

# The Phenomenology of “Akromiya”: Separating Facts from Fiction

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## “Akromiya” and the Andijan Uprising

On May 13 2005, thousands of Andijan citizens came out to the main square of the city to hold a peaceful demonstration and, according to eye witnesses, were shot down by the governmental forces in the same evening.<sup>1</sup> It was preceded by a court trial of 23 local businessmen who were accused by the government of being members of a secret extremist organization “Akromiya”. These businessmen were known and popular in the city for their charity activities and for providing jobs for around five thousand people. That is why many Andijaners, suffering from the decline of their living standards and chronic unemployment, were aggrieved by what they regarded as an unfair trial and participated in the pickets during the court hearings and in the demonstration on May 13.

There is another part of the story: on the night from May 12 to 13 2005, a group of armed men attacked a military barrack, a prison and local department of the security services. However, the identity of the group is

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<sup>1</sup> The following reports are based on the eye witnesses: “Preliminary Findings on the Events in Andijan, Uzbekistan, May 13 2005 (With Information as of June 13 2005),” OSCE-ODIHR, June 20 2005 <[www.osce.org/item/15234.html](http://www.osce.org/item/15234.html)> (April 30 2006); “Bullets Were Falling Like Rain,” The Andijan Massacre, May 13 2005, *Human Rights Watch* 17, 5(D) (June 2005) <<http://hrw.org/reports/2005/uzbekistan0605/>> (April 30 2006); “Uzbek Refugees Recount Harrowing Tales Three Months After Andijan Violence,” *UNHCR News Stories*, August 15 2005; International Crisis Group, “Uzbekistan: The Andijan Uprising,” Asia Briefing N°38, May 25 2005; Bukharbaeva, Galima [a witness of events], “Proshel mesayts s 13 maya – dnya tragichekshih sobytiy v Andijane,” [One Month Has Passed Since 13 May – The Day of Tragic Events in Andijan]. *Ferghana.Ru*, June 13 2005, <<http://news.ferghana.ru/detail.php?id=328335622424.31,512,21057897>> (April 30 2006); Volosevich, Alexei [a witness of events], “Andijanskliie hroniki: istorii iz goroda perezhihshego tragediyu 13 maia,” [Andijan Chronicles: Stories From the Town That Suffered a Tragedy on 13 May], *Vremya Novostei*, N°100, June 8 2005, <[www.vremya.ru/2005/100/13/126873.html](http://www.vremya.ru/2005/100/13/126873.html)> (April 30 2006).

still a matter of dispute: the organizers<sup>2</sup> of the demonstration on May 13 claimed that they were not involved in the attacks while the Uzbek government accused “Akromists” in implementing these violent actions. What the organizers of the uprising later acknowledged is that they indeed carried out a seizure of an oblast administration building, held a number of hostages – mainly policemen and security service agents – and that around forty guns were confiscated from those servicemen shooting at the crowd during the day.<sup>3</sup>

The event subsequently ended in bloodshed with Human Rights Watch describing it as a massacre.<sup>4</sup> According to the government of Uzbekistan, 187 citizens died during the May 13-14 events including hostages and representatives of security services. According to a number of independent sources, no less than 700 people died, mainly peaceful citizens among whom were women and children. Some of the demonstrators managed to flee across the border to the territory of Kyrgyzstan and later received asylum status.

It is evident, that the Andijan uprising revolves around the controversial case of “Akromiya”. There are two opposing set of opinions towards this group. According to one view which is mostly presented by the Uzbek government and some local experts, “Akromiya” is an extremist Islamic organization which harbors an intention to overthrow the secular constitutional order of Uzbekistan. The other camp denies that such an organization even exists.<sup>5</sup>

For this paper, I have set myself the task of examining what is fact and what is fiction with respect to the phenomenon of “Akromiya”. It is not an easy task because there are very limited credible sources available on this matter. To date, very little empirical research has been done in Andijan with respect to the local Muslim community and the activity of “Akromists”. Public attention to this group is mainly channeled towards the trial of those 23 businessmen mentioned and the Andijan uprising. To understand the context of this crisis, we first have to examine the role of Akram Yuldashev, an Islamic preacher based on Andijan and his group of followers.

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<sup>2</sup> The organizers were primarily the 23 businessmen released from the prison and their supporters.

<sup>3</sup> Video interview with Kabul Parpiev, one of uprising leaders, taken by freelance journalist Shahida Tulyaganova in June 2005. A copy of the interview was presented to me by Tulyaganova for research purposes.

<sup>4</sup> “Bullets Were Falling Like Rain,” *Human Rights Watch*.

<sup>5</sup> One of the most eloquent proponents of this view is Saidjahon Zainabitdinov, a human rights defender from Andijan sentenced to seven years following the events. See his article: “Protiv ‘akromistov’ fabrikuyutsya novye lozhnye uliki” [New Circumstantial Evidence Are Being Fabricated Against ‘Akramists’]. *Centrasia.Ru*, May 9 2005. <<http://centrasia.org/newsA.php4?st=1115619300>> (April 30, 2006).

## **Akram Yuldashev and His Group of Followers**

To start with, Akram Yuldashev was born in 1963 in Andijan. It is known that after graduation from the engineering program of Andijan University, he worked as a mathematics teacher. It has also been established that between the 1986 to 1988 period, he was a member of the clandestine Islamic organization Hizb ut-Tahrir. He left this organization apparently because of disagreement with the organization's agenda and operational methods.

There are no known records available specifying the reason of his departure from this organization but one can conclude, taking into account Yuldashev's subsequent writings and deeds of his followers that Yuldashev dismissed the call for an Islamic state. Furthermore, unlike the Hizb ut-Tahrir, he and his followers were never identified for calling for the establishment of a Caliphate and had also never publicly raised any political demands. Accordingly, none of such charges were brought to the court that considered the case of those 23 businessmen on trial. Nonetheless, it would appear that he did not abandon his determination to raise the role of Islam in society. Instead, he chose an evolutionary approach of upbringing the Muslim community by stressing on the need for pious deeds in everyday life.

In 1998, Akram Yuldashev was imprisoned for two years and six months by the Uzbek authorities on the charge of drugs possession<sup>6</sup> but was pardoned shortly after. In the wake of the bombings in Tashkent city in 1999 which the authorities claimed to be the work of Islamists, he was arrested again and sentenced to 17 years in prison, where he had remained since. Despite being self-taught on religious issues, Yuldashev nevertheless became a spiritual authority and was seen as a charismatic leader. He was popular across the whole Ferghana Valley, especially in Andijan.

Between 1990 and 1992, he handwrote a short forty-four pages tract called "Yimonga Yul" (Path to faith), in which he set forth his philosophy. After issuing this tract, Yuldashev started gathering a group of disciples. The decisive moment in the establishment of the community of his followers was his acquaintance with a local Andijan businessman named Bahrom Shakirov. Shakirov was so deeply impressed by the ideas of the Andijan spiritual teacher that he radically changed his own lifestyle, abandoned his habit of gambling and began to follow Yuldashev's call to prioritize one's spiritual needs over the material wants and to focus on 'wealth for the soul'.

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<sup>6</sup> Similar accusations were levied against other Islamists, devout Muslims and dissidents. To detain and convict these people the Uzbek police is said to routinely plant drugs on those considered disloyal to the current political regime.

In 1993, Shakirov donated a large parcel of land in Andijan's Bogi-Shamol suburb to establish a business community where followers of the Yuldashev's teaching could begin entrepreneurial activities in accordance with the pillars of Islam. On this plot of land, ten enterprises<sup>7</sup> were founded; they include a bakery, hairdressing salons, a cafeteria, and a shoe factory. By 2005, the number of firms expanded to 40.<sup>8</sup> All of its members were committed to giving a fifth of their earnings towards charitable goals realized via the establishment of a *zakat* fund<sup>9</sup> called 'Bait-ul-mol'.<sup>10</sup>

This philanthropic activity of the "Akromist" community has given a reason for Forum 18's<sup>11</sup> Igor Rotar to describe it as a "unique model of Islamic socialism."<sup>12</sup> But I would qualify the movement in a slightly different manner, as an Islamic equivalent of "social democracy", or even "moral economy", since Yuldashev and his adepts do not disapprove of private ownership and, at the same time, their activities imply a counterbalancing principle of social solidarity within the boundaries of their own community.

Apart from promoting charitable activity once a week, Yuldashev would conduct studies on Islamic education with community members, an act which the authorities perceived as a challenge to their monopoly over religious upbringing and education. The independence of the group, detached from state control and patronage, is most likely to be the key concern for the authorities. Another significant area of concern lie in the fact that Yuldashev's teachings, with its strong emphasis on moral-based social deeds of Muslims, was not in accordance with the practices of officially sanctioned Islam which focused mainly on the formalities of worship.

But even without their spiritual leader and after a short period of despondency, the community continued with its devotional activity and expanded its welfare network. On June 23 2004, the authorities suddenly ordered the arrest of 23 businessmen from this network. Despite the

<sup>7</sup> N.C. Aizenman, "The Eye of the Uzbek Storm," *Washington Post Foreign Service*, May 29 2005. Page A16, <[www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/05/28/AR2005052800870\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/05/28/AR2005052800870_pf.html)> (April 30 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Kabul Parpiyev (one of the leaders of the Andijan uprising). *Ferghana.Ru*, (In Russian), August 13 2005, <<http://news.ferghana.ru/detail.php?id=376934560219.63,1444,12124212>> (April 30 2006).

<sup>9</sup> *Zakat* is one of five pillars of Islam requiring Muslim to share a part of their incomes for those most needed, the poor, disabled and incapable part of the society.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Kabul Parpiyev.

<sup>11</sup> Norwegian-based Forum 18 seeks to highlight one's right to religious freedom as stipulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. <[www.forum18.org](http://www.forum18.org)> (April 30 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Igor Rotar, "Uzbekistan: What is Known about Akramia and the Uprising?" *Forum 18 News*, June 16 2005, <[www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article\\_id=586](http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586)> (April 30 2006).

absence of any evidence of anti-constitutional activity and ignoring protests of innocence, the businessmen were charged with organizing a criminal organization, mass rioting and infringement upon the constitutional order. The judicial process for the 23 businessmen began on February 11, 2005 and concluded on May 11 the same year, just before the government lost control of the situation on May 12<sup>13</sup>, 2005.

The accused were charged with membership in an organization called "Akromiya", which the defendants deny exists. The group members were calling themselves "Birodar" (brothers), which is reminiscent of the "Muslim brotherhood" in the Middle East. Among the local population, they were known by the nickname "Yimonchilar", which originated from the title of Yuldashev's "Yimonga Yul".

### **"Akromiya" and Yuldashev's "Yimonga Yul"**

While Akram Yuldashev has been accused of religious extremism by the authorities, it is impossible to accuse him of being so by simply referring to his pamphlet. The "Yimonga Yul" is in fact quite innocent and peaceful in content. At his 1999 trial, Yuldashev said the following of his tract: "Having written a religious book, I wanted to call people to the truth and kindness to each other."<sup>13</sup> The pamphlet can be qualified as a sort of religious existentialism. It consists of twelve parts which serve as the basis for setting forth views on the role of thought and logic in Islam, as well as stages of spiritual self-improvement.

Like many similar tracts on Islam, it contains citations from the Koran throughout. Calling man weak and helpless, Yuldashev, in his tract, sees man's path to salvation through religion. But religion for him is "no fairy-tale or legend, nor some ritual being carried out in a defined time," (cit. from "Yimonga Yul"), a reference to his observation of the local population's habit of practising Islamic rituals while at the same time lacking moral conviction in one's social action. Reading the tract, one is struck by its scientific style, especially when Yuldashev writes of the working processes of brain and thought. Some points even remind one of Abraham Maslow's humanistic psychology with its theory of the *Hierarchy of Human Needs*. In addition, the tract does not contain any noticeable social or political commentary that can perhaps be regarded as agitative towards the government.

Nevertheless, not everyone regarded Yuldashev's tract as wholesome. Bakhtiar Babadjanov, a well known Uzbek expert on Islam, has suggested that behind the abstract phrases in the pamphlet, one can reveal a call for jihad. Babadjanov comes to this conclusion only by the fact that

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<sup>13</sup>"Matlyuba Azamatova. 4 tisyachi chelovek piketiruyut zdaniye suda v podderzhku akromiytsev," [Four Thousand People are Picketing the Court Building in Support of Akromists]. *UzNews.Net*, May 11 2005, <[www.uznews.net/st190.htm](http://www.uznews.net/st190.htm)> (April 30 2006).

Yuldashev ostensibly cites some places in the Koran which, in combination with some other Koranic verses (not cited by Yuldashev, by the way), can be interpreted as justification of jihad.<sup>14</sup>

Babadjanov's shift in attitude against "Akromiya" is in fact worth mentioning. In the period before the Andijan event in May 2005 Babadjanov presented "Akromiya" as being far from an extremist group. For instance, back in 2002, he described the group as just "utopian" and Yuldashev's teaching as "amateur."<sup>15</sup> After the Andijan event, Babadjanov drastically changed his position and now describes "Akromiya" as a jihadist group.<sup>16</sup> According to Babadjanov in his recent presentation at America's Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in May 2006, he claimed that he spoke to Yuldashev in the cell for half an hour and Yuldashev ostensibly admitted that he overestimated the Uzbek population's readiness for jihad. But one should regard with skepticism confessions made by anybody being kept in custody or prison in Uzbekistan where the torture of arrested dissidents has been uncovered as routine practice.<sup>17</sup>

Besides Babadjanov, the other, less known, scholar who supports the government's position of Akromiya's extremist character is Zuhritdin Husnuddinov who was until late 2005 advisor to the Uzbek president and rector of Tashkent Islamic University.<sup>18</sup> Husnuddinov is the author of a

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<sup>14</sup> Refer to Babadjanov's presentation at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington DC, On May 2, 2006,

<[www.carnegieendowment.org/events/index.cfm?fa=eventDetail&id=881&&prog=zru](http://www.carnegieendowment.org/events/index.cfm?fa=eventDetail&id=881&&prog=zru)> (May 20 2006). This presentation was also reported in the media: Julie A. Corwin, "Uzbekistan: Scholar Says Andijon Group Threat To State," *RFE/RL*, May 4, 2006, <[www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/5/a966430c-7188-454d-8182-416e815cc452.html](http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/5/a966430c-7188-454d-8182-416e815cc452.html)> (May 20 2006)

<sup>15</sup> B. Babadzhanov. "Islam in Uzbekistan: From the Struggle for «Religious Purity» to Political Activism," in Rumer B., ed., *Central Asia: A Gathering Storm?* (Armonk, N.Y. : M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 319.

<sup>16</sup> Babadjanov's presentation at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington DC, May 2, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> In late 2002, a UN Rapporteur, Theo van Boven, conducted a fact-finding mission to Uzbekistan. He uncovered evidence of systematic torture of suspected religious and political sympathisers. His report confirmed the high casualty rates resulting from torture, and its perfunctory use in detentions. In 2006 concern over the systematic use of torture by the Uzbek government was again raised by the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, Manfred Nowak. Source: "Uzbekistan: Systematic use of torture continues - UN," *IRIN*, April 20 2006,

<[www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=52879&SelectRegion=Asia&SelectCountry=UZBEKISTAN](http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=52879&SelectRegion=Asia&SelectCountry=UZBEKISTAN)> (April 30 2006).

<sup>18</sup> It is worth mentioning that the university was created in 1999 by the government and assigned to produce imams and officers for state structures, including the National Security Service. One of the tasks of the officers is to monitor religious leaders in Uzbekistan and shape the regime's policy and the population's view toward Islam.

reference book on Islamic movements, currents and sects<sup>19</sup> which contains an article on "Akromiya" describing it as being extremist and even more radical than Hizb-ut-Tahrir.

These two are the most prominent of scholars who promote the idea of Yuldashev and his group as extremist. In both cases, both of them evoked a "supplement" to "Yimonga Yul" which they attribute Yuldashev to have written in addition to the tract mentioned. In Husnuddinov's account, Yuldashev is alleged to have described in the "supplement", a five stage program leading to the establishment of an Islamic state:

Stage 1 "Sirli" (secret), the goal of which is the recruiting of new members of the movement;

Stage 2 "Moddii" (material), directing the accumulation of the movement's financial potential;

Stage 3 "Ma'navii" (moral-spiritual), the goal of which is the indoctrination of the movement's members;

Stage 4 "Uzvii maidon" (organic union), the essence of which is the infiltration into state institutions;

Stage 5 "Tuntarish" (translated as violent coup d'état), the final point of which is the establishment of a new state order based on *Shariat*<sup>20</sup>, beginning at a local, followed by the central level.

The point in the supplement which was taken as evidence of conspiracy with the intention to overthrow the constitutional order and secular state is Stage 5, "Tuntarish". This reference was considered sufficient for qualifying the group of Akram Yuldashev's followers as an extremist organization.

Babadjanov's past presentation of the supplement before the Andijan events is slightly different compared to Husnuddinov. He translated the name of the fifth stage as "Ohirat" (Outcome)<sup>21</sup> implying the end of a certain evolutionary process, that does not necessarily require a violent change of regime but points to the creation of an Islamic state as final outcome nevertheless.

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<sup>19</sup> Husnuddinov, Z. "Islom yunalishlar, mazhablar, okimlar," [Islam: Movements, Currents, Sects], (Tashkent: National Encyclopaedia of Uzbekistan, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> Islamic law derived from Koran.

<sup>21</sup> B.Babadjanov, "Ferganskaya dolina: istiochnik ili zhertva islamskogo fundamentalizma?" [The Ferghana Valley: The Source of a Victim of the Islamic Fundamentalism] *Centralnaya Azia I Kavkaz* 5 (1999).

What is most striking is that neither Yuldashev, nor anybody else from his circle, ever recognized his authorship of the supplement. Moreover, Babadjanov in one online discussion which preceded the Andijan events stated two important facts: at the time when he first time wrote on “Akromiya,” there had been several versions of “Yimonga Yul” in circulation, some with and others without the supplement.<sup>22</sup> Babadjanov surprisingly did not even question and elaborate on the authenticity of the version with the supplement he personally used subsequently when denouncing “Akromiya”. In the interview with Forum 18, he also acknowledged that the supplement was brought to his office from the Prosecutor investigation office,<sup>23</sup> and not obtained from “Akromiya” members themselves. This thus opens questions as to the authenticity of the supplement he refers to and the basis for his accusations against Yuldashev. This doubt about Yuldashev’s authorship of the supplement is shared by Rotar who writes that it is unclear who wrote this supplement and whose idea they contain.<sup>24</sup>

### The Nurchu Movement in Uzbekistan

Yuldashev’s teachings and group of followers are akin to a number of moderate Islamic movements in the rest of the Muslim world, for instance, the Nurchu movement in Turkey and, Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East (in its latest, post-Said Qutb, period). Just like Yuldashev’s grouping, the Nurchu activist networks emerged around a charismatic spiritual leader Sayid Nursi (1876-1960) whose collection of theosophical tracts “Risale-i-Nur” is highly identical to the one written by Yuldashev. Nurchu similarly focused on enlightening the Muslim society and building a pattern of devout Muslims via charity and welfare activity.

As a category of the Islamic movement, Nurchu, far from being extremist, never set a goal to establish an Islamic state in the observable future and never speculated on this matter.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the Turkish ruling Justice and Development Party (*Ak Parti*) whose constituency is comprised of social movements like Nurchu, has so far demonstrated much greater determination to enforce democratic institutions in the

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<sup>22</sup> Babadjanov’s comments to the article of S. Zainabitdinov: “Obshina ‘Akromiya’ – proizvolnoe tvorchestvo uzbekskih spets’sluzhb i politologov,” [“Akromiya” Community – Arbitrary Creativity of Uzbek Security Agencies and Political Scientists], *Ferghana.Ru*, May 6 2005, <[http://news.ferghana.ru/comments.php?mode=news&view=comm&cid=262&comm\\_id=762&id=3629](http://news.ferghana.ru/comments.php?mode=news&view=comm&cid=262&comm_id=762&id=3629)> (April 30 2006).

<sup>23</sup> Igor Rotar, “Uzbekistan: What is Known about Akramia and the Uprising?”

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Although they also most probably had a vision of their movement bringing gradual changes in the society and state in accordance to values of Islam.

country than all previous governments.<sup>26</sup> Despite the noticeably moderate character of the Nursi's ideas and the Nurchu movement he founded, the Uzbek government has clamped down on its activities. In 2002, twelve Uzbek citizens were imprisoned and sentenced from 15 to 18 years for being readers of Said Nursi's books.<sup>27</sup>

The education of people in accordance to the tenets of Islam cannot be considered criminal *per se*. Yuldashev's followers must have seen in their activity, an expression of pious community building, where the principle of a zakat economy and social solidarity were prove of genuine devotion to Islam. Unfortunately for Yuldashev and his followers, their call for moral conviction in one's social action, emphasis on self-enlightenment and spiritual self-perfection as main duties of Muslims, appears to have challenged the Uzbek government's conceived notion of the role of Islam for Uzbek society – that it should be restricted to formal worship and remain under the supervision of the secular state.

From the treatment of the Nursi followers in Uzbekistan in 2002, one could, at that time, already predict how the authorities would react towards the appearance of other moderate Islamists groupings. The government's suspicion towards Yuldashev's grouping thus comes as no surprise. In May 2006 a conference on "Akromiya" was held in Tashkent, a professor of Tashkent Islamic University in his presentation listed in one row, movements such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, "Akromists" and "Nurchists", qualifying all of them, with no exception, as extremist.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusions

It would appear that the inability to distinguish between radical and moderate Islamic movements remains a characteristic of the current political regime. Ultimately, if the Uzbek government is to promote its image abroad and boost its relations with its own population, it would be important for the leadership to make a distinction between moderate

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<sup>26</sup> To read up on the moderate nature of the Nurchu movement, see M. Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>27</sup> The verdict of the Tashkent regional military court from July 5 2002, a copy of which has been obtained via a human rights activist who has requested to remain anonymous. The account of this trial is also published in the news-letter issued by the human rights NGO 'Ezgullik' in 2002, titled "Sbornik soobsheniy o narusheniyah prav cheloveka v Uzbekistane (za period mai-iyun 2002)," [Collection of Reports on Human Rights Violations in Uzbekistan During May-June 2002] (available in print only).

<sup>28</sup> "Deyatelnost ekstremistskih organizatsyi v Tsentralnoi Azii priobritayet vse bole radikalnyi kharakter - ekspert," [Expert: The Activity of Extremist Organizations is Acquiring an Increasingly Radical Character], *Interfax-Kazakhstan*, May 10 2006 (Disseminated via email by: "Interfax-Kazakhstan" <delivery@interfax.kz>).

Islamic activism and radical groups which employ violence against the state and call for establishing a Caliphate.

The matter of non-radical Islamism relates to a broader agenda of regional and global security. The discourse of moderate Islam has been promoted by the current U.S. administration as an advanced means of fighting extremism and terrorism. It is the hope of this author that this article's account of the state of moderate Islamic activism in Uzbekistan, taking Yuldashev and his followers as a case study, will contribute to the discussion of such an agenda.