HIZB-UT TAHIR: NIHILISM OR REALISM?

John Horton

Introduction

Hizb-ut Tahrir occupies a somewhat unique place in the current world of Islamist political movements. Outlawed in a number of countries, the group has, in many western countries, successfully straddled the fence between peaceful political activism and violent political opposition. While a number of Middle Eastern and Central Asian governments have resolutely decried the group, it has thus far managed to avoid provoking significant censorship from the US, UK, and other most other western countries. A few notable exceptions have been Germany and Denmark where the group has been banned on charges of provoking anti-Semitism. Although it has been banned on charges of racism, most of the public debates in the West which have involved the group have been on other subjects such as immigration, integration, free speech and terrorism. The group’s profile has been raised significantly in the UK due to the ongoing trial of the radical cleric Abu Hamza and, more generally, the debate within Britain over what to do with the mostly-immigrant Islamist residents of “Londonistan”. In the current political and security environment policy-makers and security officials can scarcely choose to ignore the group with its anti-western message and intentions, but must take care when formulating a conceptual paradigm in which to place the group to avoid either jumping at ghosts or ignoring a real threat.

Given the high level of secrecy that Hizb-ut Tahrir maintains around most of its members, political structure, and activities, it will be impossible to detail many of the specific activities that the group may or may not be involved in apart from those it publicly acknowledges. In many instances where the group has been accused of terrorist violence, its accusers have provided little evidence to support their accusations. For instance, Hizb-ut Tahrir was loudly accused by Uzbekistan of masterminding the semi-successful attacks in Tashkent in March and April 2004, as well as the Andijon uprisings in May 2005. On the one hand Uzbekistan’s claims of Hizb’s responsibility are dubious due to the lack of evidence presented to support the claims, but on the other hand Hizb-ut Tahrir itself has gone to great pains to hide its activities within the region, casting suspicion on the motivations for their strong denials. The following analysis will limit itself as much as possible to events and facts that have been independently corroborated and will strive to point out ambiguities and contentious points whenever possible.
History and background

Founded in 1953 by Taquiddin an-Nabhani, a Palestinian jurist and member of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizb-ut Tahrir’s early years were apparently defined chiefly by its members’ disagreements with the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine, leading to a split into two separate groups. The nature of this split is not entirely clear. In an interview conducted by Ahmed Rashid, an unnamed member of the group claims that the split with the Wahabbis (very likely referring to Hasan al-Banah, Sayyid Qutb and their followers) was due to Hizb-ut Tahrir’s less-radical goals “to work with people to bring about sharia peacefully”, while the Wahabbis wanted to create an army and wage a guerrilla war. It is likely that an-Nabhani’s falling out with the Jordanian leadership over Jordan’s decision to align with the British played a significant role, as it is also alleged that another source of friction was an-Nabhani’s dissatisfaction with the Brotherhood’s close links to Hashemite government of Jordan.

Founding the group in 1953 together with several other Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Palestinians, an-Nabhani was the group’s main ideologue and the motive force behind most of its activities until his death in 1977. Born in Haifa in 1909, he attended both the Dar ul-loom school and al-Azhar University in Cairo where he intermingled frequently and freely with members of the Muslim Brotherhood, including Sayyid Qutb. Returning to Palestine in 1932, he held a variety of jurist positions in the area until the creation of Israel in 1948 which cost him his current position in the court of Haifa. Traveling first to Syria and then returning to the none-occupied area of Jerusalem, he went to Amman in 1951. It was during this following period that Hizb-ut Tahrir was established by himself and several other Jordanian/Palestinians.

There is still some ambiguity regarding An-Nabhani’s involvement in the tumultuous Arab resistance movement(s) of the time in resistance first to the colonial the French and British and thereafter to the establishment of Israel, though it is alleged that he spent time in his teenage years and early twenties with Sheikh Izz ad-Din al-Qassam. In a response echoed by Osama bin Laden when Saudi Arabia allowed the United States to use military force against Saddam Hussein rather than allowing Bin Laden the chance to employ his own army of mujahidin, an-Nabhani was highly disappointed with King Hussein’s decision to call on the western countries of Britain and the US for aid after the disastrous war of 1948. He was also suspected of involvement in Abdullah al-Tall’s attempted coup in Jordan in the mid 1950’s.

While some of the specifics of his life seem not to be universally recognized, an-Nabhani is more consistently described as possessing a self-critical aspect that many in the Brotherhood and Palestinian groups lacked. For him the failure of the Levant Arabs to successfully oust first the colonial powers and later
to prevent the establishment of the state of Israel was primarily due to the lack of unity and the force of a strong, well-articulated ideology among the (primarily) Arab Muslims, and it was with the thought of fostering this unity and strength that he established Hizb-ut Tahrir between late 1952 and early 1953.

Present group

Due to a general lack of public information available, it is difficult to determine the current status of the group to a high degree of precision. The group makes their ultimate goal of restoring the Caliphate well known, but the secrecy surrounding both their inner workings and their recruitment activities, coupled with their strong reluctance to commit publicly on a number of specific sensitive issues, adds to the shroud of both mystery and suspicion with which the group is regarded by western policy makers. It is not wholly without just cause that Hizb-ut Tahrir acts under such secrecy, for it has faced strong and often severe opposition in a number of countries, particularly in those countries such as Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan who are understood to be potential sites for the remade Caliphate. In what may be a positive development, the group’s banishment from Germany and Denmark, as well as the threat of banishment from the UK have caused them to step forward and give a fuller public account for themselves.

Structure and disposition: strengthening or finding its voice?

Initially formed of Palestinian members of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizb-ut Tahrir has spread throughout most of the world and has widened its initial focus from the unity of Palestinian Muslims to the creation and strengthening of a pan-Islamic unity, regardless of ethnicity. Since an-Nabhani’s death in 1977, leadership of the group has passed to Abdul-Qadeem Zalloum, after whose death in 2003 leadership passed to the group’s current leader, Ata Abu-Rashta. The group is currently organized in a cellular fashion with nodes located throughout Europe, Central Asia, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Australia, Africa, India, and to at least some degree in the Americas. They are divided along regional lines into independently-governed bodies that they term Vilayas, with at least one overarching global division termed the Qiyada. Due to the reluctance of the group to divulge much information about itself publicly, the scope and authority of the global leadership is not known, nor is the current location of the group’s leadership. When asked in an interview last year whether the group was centrally governed with the Qiyada directing all the Vilayas, the group’s leader in Britain responded in the affirmative, but felt it necessary to qualify or prove the group’s unity by pointing out what one might otherwise have taken for granted, that “the regional executive committees subscribe fully
to the opinions and decisions of the central executive”5. Based on this and the cellular structure of the group, it seems reasonable to postulate that the global leadership acts more in a managerial capacity and less as an autocratic commander-in-chief. It also offers an insight into the group’s notion of leadership, or at least leadership as understood by the group’s branch in Britain. The above words of the group’s British spokesman can almost be seen as implying that the group is a unit inasmuch as its members agree with the leadership.

As a further example of the group’s secrecy, they do not disclose the location of their global leadership, and in fact did not publicly announce the successor to former leader Abdul-Qadeem Zalloum until about a year ago. Some reports cite the leadership’s location as being in the Middle East, and others claim the UK, and without further research it is impossible to know for certain. The British branch of the group, however, has been speaking in defense of the group as a whole over the last couple of years, and speaks confidently on the group’s beliefs, goals, and methods as one might expect the global leadership to do. The majority of the group’s media relations are certainly based out of Britain, and that branch of the group has been representing the public face of the group to a degree that one might expect from the global leadership rather than one of many regional offices. The lack of public information on interactions between local Executive Councils and the global leadership is one of the factors contributing to the cloak of suspicion surrounding the group and opens the door for conspiracy theories about its involvement in events worldwide. Over the last few years, the greatest press coverage has been on their activities in Britain and Central Asia, and it will be the group’s activities in these two regions that this paper concerns itself with primarily.

Further information regarding the nature of the relationships among the various regional cells and the global leadership would be a very revealing piece of the large picture of the group and would go a long way towards developing a working understanding of group. As the situation currently stands, it is difficult to say with a great degree of certainty if, for instance, one should pay close attention to statements made by Hizb-ut Tahrir in Britain about events in Central Asia as a window into the actions of Hizb-ut Tahrir in Central Asia. Without a greater understanding of the chain linking the Britain office with the Central Asian office, one is left with few other options than speculation.

As noted above, it is not without cause that the group operates in such secrecy, for its members have been subject to often severe punishment throughout its inception until the present day. Expanding from the Levant into Turkey and North Africa in the 1960’s, and subsequently into the rest of the world, its members and sympathizers have often faced lengthy imprisonment, torture and death. It is a relatively recent development that the group is speaking out with some degree of freedom in countries such as Britain and Turkey. It should also
be noted that British Prime Minister Tony Blair's announcement of his government's intention to ban the group in the UK has increased public scrutiny of the group and may have played a significant role in impelling the group to step forward and give a better account of itself. The account that the group has presented has been one of a group devoted to non-violence and peaceful political change, but, given their open support for suicide bombings in Israel and their reluctance to completely disavow violence as a means towards their objectives, one can scarcely take their statements at full face value.

**Great Britain: the diplomatic campaign**

Hizb has made the UK its main base since likely sometime in the 1980's, and at least a significant portion of their global leadership is likely located in London. Despite the group's stated intention of using Islam to topple the Western powers once the Caliphate has been established, they are currently making a renewed effort to convince the Western public that they do not in fact pose a threat and should not be banned as Tony Blair has stated he intends to do. It is in the UK that the group bases its media wing that runs a series of websites, publishes a regular magazine and publishes an-Nabhani’s books, as well as some books authored by unnamed members of the group, or simply by “Hizb-ut Tahrir”. The sophistication of their media campaign has grown over recent years, and the group has been quick to adopt new technologies to disseminate its message to the Muslim community and, more recently, in response to its non-Muslim critics.

A comparison of changes in Hizb-ut Tahrir's websites over the last few years shows that the group's marketing techniques have matured, though it is not clear if this should be interpreted as a maturation of the group itself or as solely a renewed marketing campaign. The group operates www.hizbuttahrir.org as well as a number of regionally-based sites and www.khalifah.com to accompany its biweekly print magazine, Khalifah. As recently as 3 years ago the group's main site, www.hizbuttahrir.org, was primarily composed of basic information about the group and its goals, as well as a section where one could download digital copies of the group’s printed leaflets. It has since been given a polished new look and expanded to provide current news and limited analysis of current political events, book recommendations, a collection of writings on the group’s vision for the revived Caliphate, and a section where members post comments.

The website of the British branch of the group has also shown considerable advancement, and the site offers evidence that the UK-based portion of the group has increasingly adopted the role of spokesman for the group as a whole. As the global leadership has been rumored to live in London area, the British branch’s tendency to speak for the group as a whole could be because of their naturally close relationship with the global leadership (if the leaders are in fact
in London), in addition to the current threat of banishment that the group faces in Britain. The print edition of Khalifah magazine is published in London, and the London-centered branch serves generally as the group’s media liaison to the western English-speaking world. Over the couple of years this branch has conducted a number of interviews and published responses to articles written about them in which they believe themselves to have been maligned, and the branch’s general willingness to engage in open debate and answer questions is a promising indication that the group as a whole is increasingly willing to engage with its critics. Promising though the British Vilaya may be, it is worth remembering that their work in Britain is of a different nature than their work in Muslim countries, and that they claim to not be working to overthrow the British government. Comforting as that may be, and as eager as their spokesmen may be to engage in public political conversations, the writings of an-Nabahani are clear in the groups’ opposition to and rejection of the political systems they are seeking to engage with. This is worth remembering when one compares the group’s actions in Britain with, for instance, the group’s actions in Pakistan where they aggressively recruit persons of influence who might best assist in fulfilling their political objectives. Fear is also much less of a factor for the group’s British wing whose members do not face the immediate threat of imprisonment and torture and, until the recent threat of eviction, enjoyed the full freedoms afforded to every British citizen.

It is difficult to draw conclusions on changes the group has undergone based solely from their public face and portrayal in the media, and we must look to other sources for answers. Given the dearth of unbiased information available, it is heartening to see an increase in the number of articles and papers written by journalists and scholars who have experience in the regions where the group is actively pursuing their stated goals. For instance, following the violence in nearby Andijion and the British announcement that the group would soon be banned from the UK, British reporter Nicholas Schmidle traveled to the region and particularly to the Ferghana Valley, which lies at the crossroads of most of the Islamic activity in Central Asia. While his article detailing his interactions with the group and other Muslims in the region was not lengthy, it was a striking contrast to most other recent press articles on the group which have been based in only small amounts on concrete information and instead are based on the analysis of self-styled experts who often have little to no first-hand knowledge of the group.

Central Asia: the operational theater

While Hizb-ut Tahrir is consistent and vocal in their condemnation of the secular, post-Soviet governments in Central Asia, the scope of their activity in the
region is less clear. It is evident, however, that Central Asia presents quite a different situation than the UK where the group is engaged in what are essentially marketing activities. While an-Nabhani initially looked to Jordan as the state to adopt Islamic rule, the group has been focusing a significant portion of its resources on Central Asia since the early 1990’s, and there is evidence that the group believes the region to be one of the more likely locations of the restored Caliphate. Due to the large amount of inflated rhetoric about the group being put out by the governments in the region one must take care when gauging the group’s true involvement in the region. Without in-depth field research conducted within the region one is left with such things as local press articles, some of which are at best biased towards the regional government, and at worst simply government propaganda. Fortunately, due to increasing interest and curiosity about the group and the Central Asian region, independent studies by academics and journalists alike are beginning to emerge, particularly after the Uzbek government’s violent suppression of the unrest/revolution last summer in Andijon, UZ.

With a few exceptions the majority of these fact-finding missions are skeptical of the dictatorial rule of the Uzbek government. They also have begun to bring into the public mind the primary manner in which Hizb-ut Tahrir is able to recruit within the region, namely by default as there are few other opponents to the government. In the words of an Uzbek member explaining why he joined Hizb, “Socialism is dead, and Capitalism is a lie”, implying that Hizb-ut Tahrir is his only other option. Given the shortcomings of the Uzbek government and the negative view of it that has been built up in the West, it is easier for Hizb-ut Tahrir to legitimate its call for political changes.

Rightly or wrongly so, the Uzbek government takes the threat of the group seriously, and has been quick to blame them for nearly every act of violence that has occurred since 2001. When several hundred people attempted to conduct attacks against government and western targets in the Tashkent in early 2002, the Uzbek security services announced immediately that Hizb-ut Tahrir was behind them, and later displayed leaflets printed by Hizb that had been found during the investigation as proof of Hizb’s complicity. Again, the Uzbek government took the opportunity of the uprisings in Andijon last summer to announce the complicity of Hizb and the government’s commitment to eradicating them. On the other hand, and contributing to the uncertainty surrounding the situation in the region, after the Andijon crisis had passed the Uzbeks spoke out against the involvement of foreign countries in the uprisings, raising the possibility that the situation in Andijon was being exploited to influence public opinion against Hizb. Yet there are reportedly several thousand Hizb members and/or sympathizers imprisoned in Uzbekistan, which, combined with the cover-up of their brutal suppression of the Andijon uprisings, has earned the Uzbeks widespread condemnation from the international community for their methods of ensuring national security.
Even the British and American security services that have enjoyed good relations with their Uzbekistani counterparts, particularly in the realm of counterterrorism, have been increasingly forced to distance themselves from the country. To the outside observer Uzbekistan seems to be heading down a dangerous path in its dealings with Hizb. While refusing to compromise or offer a voice to anyone or any ideology that has committed violence within the country, they are also refusing to allow any outlet for legitimate political dissent, thereby risking further radicalization within the country’s Islamic community which has historically been much more moderate than many in the Middle East.

**Methodology for change**

As with other Islamist groups, the primary concern for the West is not their disagreement with western political systems but rather the violence that often accompanies such disagreement. The outline for the manner by which Hizb will work for the Caliphate is clearly laid out by an-Nabhani himself in writings that Hizb republished circa 2000 and has since made publicly available on the internet. These writings describe a plan similar to that pursued by any number of revolutionary political movements, beginning first with the development of a support base and moving on towards seizure of power once a critical mass has been achieved within the support base and the current power-wielder’s support base has shifted to the side of the revolutionary. Claiming to be based on study of Mohammad’s original methods of spreading Islam, an-Nabhani describes the following three-step process.

The first stage is described as the cultivation stage, where the core members of the group are recruited and “cultivated” to produce a nucleus that thinks Islamic thoughts, has an Islamic mentality, and generally agrees or disagrees within themselves with what is or isn’t Islamic.

Once the nucleus of the party is developed sufficiently, it will be time for the second stage of interaction with the Ummah. In this stage the Islamicly-cultivated nucleus of the group will go forth within the Ummah and encourage them to work for Islam and to adopt as their own the principles which the nucleus has already developed. In this stage the Ummah is encouraged by the nucleus to adopt Islam in all aspects of life, state, and society. From the second stage, there is an apparently seamless movement to the third which is described as “taking the government and implementing Islam completely and totally, and carrying its message to the world”\(^7\). The group claims to currently be in the second stage of interaction with the Ummah to “cultivate” them sufficiently so that they will be ready to take the government, and their current activities worldwide give evidence that this is the case. Of most concern to Western, Middle Eastern, and Central Asian governments alike is the third stage, and the group has talked
around the exact method by which this third stage will be brought about much more than it has talked about it directly.

It is noteworthy to compare the above three-stage process with the definition of the group as written by an-Nabhani which is often used by the group as a summary of themselves:

Hizb-ut Tahrir is a political party and its ideology is Islam. Politics is its activity and Islam is its ideology, and it works together, among, and with the Ummah in order that she takes the re-establishment of Islam in life, state, and society as its vital issue, thereby leading her to establishing the Khilafah and returning to the hukm (rule) of Allah.

Although the group says it is a political party, it is not registered as one anywhere and it encourages Muslims to not take part in the political systems of the countries where they live, particularly in the Middle East. Since the methodology an-Nabhani describes is of a distinctly political nature and the final result of the group’s work is a political reconstruction of the existing state, one can scarce help but wonder if the political group as described above is only capable of taking the Ummah through the first two stages, which begs the question of what will happen when it is time to move into the third stage. If Hizb-ut Tahrir truly believes themselves to be able to achieve their goals without bloodshed then surely they need to devise a clearer plan than they have hitherto laid out.

When pressed on the issue of violence to achieve its political goals, the leader of Hizb in the UK argued most forcefully that the bottom line was that al-Qaida-style terrorist attacks where not practical and did not help the group in achieving their goals. True though this may be, it is noteworthy that he did not stress the group’s ideological aversion to violence, but rather that violence was unhelpful in achieving their current political goals. While pointing on the one hand to the group’s rationality and strategically oriented thought, it does little to allay fears that the group may shift to violent tactics to attain its political ends. Such a shift would, however, mark a significant change from their current course.

Another clear danger is from members or former members who take the angry rejection of the West that Hizb teaches and move on to either a more violent group or simply stray outside of the disciplined non-violence that Hizb seems to have hitherto imposed. Such an occurrence would fall outside of Hizb’s primarily non-violent activities, and, even if such people would not be acting on behalf of the group, the role of the ideological and psychological conditioning that members are subject to while within the group can not be ignored. Most Western governments are primarily concerned with this potential threat from Hizb-ut Tahrir, and it is this threat of al-Qaida-like violence that has prompted the most vehement condemnations, with commentators equating the group with a soft-core “gateway drug” and a terrorist conveyor belt. While the group may not intend to produce future terrorists, and in fact their leader in the UK
claims that this is harmful to the group’s larger goals, some members in the UK have already broken with the larger group over disagreements about the use of violence, and it would be naïve to suppose that future breaks will not take place. Unless the group takes strong steps to internally maintain their non-violent discipline, their response to accusations that they produce terrorists becomes a semantic argument of whether such violent individuals are acting on behalf of the group or are acting independently.

A third threat is closely related to the second and is a very near-term concern for those who support the US-led war in Iraq. The possibility that the group would support attacks in Palestine and Iraq is much higher than that they might support violence in the West, given that their main argument for why the West should not be attacked directly is that such attacks are unproductive rather than wrong in a qualitative sense. While condoning the attacks of 9/11 and 7/7 not as being unjust but as being unproductive, the group has spoken out repeatedly in favor of suicide bombings and other attacks against Israel, as well as against the US campaign in Iraq. Though stopping short of publicly calling for attacks against the US and UK forces in the country, Hizb is vocal enough in its support for the aims of the insurgency in Iraq and commands the respect of enough young potential recruits for such fighting that it should be the subject of intense scrutiny by those wishing to stem the oft-cited inflow of foreigners to the ranks of insurgents in Iraq.

Conclusion

Like all Salafist Islamic political movements, Hizb-ut Tahrir sees a steady decline in the state of the Islamic world and looks to the example of the early years of Islam for revival and renewal. It differs from many other Islamist groups in that its founder attributes the decline of Islam, and ultimately the Caliphate, primarily to a failure within Islam rather than purely as a result of Western actions. Operating under this assumption, Hizb places a higher importance on the rebuilding and reunification of Islam than simply striking down those it sees as the enemies of Islam. It is trying to walk a fine line that it has drawn for itself between rejection of the Westernized global system and reliance on that same system to do its work.

Based primarily out of the UK, the clandestine nature of the group’s activities are a primary concern to governments in Central Asia and parts of the Middle East, with members imprisoned in countries such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Egypt, and Jordan. Hizb’s main goal is direct political action against the regimes in these countries, and it recognizes that direct confrontation with the West at this point would be fatal, thus its activities in the West have been restricted to recruiting, fundraising, and maintaining its media programs. While
Hizb does not encourage or support violence in the West, its ideology differs only slightly from those more radical fundamentalist groups whose primary aim is such violence, and the radicalism it seeks to instill will likely inspire others to commit violence in the near future if it has not done so already.

In Central Asia, where they are denounced as one of the main threats to national stability, the group gains support primarily because it is one of the most vocal opposition groups in the region. Opposition to the current governments is often the primary unifying factor between members in the region, while an Islamic identity becomes indistinguishably intermingled with steadfastness in the face of perceived oppression.

Given the self-imposed ambiguity and secrecy surrounding the group, they do not present an easy case for Western policy-makers and security officials. It is unlikely that the group is planning large-scale terrorist attacks in the West beneath their cloak of secrecy, and the group has responded to the recent threat of banishment in the UK with a renewed diplomatic campaign to the West. Given the lack of a clear, immediate threat in the West, the West’s shift of support away from the repressive Uzbekistani dictator Islam Karimov, and the group’s willingness to engage in political dialogue, the doors have not yet shut and the possibility still exists for engagement.
NOTES

4 As cited on www.hizbutahrir.org.
8 An-Nabhani, Taquiddin. The Methodology of Hizb-ut Tahrir for Change.
10 Malik, Shiv. The Conveyor Belt of Extremism – Interview with former Hizb-ut Tahrir Recruiter. New Statesman. 18 July, 2005
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