSCE's terminology). In order to sustain the structures and organizations of the actors involved in the area — official Islamic institutions, law enforcement agencies in Kyrgyzstan, and extremist movements — education and the exchange of information are some of the basic elements.

This article analyses the role of ideology and education in Islam and the policy of law enforcement agencies in preventing violent extremism and radicalisation that lead to the threat of terrorism in Kyrgyzstan.

In order to analyze the educational aspect, a broader context of the situation in Islam and the government's security policy have to be taken into account. Therefore, the article first describes the ideological situation of Islam in Kyrgyzstan and the state's overall relationship with religion; secondly, education in other Islamic movements, for example Hizb ut – Tahrir, will be looked at; thirdly, the government's responses to violent extremist and radical movements that lead to terrorism will be described; and finally, we will look at the situation of secondary religious education in madrassahs.

By education I mean both formal and non-formal secondary education taught in madrassahs, higher Islamic education within the country and abroad, training courses provided for law enforcement officials, as well as non-formal groups of people who educate each other.

This article is based on research² carried out in the spring of 2010 in Southern Kyrgyzstan – Osh city and Jalal in the Abad and Batken provinces. It does not include an assessment of the level of Islamic radicalization and violent extremism or an evaluation of religious education.

Ideological situation of Islam in Kyrgyzstan and the state's relations with religion

Nowadays, 20 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan faces difficulties in defining an ideology of Islam which would be able to develop by itself, on the one hand, and allow people to enjoy the freedom of religion and belief, on the other. There are a few reasons for this. First, after Kyrgyzstan's renewed independence the doors were flung open to many religions and movements which wanted to work and be present in Kyrgyzstan. For Islamic organisations, the Muftiat (the main Muslim executive body in Kyrgyzstan) cooperated with them. Therefore many mosques were built in Kyrgyzstan. Now there are about 2,000 in total. Moreover, there have also been different foundations which are active in Kyrgyzstan to provide social and economic support to the people. Ideological and material support has often originated from Turkey and the Middle East Countries, less often also from India. NGOs were established to promote Islamic values. Although

² Several methods were used for gathering information — previous studies, expert interviews with representatives of governmental institutions, law enforcement agencies, NGOs working on defending human rights and representatives of madrassahs, mosques and other religious organizations. Two representatives of Hizbut — Tahrir were also interviewed and five madrassahs were visited. For the methodology a triangular method of analyzing information was used. The fieldwork for the interviews in Osh city and Jalal in the Abad and Batken provinces was carried out from 29 March — 5 April 2010.² The language of the interviews was mainly Russian. Some respondents preferred to answer in Kyrgyz or Uzbek. In those few cases translations were provided. A total of 35 respondents were interviewed — five females and thirty males.

diversity was observed, it created challenges for Muslim community leaders in Kyrgyzstan in addressing different interpretations of and practices in Islam, whether this was true Islam or ‘misleading’ Islam in the face of radical believers and extremist movements. From the point of view of the freedom of religion and belief, official Islam in Kyrgyzstan failed to address the challenge of diversity and, along with the government’s policy on security aspects, it applies a rather restrictive policy. There are several aspects in the organization of Islam as a religion which demonstrate this.

One of the key issues for the official Islamic authorities was to define which madh’hab to join, which values to popularize and how to organize the religion’s relations with the state. Hanafi is the most popular madh’hab (school) of the Sunni branch of Islam in Kyrgyzstan. Other madh’hab – Shafi’i, Maliki and Hanbali also are represented, but to a lesser extent. It has to be noted that the existing differences between madh’habs mainly concern rituals and practices (for example, how many times a day one has to pray while travelling, where to put one’s hands while praying etc.), while values and actions, allowed or forbidden, are common between them. Madh’habs other than Hanafi, which also ideologically represent Sunni Islam, are currently not welcome in Kyrgyzstan. Consequently, different Muslim movements cannot organize themselves separately as a religious group since the government applies a restrictive policy and often punishes ‘the others’. Government officials and representatives from law enforcement bodies perceive the existing difference as something which exists in ‘accepted’ Islam and classify it as violent extremism or radicalisation that leads to terrorism.

Furthermore, the development of Islamic ideology in Kyrgyzstan is also dependent on education and its environment, where local Islamic leaders – Imams – study and obtain knowledge. Formal requirements for being an Imam are that one has to be a male, well respected in the community, having a knowledge of basic prayers in Arabic and being a graduate at least from a madrassah (secondary Islamic religious education). There is no requirement that an Imam has to have a higher education or to be able to speak Arabic fluently. During the last few years Muftiat have worked on introducing an accreditation system for Imams by developing an examination system. At first, there were only a few Imams who took this examination and only very few passed it. The level of education is higher in the Faculty of Theology at the University in Osh due to support provided from Turkey – in the way of financing, teaching and academic staff. There is an opportunity to participate in exchange programmes in Turkey for the best students as well. The Faculty has also annually organized one-month training courses in Islam since 2006 for 60 Imams from Kyrgyzstan which take place in Osh.

The educational structure has led to the situation where there are knowledgeable and well educated Imams and, at the same time, there are Imams who cannot even read Arabic and they quote the Quran and hadith (narratives originating from the words and deeds of the Islamic prophet Muhammad) and a limited number of prayers which they have learnt by heart. Consequently, it is popular to study Islam abroad, particularly for higher education purposes. Kyrgyz students study in Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, and other countries where education concerning Islam has a long and strong tradition. According to the point of view of those graduates interviewed, the quality of education abroad is higher than in the seven Islamic institutes and one university which are present in Kyrgyzstan. There is a good environment to learn and practice Arabic, which is crucial for reading the Quran. Abroad there are often Imams and teachers who are more highly qualified than those working in Kyrgyzstan. However, it is difficult and restrictive for new graduates to reintegrate in Islamic institutions upon their return home.

According to the existing structure and personnel policy in the Muftiat (the main Muslim executive body in

Kyrgyzstan) and the Kazyat (the Muslim executive body at the provincial level), new graduates returning from foreign universities have to go through a so-called adaptation to the Islam which is practised in Kyrgyzstan and this takes two or three years. During this time the highest rank they can obtain is deputy Imam although they often have higher formal qualifications and knowledge than the Imam himself. This hierarchy is not conducive to new graduates being able to apply their knowledge in practice. They often end up teaching at universities or institutes, or changing their profession instead.

One more structural problem is related to the financial remuneration of Imams. Imams do not receive a stable salary. Their income is generated from donations. Furthermore, they do not have any social guarantees and after retirement they do not receive any social benefits or pensions. The current economic situation makes it difficult to require that Imams have a high capacity level and therefore they usually combine this work with other types of employment.

One important aspect of the state's relation with religion is its attitude to religious pupils wearing religious symbols and clothing in secular schools. In March 2009 the Minister of Education issued a decree forbidding the wearing of the Muslim headscarf in schools. Following criticism from civil society, the decree was repealed. Nevertheless, according to information from the interviews there are still a number of schools in Jalal in Abad province which openly protest against girls attending school while wear a headscarf (hidzab).

Education in other Islamic movements: the example of the Hizb ut-Tahrir The controversial ideological situation and the interpretation of official Islam in Kyrgyzstan might be one of reasons which persuade people to join other Islamic movements, like Hizb ut-Tahrir. Hizb ut – Tahrir, according to its legal status, is a party whose activities are banned in Kyrgyzstan as, indeed, they are in other Central Asian states, although they are legal in many European and Asian countries. Its headquarters are in the UK and its publications are printed in Austria.

Hizb ut-Tahrir members, interviewed during this research, criticised the fact that 'official' Islam in Kyrgyzstan is not the true Islam and it has lost its origins and true values. The same argumentation is used by "official" Islamic organizations towards Hizb ut-Tahrir. This diversity is not welcomed by the state authorities, which clearly support Islam as defined in the Muftiat. In addition, it has to be mentioned that the state adopts a different education policy for this movement.

The organizational structure of Hizb ut-Tahrir demonstrates how the needs of people have been addressed. First, this party approaches each person individually through its structure, which is along the lines of a network. One of the key elements to being a Muslim, regardless of the organization to which one belongs, is to study. The Hizbut-Tahrir's basic organizational unit is the 'halka' – a group of five people, who regularly meet and study together. This is also a basic social community which addresses not only religious needs, but also social ones, like a sense of belonging. Interestingly, usually one halka do not know the members of others. This is kept secret. When a level of one halka has been completed, a person can move to another level. An interesting detail concerning the organizational structure is that the main leader of the organization is unknown to members of the organization and to the wider public.

From the opinions and information obtained by interviewing Hizbut-Tahrir members, it was observed that their arguments on religion and their discussion of religious topics and Islam in general were more evidence and fact-based. On the contrary, it is well elaborated and discussed what the 'official' Islam actually

popularizes. Also their information materials are well prepared and their arguments are well elaborated and logical. They do address issues and problems which currently concern people.

In being a Hizb ut-Tahrir member, one of the obligations is to involve one's family in the movement. Since families tend to be large in Kyrgyzstan, especially amongst ethnic Uzbek families, this gives the organization a large number of members. Furthermore, marriages are welcomed among those belonging to Hizb ut-Tahrir so that a joint understanding of religion and Islam is present in one family. In one of the interviews I was told about a case where one Hizb ut-Tahrir member encouraged his sister to marry another Hizb ut - Tahrir member since the latter showed great courage and success in the work of the party.

The Government's response to violent extremist and radical movements which lead to terrorism State officials in Central Asia are particularly concerned about allegedly violent extremist activities by Hizb ut-Tahrir which lead to terrorism and threaten the state's security. According to the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic this movement's activities are forbidden, including informational activities. The main concern of the government and the law enforcement agencies is an aim of Hizb ut-Tahrir to re-establish the historical Caliphate. While being an aim of the organization, as conveyed interviews, this is not realistic and members are fully aware of this fact. Moreover, their knowledge of international politics and the current world order make their judgment appropriate realistic one. Nevertheless, one still has to be cautious that this aim has not changed or been abandoned.

According to information provided by one human rights defender in Jalal in Abad, Hizb ut-Tahrir has not engaged in any violent activity since 1953 and it has not been publicly active in Kyrgyzstan since 2006. Nevertheless, the Kyrgyz law enforcement agencies are cautious with regard to any actions by this movement which pose a direct threat to the state.

One cannot neglect the threat of violent extremist movements since recent years have demonstrated their involvement in several events. However, one cannot determine that every organization outside the official Muftiat is a violent or radical extremist movement which leads to terrorism. Although allegedly violent extremist activities are the ones which seriously concern Kyrgyz officials and the government, this research demonstrates that serious measures have also been taken against activities which have not proved to be violent or extremist. As the results of the research demonstrate, in many cases there is a lack of knowledge in identifying and analyzing different religious movements and assessing their threat to state security.

The Kyrgyz government has adopted several ways of responding to religious movements which it considers to be violent, extremist or radical and with a potential to commit terrorist activities. One way is through legislation. The Criminal Code includes serious sanctions for even keeping or distributing the information and materials of banned organizations. Punishment for the crime of keeping Hizb ut — Tahrir materials has been increased since 2005-2006 from 3 years imprisonment to 18 years. Even law enforcement officials privately recognize that this is too severe.

In order to closely follow the activities of radical and extremist movements, including Hizb ut-Tahrir, a '9th unit'³ has been established in each municipality subordinated to the Ministry of the Interior. There are 2 — 4

3 Since the April uprising in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, this function of the 9th Unit was removed, only to be replaced in the autumn of 2010, but this time the unit has been strengthened with additional staff and renamed as 'the counter- extremism and illegal immigration unit'.

officials working on monitoring the situation and reporting on the activities of violent extremist and radical movements. In order to obtain information, they use their social contacts, primarily those of local Imams. There are even social networks which have been established where some Imams inform the 9th unit about members of their jamaat (parish) and their behaviour. For example, if, during prayers, a person uses different gestures from those that are common to Hanafi madh'hab, for example positioning one's hands higher than the stomach, this has been reported to the responsible authorities as a sign of suspicion that a person has joined a radical movement. Also other suspicious information gained in private conversations with people has been reported to law enforcement officials. Furthermore, 9th unit officials follow suspicious persons and observe their activities. As reported by several human rights defenders, there are cases where, due to a lack of evidence, officials from the 9th have secretly planted evidence in the house of a suspected person who is under suspicion. These can be Hizb ut-Tahrir leaflets, USBs, CDs etc. Cases have been reported where weapons or ammunition have been found at the homes of Hizb ut-Tahrir members and which have been supposedly planted there by the 9th unit. These materials have been used as evidence during arrest and in the subsequent trial. Furthermore, the 9th keeps a watchful eye on madrassahs and the people working there. During the field work a teacher at one of the madrassahs was being kept under close surveillance by police officers from the 9th unit. However, she was not arrested, possibly due to her pregnancy. Also other directors of madrassahs have stated that state officials and police officers regularly visit them to ensure that no radical ideas or allegedly extremist activities have taken place there.

During interviews with representatives of the 9th unit, they were open about their capacity to evaluate and obtain evidence. Their knowledge is limited to a few seminars organized by the Ministry of the Interior or the State Commission on Religious Affairs. However, this is not enough and more in-depth and regular training in Islamic movements and freedom of religion and belief, as well as working methods are needed. The strengthened capacity of law enforcement officials and an in-depth knowledge of the diversity of Islamic religious movements would help to properly address the threats of violent extremism and radicalisation that lead to terrorism.

Violent responses by law enforcement agencies and incompatible court decisions have resulted in Hizb ut-Tahrir members being even more united in their activities and with an intensified anger concerning the government's policies. This is a stick with two ends — one is that the government fears violent extremist and radical movements in Kyrgyzstan and other is that those movements allegedly might become even stronger and possibly even more violent because of the violent precautionary response by the government.

Secondary religious education in madrassahs

Since there is a lack of information and knowledge about Islam in Kyrgyzstan, education and information is crucial to improve the level of knowledge. It is popular to study in madrassahs. Therefore, it is important to analyze the education given in madrassahs since graduates can contribute to formulating the ideology of Islam in the country.

Madrassah is an Islamic religious school where pupils can study after leaving a primary school. There are 56 madrassahs in Kyrgyzstan. Madrassahs are separated by gender — there are different madrassahs for boys and girls. Girls are mostly taught by female teachers and boys by male, if not then Imams teach girls themselves. The length of studies at madrassahs differs from one madrassah to another; it is generally from three to five years. It is mostly religious subjects that are taught in madrassahs and these subjects include

the Arabic language, the Quran, hadiths (narratives originating from the words and deeds of the Islamic prophet Muhammad), and fiqh (Islamic law). In some madrassahs secular subjects are taught as well — foreign languages, the history of Kyrgyzstan, geography, computer science, sport and in some madrassahs girls and boys can learn some crafts skills — sewing, cooking, woodwork or metalwork. There is no standard system for teaching secular subjects in madrassahs. It depends on the availability of teachers, finances, materials, and the policy of a madrassah and the Imam in question. Also, the government has stated to consider developing a standard policy for education standards in madrassahs.

Muftiat is currently working on the issue of developing a standard curriculum and a particular standard of education for madrassahs. However, at this moment in time the education in madrassahs is not licenced and their diplomas are not recognized by secular institutions and state and private authorities. If one studies abroad, usually it requires a diploma from an accredited secondary school. A diploma from a madrassah is also not valid if a graduate wants to work and proof of his education is required. Consequently, this negatively influences employment opportunities. There are a very few pupils who at their own or their parents' initiative attend a state secondary school or a vocational school in the evenings in parallel to their studies at a madrassah. This requires additional resources and, in particular, it is difficult to move between schools in rural areas without regular public transport. There are some pupils who, after graduating from a madrassah, go on to study in a secondary school. This usually requires twice the amount of study time to gain an accredited diploma, which not all families can afford, particularly if there are many children.

The question on the financing of madrassahs is a sensitive one, and therefore not much information was gained. Some directors stated that they do receive donations, and some are supported by the Muftiat. One madrassah, which was visited during this study, is located close to a market, and there are many donations — money as well as food. Similar to Imams, teachers do not receive a salary. They do not have any social guarantees for this job either. One exceptional case was mentioned where parents had collected money and paid for Russian lessons to be taught to their children in a madrassah.

Interestingly, in Osh there is one madrassah where there are separate classes for girls studying in the Uzbek and Kyrgyz languages. The Kyrgyz language class was formed just recently since the city is mainly ethnically Uzbek populated.

There are madrassahs where young people live and they only visit their homes during the school holidays. The State Committee on Religious Affairs has expressed its concerns about the sanitary conditions and housing in which students live. They are rather basic and poor, and assumingly inappropriate in cold winters. Particularly toilets, showers and hygienic facilities for girls are not up to standard.⁴

Constant studying is one of the requirements for being a good Muslim. Usually, students are highly motivated. Consequently, all madrassahs were positive about introducing secular subjects in their curriculum if technical assistance is provided.


From the information gained during this study one cannot evaluate the quality of education. However, at a systematic level there are conclusions that can be drawn. It is important to develop a standard curriculum

⁴ I had the opportunity to view one hygienic facility because of being a female. My male colleague was not allowed to enter this madrassah at all. This demonstrates the cultural sensitivity of the subject. It is recommended that a gender-balanced team works on the issue of education in madrassahs.

and an appropriate educational standard for madrassahs so that there are no concerns at the ideological level concerning the skills gained during studying. Furthermore, a standard which is accredited by the state would provide more employment opportunities for graduates. Muftiat is working on the issue of developing a standard curriculum for religious education in madrassahs.

Conclusions

- As the research shows, the ideology of the official” Islam in Kyrgyzstan is rather vaguely formulated and does not fully correspond to people’s needs. To a large extent, it is linked to the situation in religious education at the secondary and higher education level and personnel policy.
- The State fears terrorism and allegedly blames Muslim religious movements other than the official jamaats (parishes) for popularizing radical ideas and allegedly violent extremist activities.
- Law enforcement agencies in the municipalities are repressive towards Hizb ut-Tahrir members, occasionally even without any evidence of wrongdoing.
- The capacity of the law enforcement officials is weak and should be strengthened in order to be able to recognise and distinguish violent extremism and radical movements that lead to terrorism from other peaceful organisations.
- Court verdicts on keeping or spreading the information materials of Hizb ut- Tahrir are rather harsh.
- Religious education at madrassahs in Kyrgyzstan has not been standardised and is rather weak. There is no standard curriculum for madrassahs and secular subjects are taught unsystematically.
- The weakness of “official” Islam in combination with the state’s fears of violent extremism and radicalisation that leads to terrorism is very much reflected in the work of law enforcement agencies and this leads to rather harsh repressive measures against different Islamic religious movements, which is done in the name of ensuring the state’s security. However, this often means restrictive policies towards the freedom of religion and belief.
- Bearing in mind that it is an Islamic duty to study on a lifelong basis, the directors of madrassahs are positive about introducing secular subjects into the curriculum.
- From the views demonstrated by the ‘official’ Islam authorities and the Hizb ut — Tahrir movement as a reflection of the policies applied as a result of law enforcement, one can see that education has a crucial role in more thoroughly developing and implementing the freedom of religion and belief. A more elaborate curriculum and ideological guidance is needed in religious institutions of the “official” Islam; similarly, the law enforcement agencies have recognised that there is a need for more training in different Islamic movements and in the different tools and working methods with regard to extremist movements. Furthermore, although Hizb ut — Tahrir is banned in Kyrgyzstan, the overall ideology of Islam might benefit if an open discussion on Islamic principles and lifestyle is made possible. Important improvements in the flow of information between the three bodies — ‘official’ Islamic institutions, other Islamic movements and law enforcement agencies is needed with appropriate guidance and international experience to be taken into account. Of course, this is not realistic with the current security policy in Kyrgyzstan, where Hizb ut — Tahrir members are being detained and arrested. One can conclude that some of the judgements and the measures taken by law enforcement agencies towards allegedly violent extremist and radical Islamic movements are based on a lack of information and without proper understanding. This leads to a restrictive policy towards the actions of other religious movements. Education and an exchange of information might therefore contribute to improving the freedom of religion and belief in Kyrgyzstan.



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