

U.S. Strategic Dilemmas in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan Briefing at CSIS

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Daniel Kimmage : I would like to thank the International Commission on Religious Freedom and the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program for the opportunity to speak here today. My academic training is as a historian, but for the past several years I have written about economic, political, and social developments in Russia and Central Asia. I began to write about Russian affairs for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in 2002. Since December 2003, I have been RFE/RL's Central Asia analyst. Today I will address the issue of the threat of extremism and terrorism in light of government policy in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The views expressed here are my own.

Extremism, Terrorism, and Governance: Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan

1. Definitions and Threat Categories

Terrorism and extremism loom ever larger as preeminent 21st-century threats, yet the concepts themselves remain diffuse and disputed. In our efforts to understand these phenomena and their causes, only detail and precision can dispel the fog of generality and spotlight specific aspects of the problem that will help us to wage, and win, the larger war. The disparate experiences of Uzbekistan, a country at the heart of debates on how best to combat terrorism, and Turkmenistan, a country isolated by its idiosyncratic leadership from virtually all debates, are instructive, for they demonstrate the relevance of issues of governance to the fight against extremism and terrorism.

Before turning to concrete examples from Turkmenistan's and Uzbekistan's experiences in fighting extremism and terrorism, I briefly address the thorny subject of definitions and break down the overall concept of "threat" into more precise categories. For our purposes, the rough, working definition of extremism will be an ideology of political change that advocates, condones, or even implies violence. To take a local example, Hizb ut-Tahrir, which urges the establishment of a caliphate throughout Central Asia and tacitly supports the overthrow of existing governments and redrawing of existing international borders, would fit the definition of "extremist."

A working definition of terrorism comes from the 1998 International Treaty for the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings (available at http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/terrorism_convention_terrorist_bombing.html). As expounded in the treaty, this definition covers attacks by non-state actors intended to cause death, serious bodily injury, or extensive destruction using explosives or other lethal means against state or government facilities, infrastructure facilities, the military forces of a state, places of public use, or public transportation systems. In the local context, past actions of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) would clearly meet this definition of terrorism. The definition is weak in its treatment of intent, however, and one could argue for a different description of acts that, while they technically appear to meet the criteria laid out in the treaty, differed in intent -- that is, their primary aim was not to foment terror.

For example, the initial violence perpetrated by armed militants in Andijon on the night of 12 May involved an attack by non-state actors on a government facility. The attack caused deaths, yet its primary intent does not appear to have been to inflict death or spark terror, but rather to free prisoners from a jail. As such, while the letter of the treaty definition would permit the attack on 12 May to be described narrowly as terrorism, the spirit would suggest that "armed uprising" is a more accurate description that takes into account the perpetrators' apparent intent.

I divide the concept of threat on the country level into four categories: 1) "target" threat -- the country as a target, or threats to a country's interior from groups based either inside or outside the country's borders; 2) "source" threat -- the country as the source of a terrorist threat to others; 3) "cooperation" threat -- threats that the country's government and/or environment pose to the general conduct of the global war on terrorism; and 4) "evolving" threat in any of the preceding three categories, or status changes over time.

An example of a country facing a target threat would be Israel, which is targeted by a number of terrorist groups. A source threat would be Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, which hosted terrorist groups that targeted other locations. Clearly, the first two categories can overlap in cases of countries that are targeted by indigenous groups that also mount campaigns abroad (as would be the case with Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia, which has targeted locations within Saudi Arabia while at the same time acting as a source threat, inspiring supporters to travel to Iraq to engage in suicide bombings and other acts of terror). A cooperation threat would be, as we shall see, isolationist Turkmenistan. And an evolving threat merely indicates significant change, be it positive (post-Taliban Afghanistan, which is considerably less of a menace to its neighbors than it once was) or negative (Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, which became a threat to its neighbors in a way that Soviet-occupied Afghanistan never was). The first three categories are synchronic, measuring a condition at a particular point in time, while the last is diachronic, measuring possible changes over time.

2. Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan's current system of government, in which virtually all power flows from President-for-life Saparmurat Niyazov, presents a curiously bifurcated picture when viewed through the prism of our four threat categories. At present, Turkmenistan displays no known target or source threats. But the almost total lack of transparency in the Turkmen government and President Niyazov's penchant for isolationism render his country an obstacle to the sort of international cooperation necessary for a concerted fight against terrorism. Moreover, the near-certainty of a succession struggle in the wake of Niyazov's biologically inevitable passing bodes ill for long-term stability and promises a welter of evolving threats in the future.

Publicly available information indicates that Turkmenistan is not currently the target of any known extremist or terrorist groups, nor does it harbor any groups that are eyeing targets abroad. The oppressive security state that Saparmurat Niyazov has built up around his presidency has proved adept at throttling domestic dissent, shielding Turkmen society from outside influences, and maintaining a general clamp-down. Turkmenistan's isolation is by now so complete that even such seemingly heretical antics as the inscription of quotes from Niyazov's own writings on the walls of mosques have evoked little reaction in the broader Muslim world (see "RFE/RL Central Asia Report," 15 June 2004).

Turkmenistan granted the United States overflight rights to support operations in Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11, and limited military cooperation has taken place through NATO's Partnership for Peace program. Nevertheless, Turkmenistan's isolationism, opacity, and general aloofness from the international community could render it a cooperation threat in the war on the terrorism. Rampant corruption further darkens the picture. For example, former officials now in exile have alleged that high-ranking members of Niyazov's government are involved in lucrative drug-smuggling operations. Drug trafficking routes are a boon to extremists active in the region, as a 9 June AP story detailed with the example of militants from the IMU who use the services of drug dealers to pass through Iran.

More worrisome is the evolving threat presented by Turkmenistan's dysfunctional political system. A November 2004 report by International Crisis Group (ICG) enumerated a number of possible scenarios for Turkmenistan -- "Death and succession"; "Palace coup"; "Popular uprising"; and "The immortal Niyazov" -- concluding: "In most cases, it is possible to imagine a very serious shift toward chaos, in which even those state services which now exist would fail. Since much of the population, in one way or another, is highly dependent on the state,

even a short period of state malfunction could lead to a real humanitarian crisis." Needless to say, such a crisis could radically alter all of the terrorist and extremist threat parameters for Turkmenistan.

In conclusion, while Turkmenistan today is neither an identifiable target nor a source of terrorism or extremism, and its standoffish attitude toward the international community is of less than crucial significance to the war on terror, it still presents a threat. President Niyazov's subjugation of the political arena to personal whim has fostered an atmosphere devoid of viable political institutions in which any real threat to his rule is likely to take extreme forms. Moreover, as the November 2004 ICG report underscores, the possibility of post-Niyazov state failure in Turkmenistan raises the prospect of a 1990s Afghanistan redux, a potential breeding ground for extremism and terrorism with grave consequences for regional security.

3. Uzbekistan

Unlike Turkmenistan, which has been marginal to debates about extremism and terrorism, Uzbekistan stands at the center of a contentious polemic about government policy in the fight against extremism and terrorism. Before turning to that debate, I briefly review the target, source, cooperation, and evolving threats in Uzbekistan.

As a target, Uzbekistan experienced two notable terrorist attacks in 2004. In late March-early April, a series of explosions, suicide bombings, and shootouts took place in Bukhara and Tashkent, killing 47 people, the bulk of them attackers and police. On 30 July, suicide bombers struck the U.S. and Israeli embassies and Prosecutor-General's Office in Tashkent, killing the three bombers and four Uzbek law-enforcement personnel.

No credible claim of responsibility emerged for these attacks. Uzbek official statements cast a wide net, laying ideological blame on Hizb ut-Tahrir and suggesting operational links to a variety of radical groups inside and outside of Uzbekistan. Subsequent trials were less than illuminating, with most convictions based on confession amid allegations of torture.

Although much of the evidence from the 2004 attacks was fragmentary,

in toto it pointed to the emergence of a loose-knit, poorly funded group motivated by an Islamist ideology and violently opposed to the regime of Uzbek President Islam Karimov. With the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) operationally degraded and reportedly scattered to remote regions of Pakistan, the 2004 attackers may represent a "neo-IMU" with possible personnel links, but not necessarily direct organizational ties, to the "old IMU." Geographically and ethnically, the neo-IMU appears to remain a primarily Uzbek organization, although some ties to Kazakhstan emerged in statements by Uzbek, and later Kazakh, officials. The existence of links to Hizb ut-Tahrir remained, at best, unclear. In what has become a familiar pattern, Uzbek officials insisted on such ties, albeit without providing firm evidence, while HT representatives abroad vociferously denied them.

The Uzbek government has classified the violence in Andijon on 12-13 May as a terrorist attack carried out by religious extremists, but the evidence for this is sketchy. In its most basic outlines, the incident breaks down into two parts -- an initial attack on government facilities, and the violent suppression of protests in central Andijon. The initial attack, in which armed men used lethal force against state facilities and personnel, meets the criteria for extremist violence. (The second incident, in which government forces are reported to have fired on unarmed demonstrators and killed hundreds, falls beyond the threat-focused scope of this overview, although it is sure to have ratcheted up the overall level of tension in society.) But a significant amount of independently gathered, mutually corroborating evidence does not support, and in several instances flatly contradicts, the official assertion that the attackers were terrorists pursuing an Islamist agenda.

In recent years, Uzbekistan has not been a significant source of terrorist threats to its neighbors. Up until 2001, the IMU, which originated in Uzbekistan and had Uzbek leadership, functioned in Afghanistan and Tajikistan while making armed forays into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The U.S.-led military operation in Afghanistan after 9/11 significantly impacted the IMU's operational ability, and recent reports place small groups of Uzbek fighters in remote areas of Pakistan.

Uzbekistan has cooperated with global efforts to fight terror, although its cooperation has drawn criticism and recent developments suggest that ties with Western allies are fraying. Cooperation has extended from the Uzbek government's agreement in 2001 to host a U.S. air base at Karshi-Khanabad to intelligence exchanges. But critics charge that the relationship has come at too high a price. Former British ambassador to Uzbekistan Craig Murray, whose well-publicized opposition to the regime of Uzbek President Islam Karimov does not necessarily invalidate his criticism of counterterrorism cooperation with Uzbekistan, wrote in a memo leaked to the "Financial Times" in October 2004 that "tortured dupes are forced to sign confessions showing what the Uzbek government wants the U.S. and U.K. to believe -- that they and we are fighting the same war against terror."

Two threats in Uzbekistan can be classed as evolving. First, the frequency of violent outbreaks has been on the upswing, with two major terrorist attacks in 2004 and one apparent incident of extremist violence in 2005. The preservation of stability is the stated justification for Uzbekistan's harsh antiterrorism policies, which rights organizations say have given the Uzbek authorities carte blanche to categorize potential dissent as religious extremism and criminalize it. Increasing violence amid ongoing repressive measures suggests that government policy has not been effective, and the latest outbreak of violence, which took place against the backdrop of a disputed trial of alleged Islamists in Andijon, points to the possibility of further violent challenges to state power.

Second, Western governments have voiced insistent calls for an independent international investigation of allegations that Uzbek government forces killed hundreds of demonstrators in Andijon on 13 May. The Uzbek government has refused, and its relations with the West, particularly the United States, have suffered. Recent statements by state-controlled media in Uzbekistan and some officials go so far as to imply that the United States and its allies may have been behind the violence in Andijon. The United States continues to maintain its air base at Karshi-Khanabad, but Uzbek authorities have placed limitations on flights, the government-controlled press has raised the prospect that the base has overstayed its welcome, and U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's most recent trip to Central Asia brought him to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan but not Uzbekistan. In short, the future prospects for cooperation in the war on terror appear to be dimming.