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CENTRAL ASIA: Fergana Valley responds to Iraq war

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

A week-long investigation by Forum 18 News Service across the Fergana valley – the most devoutly Muslim region of Central Asia that straddles Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan – has revealed widespread popular hostility to the US war on Iraq, which one local called "a war of civilisations". Yet there was no evidence that this hostility to the war – which enjoys the tacit support of the Uzbek government – will lead to new instability in the Fergana valley. "While the situation will quickly become strained in the rest of the Muslim world, here everything will stay virtually unchanged," a local Muslim leader told Forum 18 in the Kyrgyz town of Osh. Even members of the banned Islamist party Hizb ut-Tahrir conceded that people are more concerned about surviving in the harsh economic climate than about their fellow-Muslims. "You must understand that our people are asleep," Uzbek Hizb ut-Tahrir members told Forum 18. "Even the co-operation between [Uzbek president]Islam Karimov and the US and the extermination of Iraqi Muslims have not awoken Uzbeks."

A week-long investigation by Forum 18 News Service across the Fergana valley – the most devoutly Muslim region of Central Asia that straddles Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan – has revealed widespread popular hostility to the United States-led war on Iraq to oust the regime of Saddam Hussein. Neither in the Kyrgyz section nor the Uzbek section of the Fergana valley could Forum 18 discover anyone who supported the US military action. Yet there was no evidence that this hostility to the war – which enjoys the tacit support of the Uzbek government – will lead to new instability in the Fergana valley. Even members of the banned Islamist party Hizb ut-Tahrir conceded to Forum 18 that people are more concerned about surviving in the harsh economic climate than about their fellow-Muslims.

"Virtually all Muslims in our region are very hostile to the US action in Iraq," the mufti of Jalal-abad region of southern Kyrgyzstan, Dilmurat haji Orozov, declared bluntly. "Why does the US have the right to have nuclear weapons, but not Iraq? We believe that the US simply wants to have control over Iraqi oil and definitively strengthen its worldwide domination," he told Forum 18 in Jalal-abad on 15 March.

He insisted that the situation in Iraq was not at all as it has been described in the western media. "I have been to Iraq several times, most recently about a month ago when I was on my way to the pilgrimage in Mecca. I can testify that the economic situation in the country is improving. Beggars have virtually disappeared and the Iraqis have become more prosperous and good-natured. Perhaps the Americans don't like Muslims to be successful!?"

His opposition was echoed by the imam-hatyb of the Bilol mosque in Jalal-abad, Muhamajon Akhmedov. "The Uzbeks have a saying: 'If your neighbour sleeps soundly, then you can sleep soundly too.' Iraq is not only a country situated not very far from Kyrgyzstan, it is also a Muslim country. Therefore naturally we are against US military action in Iraq," he told Forum 18 on 16 March in Jalal-abad. "The fact that we Kyrgyz are not able to receive objective information is a separate issue. For example, there is not one Uzbek-language programme on [Kyrgyz] television. It has got to the stage where people even buy their newspapers in Uzbekistan. In a situation like this, many of Kyrgyzstan's Uzbeks know virtually nothing about world events. For example, people cannot even make a guess at where Iraq is."

The director of the Osh-based Centre for Islamic Co-operation, the former mufti of Kyrgyzstan, Saijan Kamaluddin, was equally opposed to the war. "Naturally, we condemn the US military operation in Iraq," he told Forum 18 in the Kyrgyz town of Osh on 17 March. "Washington's main aim is to seize the oil fields and establish complete world domination."

Valeri Uleyev, director of the Jalal-abad human rights organisation Justice, reports that the current US military action in Iraq has aroused much more opposition among local people than its action in Afghanistan. "The Taliban were opposed by Afghanistan's Tajiks and Uzbeks, and naturally Central Asian Muslims supported their fellow tribesmen on that side of the border," he told Forum 18 in Jalal-abad on 18 March. "Today, the situation is quite different. Washington's military action is opposed by virtually all the people of southern Kyrgyzstan. People see this war as 'a war of civilisations'. In their opinion, the US has launched a war against the whole Islamic world."

The Fergana valley is a special region of Central Asia. The population density is the highest in the CIS. The population here is much more religious than in other areas of Central Asia. Even in Soviet times an entire network of medressahs and mosques existed

underground outside the control of the communist leadership. It was in this region that the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) - whose goal is to set up an Islamic state in Uzbekistan's section of the Fergana valley - was set up. The international radical Islamist party Hizb ut-Tahrir - which aims to unite Muslims worldwide under a single caliphate - is also active in the valley, despite being banned in both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

An additional source of tension in the Fergana valley is the fact that at the beginning of the 1920s, this distinct mono-cultural region was divided between the three republics of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Moreover, the borders were drawn randomly, without taking account of ethnic realities. For example, there are compact groups of Uzbeks both in Kyrgyzstan's section of the Fergana valley and in Tajikistan. In 1990 there was conflict between local Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the Kyrgyz section of the Fergana valley, which led to the deaths of around 320 people. Moreover, the first cause of conflict persists even today (local Uzbeks believe that this territory historically belongs to them, viewing the Kyrgyz as "incomers" who do not belong). It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that the situation in the Fergana valley determines the stability of the whole of Central Asia.

It remains unclear how far popular opposition to the war will turn into practical action. Orozov told Forum 18 that it was possible that many residents of southern Kyrgyzstan would go to fight against the Americans and rumours are already circulating about volunteers travelling to Iraq. He reported that when in 1999 and 2000 IMU fighters crossed southern Kyrgyzstan on their way to Uzbekistan, several local residents welcomed them as "fighters for the faith" and helped them. Orozov added that Uzbeks and Kyrgyz also fought in detachments of the Chechen resistance. "So I think it is quite likely that many residents from our region will go to the aid of the Iraqis," he told Forum 18.

At the same time, one must not overstate the dissatisfaction of local Muslims, which is more of a passive nature. "I do not think that the military events in Iraq will have a discernible effect on the situation in our region," Kamaluddin admitted to Forum 18. "While the situation will quickly become strained in the rest of the Muslim world, here everything will stay virtually unchanged."

Taking into account the extremely difficult economic situation of the region, people are primarily concerned with their own material problems, not with their sympathy for Iraqi Muslims. Even local members of Hizb ut-Tahrir - who spoke to Forum 18 on condition of anonymity, given the fact that the party is banned in Kyrgyzstan - do not predict a real aggravation of the situation in Central Asia because of the Iraq crisis. It is also noteworthy that after the start of the US "anti-terrorist" operation in Afghanistan many local Muslim leaders (such as Orozov and Kamaluddin) also strongly criticised this action by Washington. But after the US embassy in Kyrgyzstan organised, at its own expense, a familiarisation visit to the United States by members of the Kyrgyz Islamic clergy, critical remarks by imams ceased.

It is even less likely that the Iraq crisis will affect the political situation in Uzbekistan, which is ruled with a strong hand by President Islam Karimov. The Uzbek government has tacitly supported US action and, bearing in mind the authorities' complete control over both the media and the official Muslim clergy, it is hard to foresee that criticism of the US will be voiced openly.

According to a report on 20 March by the German radio station Deutsche Welle, the Uzbek authorities have restored unofficial censorship in response to the military operation in Iraq and the media can only carry the viewpoint of the Uzbek government in support of the war. Neither the Russian nor the Western European points of view are being reported. Foreign Minister Sodyk Safayev summoned the editors of major media outlets and asked them not to report on the war from a pro-Russian point of view, but exclusively from the US position. One may predict that very soon the muftiate will also receive orders from the authorities.

After the start of the US-led attack on Afghanistan, imams at all of Uzbekistan's mosques gave an address condemning terrorism. The chief imam of Tashkent, Anvar haji Tursunov, welcoming the start of Washington's "anti-terrorist" campaign in Afghanistan, declared that this would promote stability in Uzbekistan. It is unlikely that there will be a similar response to the war in Iraq.

Despite the opposition of the local Muslim population in the Uzbek section of the Fergana valley to the US action in Iraq, it is practically inconceivable that people there will decide to express their dissatisfaction openly. "You must understand that our people are asleep," members of the Uzbek branch of Hizb ut-Tahrir told Forum 18 on 19 March in the Uzbek town of Fergana. "Even the co-operation between Islam Karimov and the US and the extermination of Iraqi Muslims have not awoken Uzbeks. The majority of true Muslims have been behind bars for some time. The rest, who are free, have forgotten about God and think only about the next piece of bread."

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