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pp. 61-66

Recommended Citation

Mungur, Krishna. "Islamist Distortions: Hizb ut- Tahrir a Breeding Ground for Al- Qaida Recruitment." *Journal of Strategic Security* 2, no. 4 (2010): : 61-66.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.2.4.6>

Available at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol2/iss4/6>

Islamist Distortions: Hizb ut- Tahrir a Breeding Ground for Al-Qaida Recruitment

Author Biography

Krishna Mungur is an Independent Contractor with nineteen years combined experience in Open Source Intelligence research and analysis, and information technology. He fulfills assignments within his own consulting company, SCC, in cooperation with government agencies, defense contractors, and within academia. Krishna has completed hundreds of studies on terrorist organizations, attacks, leadership profiles, and created the Werzit (<http://werzit.com/intel/>) website for intelligence studies and counterterrorism. The website has detailed country and regional studies, historical analyses, and extensive archives on national security. His current work is concerned with terrorism from the three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Krishna is a member of the International Association for Intelligence Education, and holds a Master's of Science in Strategic Intelligence from American Military University, and two Bachelor's degrees from Miami University, in Oxford, Ohio.

Abstract

In 1953, a radical splinter organization from the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT), was founded by the Al-Azhar University (Cairo, Egypt) educated jurist Sheikh Taqiuddin an-Nabhani who criticized the Muslim Brotherhood for collaborating with Egyptian secularists, such as Gamal Abdel Nasser. A sizable portion of the more radical members of the Muslim Brotherhood broke away, to join Nabhani's budding movement. Today, HuT is known to operate in more than forty countries, calling for the restoration of the Islamic Caliphate, with a history of violence and links to violent terrorist organizations. Given increasing tensions in the region over the presence of coalition troops, Predator drone airstrikes, a destabilized Pakistan, and lawless regions in Afghanistan, HuT is well positioned to amplify the strategic threat to coalition forces serving in the Pakistan and Afghanistan theaters.

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Introduction

In 1953, a radical splinter organization from the Muslim Brotherhood, *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (HuT), was founded by the Al-Azhar University (Cairo, Egypt) educated jurist Sheikh Taqiuddin an-Nabhani who criticized the Muslim Brotherhood for collaborating with Egyptian secularists, such as Gamal Abdel Nasser.¹ A sizable portion of the more radical members of the Muslim Brotherhood broke away, to join Nabhani's budding movement. Today, HuT is known to operate in more than forty countries, calling for the restoration of the Islamic Caliphate, with a history of violence and links to violent terrorist organizations. Given increasing tensions in the region over the presence of coalition troops, Predator drone air-strikes,² a destabilized Pakistan, and lawless regions in Afghanistan, HuT is well positioned to amplify the strategic threat to coalition forces serving in the Pakistan and Afghanistan theaters.

History and Ideology

The *Hizb ut-Tahrir* organization considers its members to be the vanguard of political Islamism in the world. In this position, argues HuT, the members are told they are vastly superior or of far greater importance than non-members. In the West, where Muslims may experience racism and prejudice, being made a leader in this self-proclaimed vanguard is particularly empowering, and helps the organization breed greater loyalty. In the East, HuT members are often sentenced to prison, which helps reinforce the conviction that they are among the most important Muslims. Historically, the early Muslim community was subjected to incarceration and torture, and HuT ideologues view their own incarceration as similar to the torture endured by the early Muslim community. Instead of slowing the recruitment process for HuT, statistical estimates suggest that such experiences as violence and imprisonment may actually accelerate it.³

Membership

Reliable estimates of the membership of HuT are difficult to determine. As with any clandestine organization, member cells are deliberately kept ignorant of the identity of other cells in their own geographic region. In addition, HuT has formed scores of front groups, many with only a few members in each. The front groups exist as a psychological operation, intended to convey the impression that the ideas of HuT are shared, debated, and discussed seriously by many other organizations. In some cases, a single member might belong to more than a dozen front organizations, and under any number of false identities, frustrating any sincere effort to determine genuine membership numbers.

One indicator of the level of support enjoyed by HuT is the attendance at rallies, conferences, and other events. In August 2007, HuT held a conference in Indonesia, at the Gelora Bung Karno stadium in Jakarta, a place normally reserved for football matches. The facility, which can hold an audience of one hundred and eight thousand, was packed to capacity.⁴ While it is unlikely that every person in attendance was a rank-and-file member of HuT, the conference likely enhanced the prestige of the group because of a keynote address by Din Syamsuddin, the chairman of Indonesia's second largest Muslim organization, *Persyarikatan Muhammadiyah*, boasting some 29 million members. Despite the fact that many in attendance were not members of HuT, support for the organization from non-members is widespread. The first HuT conference in the United States, in July 2009, had a much more modest turnout of approximately three hundred attendees in the Chicago suburb of Oak Lawn.

Beliefs

Hizb ut-Tahrir is strongly committed to the destruction and subversion of democracy. Its earliest literature, from founder Sheikh Taqiuddin an-Nabhani, testifies to this fact, and references to such insurrections are rampant. To help realize their dream of an Islamist Caliphate, Nabhani drafted a proposed *Constitution for the Caliphate*. The document clearly places HuT into a class of subversive political organizations operating under the guise of religion that seek to realize the founding of a totalitarian dictatorship. For example, when HuT showed its Constitution to representatives of Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, it was quickly rejected after only two meetings.⁵ Similarly, Jordan's King Hussein predictably refused to implement the Constitution, and banned HuT from operating in Jordan, stating that it sought to overthrow the monarchy. From these and other similar experiences with Arab leaders, HuT denounced the

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governments of Iraq, Libya, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Iran.⁶ Other Islamist organizations that have operated within democratic structures, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hamas in Palestine are also unacceptable to HuT.

Tactics

It is commonly reported that HuT is committed to nonviolence to achieve its stated political objectives, such as forming an Islamist Caliphate.⁷ However, a review of relevant literature and investigation into the history of the organization is not consistent with a nonviolent group seeking the restoration of the Caliphate. HuT has not restricted its operations to discussing its Constitution with Arab governments. In 1968–1969, HuT led failed coup attempts in Syria and Jordan. Coups were again tried in 1974, but also failed.⁸ HuT has encouraged suicide bombers to attack Western troops in Iraq, referring to suicide bombers as "martyrs" and stressing the mission of destroying "the new crusaders."⁹ The successor to Sheikh Taqi-uddin an-Nabhani, Abdul Qadeem Zallum, who led the organization after the death of its founder, has gone on the record saying that every Muslim government "must forcibly unite . . . into [a] military state even if it means killing millions of people."¹⁰ In November 1990, Sheikh Omar Bakri, leader of HuT in Britain, publicly called for the assassination of Prime Minister John Major.¹¹ Although HuT literature frequently claims to be seeking a nonviolent revolution, its violent history suggests otherwise.

Group Identity and Cohesion

HuT is a breakaway from the less radical Muslim Brotherhood organization. The splintering process from the Muslim Brotherhood was characterized by more extremism and radicalized actions. However, HuT itself has also seen a splintering process from within its own ranks. A group of violent radicals following Sheikh Omar Bakri broke away from the main organization in 1996, leading to the formation of the smaller and more violent organization *Al-Muhajiroun*. Individuals and cells from *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and *Al-Muhajiroun* have partnered with the hardcore terrorist groups, such as Hamas, the al-Aqsa Martyr's Brigade,¹² and al-Qaida on attacks including: London's shoe-bomber attacks and the London July 7 and July 21 bombings in 2005;¹³ the Christmas Day 2000 bombing of Indian military barracks in Srinagar in cooperation with the terrorist organization Jaish-e-Mohammed;¹⁴ the founding of a terrorist training camp in Bly, Oregon during 1999;¹⁵ a 2004 aborted plot to bomb the Ministry of Sound nightclub in London;¹⁶ the Madrid train bombings of March 2004;¹⁷ a poison-gas attack in France in 2000;¹⁸ the kidnapping of

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Western tourists in Yemen in December 1998;¹⁹ attempted surface-to-air missile purchases in East London during 2005 to shoot down civilian airliners;²⁰ and poison ricin plots from January 2003 against the Heathrow Express rail system in London.²¹

Sheikh Omar Bakri has even allied with his own rivals, including Abu Hamza and Sheikh Abdullah al-Faisal. It is this splintering process within a radical organization that has turned into a violent group that poses the greatest risk to Western forces in a destabilized Pakistan and the lawless regions of Afghanistan.

Conclusion: Current and Future Threat

In July 2009, Pakistan, HuT recently called for a coup against the government of Pakistan, by "military means" if necessary.²² About one month later, thirty members of HuT in Afghanistan were arrested.²³ Western forces face the potential for military coups in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. Additionally, since HuT has authorized the killing of military personnel in suicide bomb attacks, Western forces face this threat as well.²⁴ The use of Predator drone air strikes in the Global War on Terrorism, and the mere presence of Western forces in the military theater provide greater tinder for the fire of HuT recruitment strategies. The threat posed by HuT to Western forces is real, severe, and must not be overlooked.

About the Author

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