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SCHOLAR RESEARCH BRIEF:  
**RESURGENCE OF FUNDAMENTALIST AND RADICAL ISLAMIC  
IDENTITIES IN CRIMEA AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL  
SECURITY IN POST-SOVIET UKRAINE**

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In post-independence Ukraine, the number of registered religious organizations has been growing significantly within the last decade. According to Vladimir Maliborsky, the Chairperson of the Republican Committee for Religious Affairs (RCRA) of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, religious organizations increased forty-fold in Crimea, surpassing all the other regions of Ukraine. My research specifically focuses on one of these rapidly growing religions, namely, Islam, in Crimea as well as in Ukraine. It examines the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Ukraine (DUMU) and the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Crimea (DUMK), which represent mainstream Islam, as well as the dynamics of the emerging fundamental Islamic splinter group Hizb Ut Tahrir al Islami (HUT), or Party of Liberation, which was originally founded in 1952 in Jerusalem (Al Quds) by Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani. By highlighting the serious ideological rifts between the mainstream Islamic administrations and HUT, this research aims to assess the risks in sufficient time to prevent potential intra-religious group conflict from erupting into violence and spilling over to the international arena.

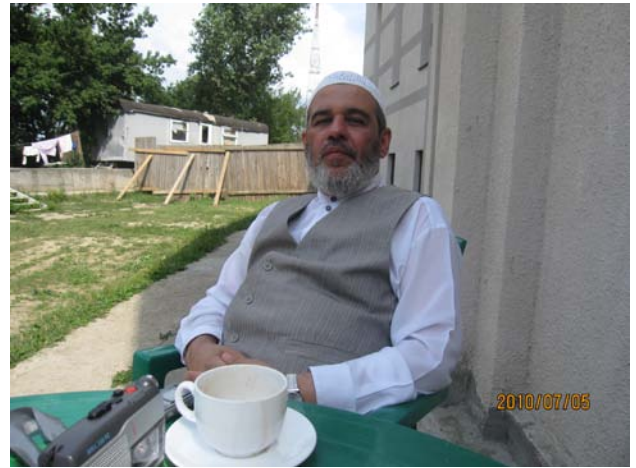
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## RESEARCH IN CONTEXT

According to the Ukrainian government and some independent think tank estimates, there are 500,000 Muslims living in Ukraine, constituting 1.1 percent of the total population. Crimean Tatars, who have been returning to their historical homeland from exile since the collapse of the Soviet Union, constitute 70 percent of the Ukrainian Muslims, with a population of 350,000.

Islam is far from monolithic in Ukraine. Currently, there are five Islamic religious umbrellas which clearly indicates the disunity among the mainstream Muslims: the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Ukraine (DUMU), the Spiritual Administration of Crimean Muslims (DUMK), the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Ukraine “Umma (DUMU-Umma),” the Religious Directorate of Independent Muslim Communities of Ukraine “Kyivan Muftiyat,” and the Donetsk-based Spiritual Center of the Muslim Communities.

At present, there are 1358 *registered* religious organizations on the territory of Crimea, of which 391 are Muslim organizations. Yet, only 344 of these are registered with DUMK, the Spiritual Board of Crimean Muslims. The remaining 47 Muslim organizations that were denied registration by DUMK, yet registered by the Republican Committee for Religious Affairs define themselves as “Independent Muslim Communities.” Although DUMK closely cooperates with CRCRA in the management of Islamic affairs, the Crimean Tatar *Muftiyat* (Islamic council) disputes the registration of these so-called independents and accuses CRCRA of being too lenient towards fundamentalist organizations with radical elements that might be linked with foreign-based fundamentalist groups that can eventually create security challenges for Crimea. The interviews with DUMU, DUMK, the Crimean Tatar *Muftiyat*, as well as the *Mejlis* leadership indicated that they collectively are worried about the resurgence of Islamic splinter groups, specifically, in their words, “extremist radical Hizb-Ut Tahrir al Islami (HUT)”, which was launched in Crimea in 2003. HUT is a fundamentalist global political party that aims to unite all Muslims (*umma*,



The head of the Spiritual Administration of Ukrainian Muslims (DUMU), Sheikh Ahmed Tamim (July 5, 2010)

i.e., Islamic community) in a unitary Islamic state or *Caliphate* (1342-1924), in a borderless state ruled by Islamic law. HUT is banned in most of the Central Asian republics, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, the Gulf States, Egypt, Germany (since 2003), and the Russian Federation. It is legal in the Ukraine as well as in Great Britain and Jordan, where its two headquarters are located.

HUT is very active in Crimea. According to DUMK, in 2006 they had approximately 600-1000 members in Crimea. In September 2009, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) of Crimea declared that HUT has 30-35 thousand followers in Crimea, indicating a thirty-fold (from 600-1000 to 30,000) increase within the last three years.

To capture the complexity of mainstream as well as political Islam in the region, my research first investigates two of the mainstream Muslim religious umbrellas in Ukraine, namely DUMK and DUMU and explores their opinions of HUT and other Islamic splinter groups in Ukraine. Consequently, it focuses on the root causes of HUT’s emergence and its implications in Crimea within the Ukrainian context. It also examines HUT’s activities and their short and long-term goals in Crimea through face-to-face interviews against the Crimean political landscape.

## RESEARCH PROCESS AND RESULTS

In an effort to triangulate the data, my research consisted of face-to-face interviews, participant observation, and the content analysis of Islamic publications, including books, underground newspapers, pamphlets, flyers, and propaganda DVDs. Face-to-face interviews with the mainstream Islamic leadership included the head of the DUMU Sheikh Ahmed Tamim and two of his assistants (in Kyiv), the head of DUMK Aci Emirali Ablayev, and 5 imams of the DUMK registered Islamic communities (in Crimea). In addition, I conducted 29 (18 female and 11 male) face-to-face interviews with HUT supporters utilizing snowball sampling. A number of HUT supporters refused to give me interviews stating that they would not want to meet “a US scholar who came to sniff around and stir up things in Crimea and then report it to the US government.” On the other hand, stating that “they are not afraid of anyone other than Allah,” many other HUT supporters agreed to be interviewed by me and talked with me for hours during the semi-formal interviews. Moreover, they provided me with the copies of their underground monthly newspaper *Vozrojdenie* (Revival).

Interviews with DUMK (including the Crimean Tatar *Muftiyat*), and DUMU indicated that, in their opinion, HUT poses a significant threat for Crimea. In unison, they cooperate with the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) of Ukraine in its effort to ban HUT in Ukraine, which in their words is “an extremist, terrorist organization.” My interviews with HUT supporters (male and female) also revealed that they do not believe in the religious authority of the so-called DUMK in Crimea and DUMU in Kyiv, which in their opinion, continue to live in a state of ignorance (*jahiliya*) and collaborate with the secular Ukrainian political regime. HUT supporters often affirm that they do not support violent acts or terrorism by any group. Pointing out the fact that HUT never committed a violent act since its foundation in 1952, they argue that all rumors about them being terrorists that are being spread by DUMK and DUMU are false and unfounded.

During my STG in the summer of 2010, I was invited by some female HUT supporters to the Third Women’s Islamic Conference that took place in Simferopol on July 17, 2010. This conference was sponsored by DAVET, an *unregistered* Crimean Muslim organization, and focused on three themes:

1. To announce the newly formed organization, the League of the Muslim Women *Ansara*

(the name means “helpers” and refers to the citizens of the Arabian city Medina that helped the Prophet Mohammed after his migration from Mecca in 622 CE)

2. To discuss the disparity between Article 35 of Ukraine’s constitution, which guarantees the freedom of religion and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) order (Number 600) that forbids headscarves in passport photos
3. To combat the negative labeling of Ukrainian Muslim women as terrorists based on their choice of Muslim garb

After the conference, I was able to interview the majority of the conference organizers, who also gave me the papers they had presented at the conference. In addition, I was able to establish contacts with a number of women who came to attend the conference from different Crimean cities, towns, and villages. Consequently, I was able to go to those places where these women resided and conduct interviews with them in their houses or in outside “Islamic” cafes.

Similar to fundamental Christians in the US, HUT members claim to promote principles of religious morality against the dangerous shortcomings of a modern society, including alcoholism, drug addiction, corruption, and promiscuity. They strive for a purified style of Islam, as it was, in their words, “during the Caliphate.” They study Quran and *Hadith*, but they also believe in *ijtihaad* (individual interpretation or reasoning). Unlike the mainstream Muslim Crimean Tatars, they reject the veneration of the tombs of saints and even dead ancestors. They do not drink alcohol, and



Headscarves of Muslims –It is the Law of God!!!  
All-Women Conference organized by an independent Islamic organization “Davet.”



do not even attend weddings of their own siblings if they serve alcohol at the wedding party. They also observe only Islamic religious holidays. The majority of the mainstream Muslim Crimean Tatars, on the other hand, drink alcohol, eat pork products, celebrate the new year by decorating a “New Year’s tree,” and giving each other presents; yet, they also retain their Islamic traditions.

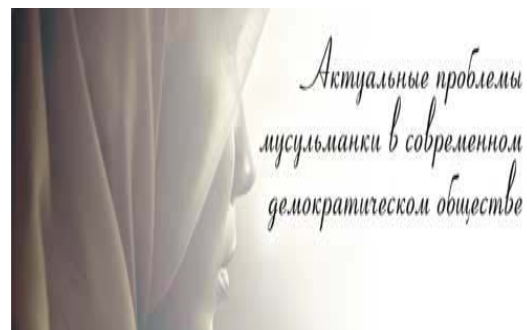
HUT members recruit new members through individual face-to-face outreach. They talk to everybody and tell them about the “real” Islam. They specifically target alcoholics, drug addicts, and even prostitutes and try to show them the right path without forcing them to join their organizations. During my interviews, I personally met a number of former alcoholics and drug addicts who sobered up or cleaned up and consequently joined HUT’s cause in proselytizing their ideology. Because these newly empowered HUT supporters were former addicts themselves in the past, they are credible role models, who are able to establish good rapport with the other addicts, who are still under the influence of drugs or alcohol. In my opinion, HUT numbers continue to grow in Crimea, because they offer a solution for unemployment, corruption, structural and cultural violence against the background of political chaos, economic decline, and religious and ethnic profiling. They claim that the global Caliphate will resolve all the evils in Crimea as well as in the whole world.

HUT ideology is based on the tenet that a return to Islam begins with one’s self for both men and women, and thus, HUT strongly encourages women’s participation in their task force. Female members of HUT can own a business, work as teachers, artists, journalists, or at open-air markets where they are expected to use any social contact with their co-workers, neighbors, and even the tourists they sell honey or spices to, as an opportunity to spread their ideology. I also often witnessed how these well-educated, soft spoken, HUT women in their colorful outfits (*jilbab*) with matching head scarves (*khimar*) talk to people, listen to their socio-political grievances, and then tell them all these problems could only be resolved through the Islamic faith and the restoration of the long-awaited global *Caliphate*, and not by a local secular power. HUT affirms that their approach to women is different than that of the Taliban because of *ijtihaad* (individual interpretation) According to HUT’s philosophy, women can choose any profession they like and even become party leaders. They just cannot be the Caliph or the Supreme

Judge (*qadi*).

The HUT interviews indicated that their short-term goal in Crimea as well as in Ukraine is two-fold: first, to self-study the tenets of Islam in depth, and, second, to spread the word and raise the consciousness of people about the Caliphate, which is their long-term goal around the globe. Stressing the fact that none of the world’s problems can be resolved by anybody without the Caliphate, they are determined to proselytize the masses via face-to-face outreach and education. Using the analogy of a pregnant woman, they state that just as pregnancy will end with the birth of a child, the long-awaited Caliphate will come out of their struggles. “Our struggle is nonviolent and our methods are nonviolent, but we are being labeled as radicals because we tell the truth. We do not believe that the Caliphate can be established by terror or armed conflict; it can only be established through raised consciousness. Therefore, we do not aim for the Caliphate in Crimea or Ukraine; we aim to establish it globally,” states one of the main actors of HUT, who is a computer engineer.

Regardless of their rejection of violent acts, the interviews with HUT supporters also revealed that under certain circumstances, they do not condemn *mujahidun* (fighters in religious wars - *jihad*) who use violence in protection of the Muslim *umma* (community). HUT explains this phenomenon by stating that defending one’s land when attacked is every Muslim’s duty (*fard*). “If no one occupies their land, they won’t retaliate. It is as simple as this” declare many HUT supporters. Interestingly, I also interviewed a few HUT women who had radicalized opinions



The author’s invitation to the Women’s conference (2010), “Genuine problems of Muslims in contemporary democratic societies.”

on certain topics that indicated their acceptance of violence under specific conditions. For example, when I asked a female supporter of HUT about the Taliban practice of stoning a woman to death if she had pre-marital sex, she stated that she would have approved of this practice if she lived under the Taliban regime. When she saw how surprised I was about her attitude, she argued that if her daughter had had pre-marital sex, she would be happy if they killed her daughter by stoning because she committed this unbearable sin, which is punishable by hellfire when she passes away. On the other hand, she said that if her daughter is stoned to death on earth in this imaginary scenario, her earthly sins will be forgiven. Another woman stated that some Palestinian women send their own children to death in the name of Allah for suicide bombing. She said this action probably is very hard for the mother, but it is just as necessary as giving birth or going to *Haj*.

In general, HUT supporters state that attacking innocent people without a reason is the greatest sin. Accordingly, they state that the events of September 11 could not have been committed by real Muslims. As one prominent figure of the Crimean HUT noted,

“Jihad entails defending one’s own land and territory when attacked, but it does not entail killing innocent civilians, like in the twin towers. September 11 needs a global investigation and the film ‘Loose Change 9/11 – An American Coup,’ narrated by Daniel Sunjata, should be available for the world’s mainstream audience. Then everybody can understand the reality surrounding this event, which had one goal: to divide the world into two spheres: Non-Muslim versus the Muslim and then to occupy Muslim lands based on false accusations. September 11 became a socio-political tool, especially for the US president George Bush, who consequently occupied Muslim lands and killed innocent people. When those people started to defend themselves as a reaction, the clueless Western world labeled us Muslims as terrorists.”

He continued by stating that “in Islam, the natural resources, like minerals and gas belong to the people of the land. No foreign organization can come and take those resources away from the people. However, if someone plots an event, like September 11, then this gives them an opportunity to occupy those lands and take those resources via military oppression.”

HUT members criticize the US and Western capitalism for the troubles of the world. In particular, the persistence of US support of Israel, a state that HUT considers to be “illegitimate,” and the US occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan increase their mistrust of the West even further. They argue that there was no drug trafficking in Afghanistan during the time of the Taliban and that if one dealt cocaine, the penalty was death according to the laws of *Shariat*. After the US occupation, they state, the drug trafficking started under the gunpoint of the US soldiers, who transport the drugs in their military cargo planes to the US.

HUT also denounces the Muslim governments all over the world, which cooperate with Western powers, such as the US, and act against their own people. They say these governments, including Saudi Arabia, claim to be Muslims and yet do not take any measures against the Western “occupiers.” Furthermore, they even “let the foreign planes of private American companies, like Blackwater, fuel on their territory before they move on to Iraq or Afghanistan to bomb innocent Muslim civilians.” HUT suggests these injustices will continue until the establishment of the Caliphate, which will then launch its army and fight with the infidels when the time comes.

HUT believes that every nation in the world has the right to self-determination and state “we want to establish our Caliphate for the self-determination of Muslim people.”



Crimean Mufti Emirali Ablaev (July 8, 2010)

## CONTINUING RESEARCH

In an effort to understand the dynamics of the Islamic fundamentalist groups in Crimea from the point of DUMU, I will first conduct a detailed content analysis of the series of books titled "Beware of Extremism" (*Ostorojno, Extremism*) from DUMU's own publishing house "*Al' Irshad*," that was given to me as a present by the Sheikh Ahmed Tamim. These publications include "Errors -or inaccuracies- of the Wahabis" (*Zablujdeniya Vahabito*), "Erroneous Path: Hizb-Ut Tahrir" (*Zablujdeniya Techeniya: Hizb-at Tahrir*), and "Caution against the Three Lost Paths" (*Predosterejenie ot trex zabludshix techenii*), which includes the ideologies of Wahabism, Hizb-Ut Tahrir, and the Party of Muslim Brotherhood. In my research proposal, one of my goals was the investigation of the so-called *Takfir wa al Hijra* (ATWAH), a Salafi-Jihadi organization that allegedly existed in Crimea. My research indicated that in fact those so-called ATWAH terrorists who were caught with knives and illegal rifles and plotting to murder Mustafa Cemilev, the current head of the Crimean Tatar de facto Mejlis, were actually cattle thieves who were used in a pre-election hoax by the former administration. On the other hand, I was able to locate and conduct three interviews with the *Salafis*, members of another fundamental Islamic splinter group with a religious ideology totally different from HUT. This purist Islamic group named after *Salaf* (the righteous ancestors, meaning the first three generations of Muslims) considers itself to be the "chosen group" of Muslims and the only true interpreters of the Quran. They also call themselves the *Ahl-al Sunnah wa al Jamaat* (the community that adheres to *sunnah* – the perfect habits of the Prophet Mohammed). Unlike HUT supporters, *Salafis* are difficult to detect. They are not open about their religious affiliation and one can only detect their religious association through certain references to the Quran and to Hadith or certain religious figures they refer to. Therefore, another potential grant project would be the examination of the short-and long term goals of this closed-community in Crimea as well as to investigate the ideology of Wahhabis, who also call themselves *Ahl-al Sunnah wa al Jamaat*, but differ from the *Salafis*.

Moreover, I will continue my research of HUT, which does not define itself as *Ahl-al Sunnah wa al Jamaat*, but as a political party distinct from all other Islamic groups in Ukraine.

## RELEVANCE TO POLICY COMMUNITY

During the last year, in an effort to "reset" progress on the START treaty with Russia, the Obama administration has been cooperating with the Russian Federation, where HUT is banned. After a long freeze, there has also been a rapprochement with Uzbekistan, (as indicated by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to the region on December 1-2, 2010) where "terrorist" HUT members are being blamed for infecting Uzbek children with the HIV virus. In these regions, HUT members are being jailed and tortured. Although there are currently anti-HUT sentiments in Ukraine, HUT is still free to proselytize about their future "imagined" Islamic community, the Caliphate, but for how long? According to the Freedom House report of January 2011, Ukraine showed a significant decline in democracy after the new pro-Russian president of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich's (who immediately after his inauguration extended the stay of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in the Crimean city of Sevastopol until 2047) first year in office. In my opinion, if Yanukovich changes his political maneuvering against Islamic groups and bans HUT or jails its members, as does the Russian Federation, this will not only increase the membership of HUT in Crimea, but will also encourage the activities of other Islamic radical organizations, which could use fierce top-down harassment against this nonviolent group as justification for violence.

My research suggests that US policymakers should monitor the activities of HUT in Ukraine as well as in other post-Soviet states and continue to partner with Ukraine in international security issues. At the same time, the US policy community should be aware of the fact that there are unreliable reports on fundamentalist and radical groups in Ukraine, which certain political and religious elite use for their own benefit. Therefore, US policymakers should be aware of the differences between the ideologies of fundamentalist and radical groups in potential conflict zones. Their source of information should be based on field research and monitoring of events on the ground. Accordingly, the US policy community should not label HUT a radical terrorist organization and lump HUT together with real terrorist organizations. These types of accusations will not only mislead American security analysts and policymakers but also increase global reactions against the US.

## REFERENCES

## ENDNOTES



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