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**Assessing the “War on Terror” in Central Asia**

Russia and Eurasia Program  
*Islam in Eurasia and the “War on Terror” Series*

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On May 3, 2004, the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, hosted a seminar entitled “**Assessing the ‘War on Terror’ in Central Asia**” as part of a two seminar series on Islam in Eurasia. The seminar on Central Asia featured two panels that explored questions surrounding the sources of instability and extremism in the region and the role of the United States given its strategic and long-term interests in Central Asia.

**Panel I: Islam and Extremist Groups in Central Asia**

The first panel was chaired by Dr. Donald Jensen, Director of Communications for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. The three panelists were Daniel Kimmage, Central Asia Analyst for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty; Dr. Kathleen Collins, Assistant Professor at the University of Notre Dame; and Dr. Najia Badykova, Research Associate at The George Washington University.

The panel focused on recent attacks in Uzbekistan and the underlying conditions for instability and extremism in Central Asia. Uzbekistan was seen as the principal battleground for Islamists in Central Asia. The profile of the March attacks suggests a new, and most likely domestic, organization is responsible for the bombings. Popular opinion seems to sympathize with the attacks, which were seen largely as revenge against Uzbekistan’s reviled police force. An important question is whether there will be a second outbreak of violence, which could push the Uzbek government toward a much wider crackdown and lead to a new cycle of violence and oppression. Focusing strictly on Islamist groups, however, distracts attention from other underlying and fundamental sources of instability—inter-clan rivalry combined with a substantial decline in socio-economic conditions.

**Summary of Remarks by Daniel Kimmage**

When looking at Central Asia as the next potential battleground in the war on terror, because of recent events and historical factors, the central country is Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan suffered a spate of violence in late March and early April. In the wake of these events we heard two main explanations for what happened. The government put forth the argument that the violence was linked to Islamic extremism and specifically to

those inspired by the ideology of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and should be viewed in the same way as Al Qaeda. President Karimov has said that this was a group inspired by the ideology of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a radical group known to have ties to Al Qaeda. An alternative explanation for the events was offered by opponents of the Karimov government. In this view, the events should be considered a form of protest against the government.

Given that the IMU is holed up in Pakistan and has limited operational capability in Uzbekistan, it is not likely that the IMU is the main actor behind the outbreak of violence. The other prime suspect is Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT), which is considered a radical group and aims to establish an Islamic caliphate in Central Asia. HT, however, has no history of violence and has explicitly denied responsibility. The attacks of late March seem to have had a clear Islamist element, which suggests that we may be dealing with a new organization that could have ties to organizations such as the IMU. These radical organizations frequently form and reform, and may not necessarily be tight, well established groups. So focusing too much on organizations is something to be avoided.

At the moment, we lack sufficient evidence to pinpoint who was responsible for these attacks but we do have sufficient evidence to form profiles for some of the attackers—profiles that indicate an Islamist factor. The pattern of attacks in Uzbekistan did not match previous Al Qaeda tactics seen in Bali, Madrid, and Morocco, where the attacks were aimed at causing massive civilian casualties. The target in Uzbekistan was the police and many Uzbeks saw the attacks as revenge against a brutal and corrupt police force. More importantly, the popular response was one of approval but not active support.

Islamist activity in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is primarily an irritant rather than a threat to state stability or security. Uzbekistan is the key country in the region facing an Islamic threat. There are 3 possible scenarios for how Uzbekistan will react to this threat. The first is a scenario of short term containment through a combination of repression to disable radicals and policy shifts to diffuse tension. The second is containment through an attempt to remedy the causes of popular discontent. This is the scenario that Western NGOs, human rights groups, and the Uzbek opposition groups would like to see. The third is containment through crackdown. This is what opponents of the government claim will happen and this is the most dangerous scenario.

For the moment, the government appears to have chosen the first option. We have seen some arrests and police tactics have apparently shifted in order to establish a better image. This leaves the economy as the biggest problem for the long-term containment of a terrorist threat. While economic hardship does not necessarily produce radicalism, economic hardship does make it more likely that people will support radical groups. At present, the government does not seem to have the political will to carry out significant economic reforms.

The real question is whether there will be a second outbreak of violence. Here is where the danger lies. Continued violence could cause the government to shift to the third scenario, opting for a large-scale crackdown, and this could open the door for a vicious cycle of violence and oppression.

## **Summary of Remarks by Kathleen Collins**

In terms of the war on terror, paying attention to the target is essential. There are a handful of soft targets in Tashkent and if attackers had wanted to target the United States or Westerners they could have targeted Western hotels, U.S. bases, or the embassies of the United States or the United Kingdom. They did not and this indicates a serious focus on the central government. They targeted the police, the most visible aspect of the government. This is a critical point in terms of U.S. policy.

In terms of methods, the use of suicide bombers is a radical break from previous Islamist tactics in Central Asia. This is clearly worrisome. As we have seen in Chechnya and in Palestine, once the use of this tactic is effective and draws enough attention, it becomes a tactic that is repeated over and over leading to a cycle of violence difficult to break. Therefore, we should attempt to deal with the situation in an extremely careful and appropriate manner.

Given the target, the attacks are not likely to have come from an outside source such as Al Qaeda. There is nothing that clearly suggests a link to HT, which advocates non-violence, so this would represent a very dramatic jump for HT. It could be a splinter group dissatisfied with HT's slow progress, a faction, or a new organization. We should think of these groups as networks that can transform themselves rapidly and easily. The IMU, for example, did not initially develop as an anti-American organization.

It is important to step back and look at the underlying causes for these attacks and rising instability in Uzbekistan. We have to consider the last 10-15 years of socio-economic decline and its effect on the politicization of Islam. Poverty does not necessarily cause Islamism, much less terrorism, but poverty breeds the conditions for its broader social support. Unofficial estimates of poverty in Uzbekistan are in the range of 70-80 percent, especially in rural areas. We have also seen a dramatic economic decline from a relatively good starting point, which can be more destabilizing than persistent poverty, as well as an increase in the differentiation between the very wealthy and the desperate masses.

Second, until the 1980s the birth rate was relatively high and now a large percentage of the population is under 30. It is critical to remember that this percentage of the population has received a relatively poor education, one that is not up to the standards of the Soviet system. Deteriorating economic conditions and lack of employment opportunities has fed increasing internal migration, especially amongst young men. This process in turn leads to a breakdown of the traditional social networks that generally fostered an apolitical Islam and social stability. These trends can lead to rising support of radical Islamism, violence, and potentially tremendous social instability.

On the state level, systematic corruption among the police is ever-present. People experience this in their daily lives; they want to see the government crack down on police abuse. The presence of 6-7 thousand political and religious prisoners in Uzbekistan has created sympathy for the Islamist opposition as well as a backlash against the state. Relatives, neighbors, and friends of these prisoners are likely to sympathize with radical organizations. If you consider that 6-7 thousand prisoners have a clan, a lineage, or a village that sympathizes with them you can imagine that there are thousands of people personally touched by the arrests and police abuse.

There are a few things missing from a more successful Islamist movement in Central Asia. To a large extent the opposition, including Hizb-ut-Tahrir, has been very disorganized. It lacks cohesion, a centralized organizational structure, and a charismatic leader. Thanks to intense U.S.-Uzbek cooperation in solidifying border controls, access to significant amounts of arms has been limited. The U.S. government should continue to support border control measures.

Finally, focusing on Islamist groups distracts our attention from other underlying political issues and sources of instability. The fundamental problem for political development is one of inter-clan competition, especially within the Uzbek elite. These informal networks have become increasingly powerful, and threaten state cohesion as well as reform. Inter-clan rivalries over political and economic resources have had a significant effect on shaping state policy, especially on the economy, and in blocking economic reforms. The consequences for economic growth have been very negative; this in turn feeds into social dissatisfaction and Islamist opposition. There is also a widespread perception that various clan elites in the government control particular resources and have little accountability to either the people or the government and are engaged in widespread corruption. An inter-clan power struggle is more likely to lead to a coup or regime breakdown and violence than widespread Islamist mobilization, at least in the near term.

To summarize, we should not focus only on Al Qaeda and the international war on terror. We also need to pay attention to informal actors and highly fluid networks that have been developing in Central Asia over the last ten years. Secondly, we need to focus on the *underlying* political, social, and economic causes for the rise in extremism if we want to prevent the development of a broader Islamist opposition. Lastly, we should not be obsessed with the *formal* level of politics in Central Asia. We need to focus on informal political dynamics within the government, and how that is affecting regime stability within these countries. These informal dynamics will seriously affect U.S. potential to act within this region.

## **Summary of Remarks by Najia Badykova**

Why did the emergence of Islamic extremism become possible in Central Asia? It is often said that after collapse of Soviet Union there was a vacuum of ideology. This was not the only reason; the main reason was the poor economic conditions that confronted the population. Of course, after the collapse of Soviet Union, Central Asia became the target for many extremist groups but the vitality of these movements is explained by three simple things: ideology, simplicity, and the simplicity of the solution they propose. There are few true fanatical adherents of movements such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir in Uzbekistan. If you look at the ideology of HT, the number of fanatical adherents is small, but the number of people who sympathize is larger. Nevertheless, there were very few Communists in 1917 but they managed to conduct a successful revolution and this should be considered a dangerous phenomenon that is present in all Central Asia states, but most notably in Uzbekistan.

There has been insufficient attention to the question of why terrorism arises with too little attention to the role that economics plays in fostering terrorism. The competition between Russia and the United States provides the regimes in Central Asia with a certain room to maneuver between these two countries and to escape their real problems, which are economic.

The economy in Uzbekistan is the most pressing problem that the state faces. Political reform and human rights issues are important, but secondary. Uzbekistan had a window of opportunity to conduct reforms, but they have missed that opportunity and, unfortunately, all the criticism directed at Central Asian countries has failed to produce results. It is now time to stop criticizing and start thinking about what we can do next. The ideal solution would have the United States and Russia working together to set certain conditions and obligations for these countries.

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) is scaling back its program in Uzbekistan but if you look at the conditions they set for the Uzbek government, 3 out of the 7 were political conditions. While it is important to address political and human rights issues, the EBRD should not place such an emphasis on these issues.

Education is a serious problem in Central Asia and while we cannot change those governments we can change the future by improving the educating of younger generations. Education should be a higher priority.

## **Question and Answer Period**

In response to a question asking whether Uzbekistan is next front in the war on terror, Daniel Kimmage answered that Uzbekistan is not likely to be the target of an Al Qaeda strike with massive civilian casualties but it could become a central region in the war on terror, in the same way that that parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan are—as a key country in the phenomenon of international terrorism. Arabic language forums and the ideological writings of Al Qaeda, however, tend not to focus on Central Asia. It is a very distant and unfamiliar region for them and it is certainly not on the front burner for Arabic language Islamist extremist groups, even during the recent violence in Uzbekistan.

Kathleen Collins responded to a question asking why there are so few Islamic extremists in Central Asia by saying that sympathy and support for radical Islamism and extremism is on the rise and that a significant social and political transformation has taken place over the last ten to fifteen years. Most Uzbeks have not supported these groups and do not support the use of violence, but we are seeing a change this attitude. Finally, even though the recent events were not likely directed at the United States, we do need to be concerned about growing support for Islamism and the use of terrorism in Central Asia. We need to engage the Uzbek and other Central Asian governments in addressing these problems.

Najia Badykova was questioned on what economic measures should be prioritized in Uzbekistan. The two most important things in her view are improving currency convertibility and the development of more favorable conditions for business. Badykova questioned to what extent is the government capable of enacting these changes, and that

this is where the U.S. needs to be tougher on reforms by tying conditions to its foreign aid.

## **Panel II: The U.S. Presence in Central Asia and its Impact on Islam**

The second panel was chaired by Dr. Celeste Wallander, Director, Russia and Eurasia Program, and Trustee Fellow, CSIS. Panelists were Dr. Kimberly Marten, Associate Professor of Political Science at Barnard College, Columbia University, and Adolat Najimova, Uzbek Service Director for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

The panel focused on factors that are likely to contribute to instability in Central Asia, as well as the changing perception of the United States in Uzbekistan. Unmet rising expectations and pervasive clan networks constitute the two most dangerous threats to stability in Central Asia, which provides clear policy implications for the United States. While there is currently no strong anti-American sentiment in Uzbekistan there is disappointment with the United States, as many Uzbek Muslims apparently perceive that the U.S. government allows the Uzbek authorities to persecute Muslims. In addition, Uzbeks do not feel that the U.S.-Uzbek relationship has produced much in the way of positive change. Reportedly, most Uzbek analysts feel that the United States is turning a blind eye to human rights abuses. If the U.S. military is perceived to be associated with the abuses of the Karimov regime, and a supporter of secular nation-states in the region, this could make the United States or U.S. interests vulnerable to future attacks from extremist groups.

### **Summary of Remarks by Kimberly Marten**

The United States hosts bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan as well as having a military presence in and providing economic assistance to Tajikistan. In Kyrgyzstan, the base at Manas hosts approximately 1,300 U.S. troops. These troops have considerable contact with the local civilian population. The United States pays rent on the base to the Kyrgyz government. In 2003, this rent amounted to nearly 2 percent of Kyrgyzstan's GDP.

Although the United States tries to distribute its contracts for local goods and services to a number of suppliers, many of these contracts do end up going to government favored contractors, which has been the cause for complaints that the United States does not buy enough local products. President Askar Akayev's son-in-law, for example, has the contract for the supply of aviation fuel at the base. In addition, the United States employs about 300 Kyrgyz civilians at the base. Although the Kyrgyz government patrols 16 local towns on the perimeter of the base in order to ward off terrorist attacks, Islamic terrorism against U.S. forces in the region is a possibility given the apparent attempt to attack Manas in November 2003.

In terms of local influence and the ability to buy local favor, there is a sense of competition with the Russian base at Kant. The Russian military does not pay rent but has refurbished the base, which is being used as the headquarters for the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) rapid reaction force. Local citizens make up approximately 60 percent of base personnel and the Russian military buys all of its food and construction materials locally.

The U.S. base in Uzbekistan, known as K2, is located at Khanabad. The base probably has fewer troops than the Manas base in Kyrgyzstan. The troops at K2 are likely involved in special forces and intelligence gathering operations in Afghanistan. In addition, there is a military training and education base at Chirchik, as well as bases at Termez and Tuzel. These bases, however, are rarely discussed in the media.

In contrast with U.S. forces in Kyrgyzstan, K2 is located far from population centers and U.S. soldiers there have virtually no contact with the local population, although some local citizens have been employed in construction work. At the request of the Uzbek government, the base is surrounded by a security cordon of Uzbek troops. American personnel rarely leave the base and have almost no local impact. Those locals who do have a connection with the base tend to have a positive impression of Americans.

U.S. military bases all over the world have a psychological impact that is probably more important than their physical impact. This psychological impact has very little to do with the behavior of those forces on the ground. In this way, the U.S. military may be associated in the minds of significant population groups with the Karimov regime and its abuses, regardless of its policies. Additionally, if the United States is perceived to be associated with the idea of support for secular nation-states in Central Asia, then by association, it might become the target of Islamic terrorist actions.

There are two primary factors that we need to focus on when looking at the future potential for instability in Central Asia. The first is unmet rising expectations. In a stable society that has not experienced political violence in the past but becomes destabilized, it is not poverty that causes violence but the unmet rising expectations of economic well-being. This factor looms large in post-Soviet Central Asia because there was a great sense of hope at the end of the Soviet era that things would change for the betterment of the population but what we have seen instead is an increasing level of impoverishment.

The second factor is clan networks. When we talk about the secular state structure in Central Asia, especially in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, we are not talking about a state in the way we understand it in other areas of the world. We are talking about a set of family clans that support the state structure and get the benefits of that structure. These economic benefits are not evenly distributed throughout society but are instead distributed based on clan structure. There is some evidence that Islamism in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan is very much centered in these impoverished rural areas that are not connected to the ruling clan structures. While there is potential for clan rivalry that may lead one clan to topple another, a challenge to the existing state is likely to come from those who are excluded from the clan structure.

The implication of these two factors for U.S. policy is clear: concentrating on human rights or poverty reduction alone will not be enough if the goal is to stop anti-American resentment. When thinking about future terrorist attacks against the United States, the problem will come from the social strata who feel cut out of the economic relationship the United States has established with the ruling clans. Dealing with this problem will be difficult because we cannot just stop supporting the ruling clans or warlords; however, we should keep up the pressure on the Uzbek government to reach

outside of the existing clan structures and pay attention to the disaffected people who believe that they have no hope of sharing in the state's economic development.

## **Summary of Remarks by Adolat Najimova**

More than a decade ago the United States established relations with Uzbekistan and the hopes ran high among Uzbeks that the most powerful and democratically advanced country would help to promote democracy in Uzbekistan. With time, however, those hopes have faded.

The Clinton administration endorsed a policy of constructive engagement in an effort to improve Uzbekistan's human rights record and facilitate economic reforms, but the Uzbek government continued to restrict and deny the activities of both the secular and religious opposition. When first coming into office, the Bush administration had no clear policy toward Uzbekistan. September 11 dramatically changed the nature of the relationship between these two countries and overnight Uzbekistan became a strategic partner for the United States. In March 2002, President Karimov signed a "declaration of strategic partnership" at the White House, whereby the United States promised to protect Uzbekistan from external threats and Uzbekistan promised to improve its human rights record and facilitate political and economic reforms.

Over the past two or three years there has been very little movement by the Uzbek government on its promised reforms and many local analysts have expressed disappointment with the United States for its policies toward Uzbekistan. These analysts feel that U.S. military cooperation is paramount for the United States and the U.S. government thus turns a blind eye to human rights abuses in order to maintain good relations with President Karimov. In addition, ordinary Uzbeks do not feel that the rapprochement with the United States has produced much positive change in Uzbekistan.

The United States has also generated a great deal of confusion for Uzbek analysts with its mixed signals. While the State Department consistently notes human rights abuses in the country, the Defense Department praises Uzbekistan for its cooperation in the military arena. In February 2004, Donald Rumsfeld visited Uzbekistan and praised Karimov for his cooperation, but when asked about human rights abuses, Mr. Rumsfeld said he was unaware of this issue. The very next day, a group of State Department officials visited the Ferghana Valley, where Islamic sentiments are strong, and discussed issues of human rights abuses with local activists.

While there is currently no strong anti-American sentiments, many ordinary Uzbek Muslims express disappointment with the United States, perceiving that the United States allows Uzbek authorities to persecute ordinary Muslims.

In general, the poor political and economic situation plays into the hands of radical Islamist and extremist groups who promise to bring justice and equality, something very appealing to people whose life has become miserable in the last decade. Recently, Lorne Craner, Assistant Secretary of State Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, said "while there is no justification for terrorism, repressive societies without economic development where there is social exclusion have been breeding grounds for terrorism." This is a simple fact. According to official information six million Uzbeks, or one in four, live in poverty.

While most Western analysts believe the IMU still poses a threat to Uzbekistan, local experts believe the IMU never constituted much of a threat. It is not likely that the IMU ever had many members and with the fall of the Taliban the remaining remnants are hiding in Afghanistan and Pakistan. What is more dangerous is that the IMU may have large numbers of supporters in Uzbekistan who sympathize with its agenda. The Hizb-ut-Tahrir advocates non-violence and for the moment does not represent a violent threat to the regime.

It is widely believed that Karimov is overestimating the threat of Islamic groups in order to justify his crackdown on both the secular and religious opposition. Both Western and Uzbek observers believe that the government is creating its own enemies through its repressive policies. Relatives of jailed members of different religious groups are becoming more politically active and vocal. As long as the United States continues to support Karimov, Washington might be perceived among Uzbeks as anti-Islamic.

There are regional security implications to the situation in Uzbekistan. There are many members of HT in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and lately in Kazakhstan. The authorities in these republics have increased their harassment of HT members following the March attacks in Uzbekistan. Unrest in Uzbekistan could create a domino effect in the region.

## **Question and Answer Period**

The question and answer period centered largely on the question of how to reach out to disenfranchised groups currently excluded from the economic benefits enjoyed by the elite clan structure, and how to work through and pressure the central governments to spread the wealth in terms of U.S. base-related contracts. Kimberly Marten responded that we need better intelligence resources to provide us with an in-depth knowledge of the clan structures and precisely who is in what group. This is a first step in helping to disperse contracts to those groups not in the elite clan structure. This type of intelligence is being conducted in Afghanistan, so it is something we are capable of doing.

There is, however, a danger with any U.S. government agency trying to do diversify its local suppliers in opposition to the central government. It is obvious that the Central Asian governments do not want to be violently challenged by those outside of the clan network and thus outside the scope of the economic benefit that accrues from U.S. military presence. The United States should try to work through the governments to purchase food and hire physical labor from rural areas.

Responding to the same question, Adolat Najimova replied that since NGOs are the central force for promoting democracy in Uzbekistan they could help in finding ways to include disaffected segments of society. The closure of the Open Society Institute shows that the Uzbek government recognizes the potential of NGOs to challenge existing structures.

Asked if the military could be an agent of change or reform, Kimberly Marten stated that in Central Asia it is not clear that the military is an institution with power apart from the central government. Some scholars believe there is an alternative to the current clan structures in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, but may believe that the clans have penetrated the military.

One participant asked how Uzbeks will interpret the upcoming decision by the Bush administration to certify or not certify the “declaration for strategic partnership,” which links U.S. assistance to Uzbekistan’s progress on human rights and democracy commitments. Adolat Najimova replied that a decision by the Bush administration to certify that Uzbekistan is implementing its commitments under the strategic partnership will lead to a rise in anti-American sentiment. If the State Department fails to certify Uzbekistan, however, this is also unlikely to improve the perception of the United States for ordinary Uzbeks.

One participant asked about problems associated with the U.S. bases in Uzbekistan and for suggestions on how to alleviate those problems. Adolat Najimova outlined some of the problems for ordinary Uzbeks, especially those living in close proximity to the Khanabad air base. Khanabad was already very secretive but after the attacks in March the security measures heightened and locals employed at the base have been fired. Due to the high level of security around the base, the people living in the village near Khanabad are very isolated, travel is heavily restricted, and there are not many jobs. Although this group of people is small they are very unhappy.

Kimberly Marten responded to the same question stating that in Okinawa some U.S. bases have an outer as well as an inner perimeter. The area between the two perimeters is used by local farmers and thus is a revenue source. In addition, these locals may well be able to tell if someone suspicious is trying to enter the area, so it can actually increase security by having locals work at and for the base.

The last question centered on the role of Russia and how the United States can cooperate with and reach out to Russia. Kimberly Marten responded by noting that many Russian analysts see the U.S. presence in Central Asia as competitive, but one way to reach out to Russia could be through a campaign against the cultivation of poppy and the heroin trade. Intravenous drug use is one of the main sources of HIV transmission in Russia; helping to decrease the supply of drugs could have an immediate positive impact in Russia. In Kyrgyzstan, it would be a good idea to reach out to Russia with cooperative agreements between the bases and military exchange programs that could build a less competitive relationship.

*Summarized by John Geis*