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RUSSIA: Division over Hizb ut-Tahrir

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

In Russia, there is much disagreement over how to respond to Hizb ut-Tahrir, Forum 18 News Service has found. Hizb ut-Tahrir is banned as antisemitic in Germany, and its Danish spokesman was given a suspended jail sentence for distributing racist propaganda. Rejecting democracy and core human rights such as religious freedom and purporting to reject violence, it has made violently antisemitic statements but not publicly called for specific terrorist acts. In Russia, 29 alleged Hizb ut-Tahrir members have been given jail terms, following a Supreme Court decision banning the organisation as terrorist. Some, such as Aleksandr Verkhovsky of the Sova Centre, think that monitoring and targeted prosecution of concrete cases of incitement to violence or hatred would be a more effective response. Mukaddas Bibarsov, co-chairman of Russia's Council of Muftis, told Forum 18 that he had only met three sympathisers, suggesting that, instead of prison terms, the Muslim community should challenge such people, but lamented that "there is no [Muslim] intellectual force to explain that (...) everyone must live by the Constitution here."

Human rights activists, Islamic studies specialists, Muslim leaders and the courts disagree sharply in their evaluation of Hizb ut-Tahrir's activity in Russia and how the state should respond to it, Forum 18 News Service has found.

The Russian Supreme Court banned Hizb ut-Tahrir as a terrorist organisation in February 2003, and those publicly questioning this ruling were recently given an official warning by the state authorities (see F18News 10 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=756).

A self-styled international Islamic political party that claims to reject violence, Hizb ut-Tahrir has had many of its members imprisoned in Central Asia (see F18News 29 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170 and 16 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=253). Those charged with membership of the organisation in Russia have claimed that they are being persecuted for their religious beliefs (see F18News 18 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=761).

A major point of contention has been whether the organisation may be regarded as terrorist or extremist. While doubting – on the basis of media reports – that Hizb ut-Tahrir is preparing or engaged in terrorist acts, the editor of the Sova Centre's Moscow-based religious affairs website examines, in an extensive 6 February 2006 article, whether the organisation calls for violence in Russia and is thus liable to prosecution under the 2002 Extremism Law.

Aleksandr Verkhovsky notes that Hizb ut-Tahrir's literature – the only publicly available source of information about the organisation – is likely to be understood literally by its target audience. He finds that Hizb ut-Tahrir does not accept existing self-proclaimed Muslim nations as truly Islamic, and aims to restore the Islamic Caliphate (abolished by the Turkish republic in 1924) by establishing an Islamic state in a historically Muslim country.

Forum 18 notes that, while Russian Hizb ut-Tahrir members insist, in a 10 March 2005 statement, that they regard not Russia but Arab countries and those with a predominantly Muslim population as the basis of this future Caliphate, it remains unclear whether they consider traditionally Muslim republics - such as Chechnya - as an integral part of Russia.

Both the 10 March 2005 statement and Hizb ut-Tahrir's English-language website present the organisation's purported rejection of violent acts in terms of the Prophet Mohammed's sole reliance upon dawah (preaching) until he and his followers had established an Islamic society in Medina. By continuing this analogy, Forum 18 notes that the use of violence would prove a likely option should Hizb ut-Tahrir succeed in – albeit possibly peacefully - creating even a small Caliphate area. As Verkhovsky points out, the organisation also categorically rejects both the democratic system as a method of extending power and such key human rights as religious freedom.

Nevertheless, Verkhovsky finds that it would be difficult to prosecute Hizb ut-Tahrir under Russia's 1998 Terrorism Law on the basis of these texts and even the organisation's 1988 resolution legitimising hijack of aeroplanes belonging to a country "in a state of war with Muslims." (According to Verkhovsky, the 1988 resolution was removed from Hizb ut-Tahrir's English-language website some years ago but has never been repudiated.) This, he explains, is because "encouragement" to commit terrorist attacks under Russia's 1998 Terrorism Law means a direct instruction to commit a certain action, rather than general appeals.

Verkhovsky does believe, however, that Hizb ut-Tahrir's defence of hijacking and its antisemitic March 2002 statement describing Jews as "a defective people" and calling upon Muslims to remove them from Palestine (still on the organisation's Russian-language website until recently and likewise not repudiated) would be sufficient to prohibit Hizb ut-Tahrir as an extremist organisation under Russia's 2002 Extremism Law.

Entitled "Kill them wherever you find them, and cast them out from wherever they cast you out" - a quotation from the Koran - the March 2002 document begins by describing Jews as "renowned for their treachery and broken promises (..) they kill prophets and innocent people." While stopping short of calling for specific terrorist acts, it describes how "in Palestine today the mujahidin display examples of piety - young men compete in acts of self-sacrifice (..) and mothers encourage their sons to become shahids [a term for suicide bombers] and bow to Allah in gratitude if they hear news that their children have fallen as shahids." It concludes by calling upon Muslims to mobilise armies for battle "in order to cast the Jews into misfortune for their deeds and wipe their vile persons from the land of Isra and Mi'raj" (a reference to a journey said to have been undertaken by the Prophet Muhammed from Mecca to Jerusalem and then heaven in one night).

Under Russia's 2002 Extremism Law, extremist activity is defined as "the planning, organisation, preparation for or execution of actions aimed at the forcible change of the constitutional order or violation of the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation; the undermining of the security or the assumption of the governing powers of the Russian Federation; the creation of illegal armed formations; terrorist activity; the incitement of racial, ethnic or religious discord or social discord in connection with violence or calls for violence; humiliation of national dignity; the organisation of mass unrest, hooliganism or acts of vandalism motivated by ideological, political, racial, ethnic or religious hatred or hatred towards a particular social group; the propaganda of exclusivity, superiority or inferiority of citizens on account of their attitude towards religion, social status, race, nationality, religion, or language."

Forum 18 notes that Hizb ut-Tahrir is banned as antisemitic in Germany, while the organisation's Danish spokesman, Fadi Abdelatif, was given a sixty-day suspended jail sentence for distributing racist propaganda in October 2002, after he circulated the March 2002 antisemitic statement on the streets of Copenhagen.

To date, 29 alleged Hizb ut-Tahrir members have been sentenced to lengthy prison terms in Russia, as a result of the Supreme Court's February 2003 decision banning the group as a terrorist organisation (see F18News 18 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=761). Verkhovsky suggests that continual monitoring and targeted prosecution of concrete cases of incitement to violence or hatred by individual members would be a more effective response. "If such calls became widespread, closure of Hizb ut-Tahrir as an extremist group should be based on sound reasons, acceptable and convincing for the public."

Forum 18 notes, however, that under Russia's new Terrorism Law – signed by President Vladimir Putin on 6 March 2006 – an extremist organisation is now automatically terrorist; it recognises an organisation as such if, in its name or interests, "the organisation, preparation and commission takes place of acts punishable under Articles 282-1 and 282-2 of the Criminal Code [extremism]."

Some commentators are not convinced by the seriousness of even the extremist threat posed by Hizb ut-Tahrir, however. Interviewed by Forum 18 on 23 January, Vitali Ponomarev - who as Central Asian programme director at Memorial Human Rights Centre has closely followed many prosecutions of the organisation's members - described Hizb ut-Tahrir's pursuit of a universal Caliphate as "utopian, purely theoretical" ideas which its members view as a natural element of Islam. If they are to be regarded as an attempt to undermine the state, he remarked, "You could just as well say that the Last Judgement in Christianity is advocating the replacement of the constitutional legal system." Ponomarev maintained that Hizb ut-Tahrir is opposed to the military tactics of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and has no members in the conflict-ridden northern Caucasus. He also stated that its antisemitic sentiments are "practically never met" in Russia.

In an interview with Forum 18 in Saratov in June 2005 Mukaddas Bibarsov, who heads the Volga Region Spiritual Directorate of Muslims and is co-chairman of Russia's Council of Muftis, said that he personally had never heard calls to violence from Hizb ut-Tahrir: "In all my time I've come across only three of their sympathisers, naive young Bashkir girls." Instead of dealing with them by handing down prison sentences, he suggested, the Muslim community should work with such people, "but no one wants to. There is no intellectual force to explain that Muslims are the native population of this country, that we have no other homeland and everyone must live by the Constitution here. The Islamic state that they want is in reality impossible – we need to explain to them that first we need to have Muslim economists, Muslim doctors and so on."

In an interview with Forum 18 on 24 January Georgi Engelhardt, a researcher into militant Islam at the Russian Academy of Sciences, maintained by contrast that Hizb ut-Tahrir was "openly extremist, present and serious," while acknowledging that it remained unclear whether the organisation's extremism was limited to propaganda rather than actions. "But no one is going to say openly that they are a terrorist – if you caught bin Laden now he'd say he enjoys mountaineering or is hiding in a cave out of self-defence." In particular, he expressed doubt as to whether the grounds set out in the Supreme Court's February 2003 decision – which has still to be officially published - were the whole set of motives for banning the organisation, "perhaps there is also a

classified part."

Asked whether Hizb ut-Tahrir could be regarded as extremist in the same way as the Russian Orthodox monarchist movement, in that both seek to do away with the constitutional secular state, Engelhardt pointed out the main difference as being that "in the monarchists' case, there is no place in Russia or abroad where a holy war is being waged by those radicals – [Leonid] Simonovich and his [Union of Orthodox] Banner-bearers are the most radical that there is." He thus suggested that even apparently moderate Islamists pose a danger to society: "Their adherents one way or another form a mindset more inclined to political violence – they lay the groundwork for future radicalism, and if someone is looking for soldiers, he finds a prepared audience."

At a round table on "Islamic Radicalisation and Islamic Democracy" at a religious affairs conference in the Russian capital on 7 February, Valentin Gefter of the Moscow-based Institute for Human Rights asked leading Islamic studies academic Aleksei Malashenko what human rights activists should do with regard to Hizb ut-Tahrir. "There is a mistake in your question," Malashenko replied, "you want to put them in a normal European framework." Adding that the organisation was largely Uzbek in Russia, he suggested that, in Uzbekistan, the 60 per cent of its members whom he estimated to be moderate would "deal with the remaining extremist wing if [Uzbek president Islam] Karimov gave them some sort of status." Then asked by Gefter whether Hizb ut-Tahrir was terrorist, Malashenko claimed to have seen members' diaries containing diagrams of how to blow up bridges and lay landmines, "just like in Soviet military textbooks." He then left the conference, and Forum 18 has since not received a response to requests to interview him. (END)

For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=509

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>

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