

Islamic Extremism in Former Soviet Republics

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SINCE THE FORMER Central Asian Soviet Republics—Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan—gained independence, there has been a revival of Central Asian Islamic roots. Within this revival, certain areas have turned to Islamic fundamentalism, and incidents of Islamic extremism have multiplied. This trend helped fuel a civil war in Tajikistan and caused recent terrorist acts in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. An extremist group, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), has committed most of the armed activity and receives support from inside and outside the country. Playing a pivotal role in these proceedings is Afghanistan, where the Taliban now control nearly the entire country and export not only narcotics but also their militant brand of extremism. A survey of the IMU, the region and other contributing factors, such as Caspian Sea oil, illustrates the depth of this problem and its connections to transnational issues affecting both the region and the world.

Genesis of the Islamic Extremist Movement

Extremist problems in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have surfaced for many reasons. Although none was strong enough to bring about this movement alone, the synergism led to the current, dangerous state of affairs.

Ideology vacuum. The extinction of Marxism-Leninism as the official state ideology a decade ago created a vacuum, which “was quickly filled in with all sorts of ideologies wrapped in Islamic ideas.”¹ Both local and established Muslim-state religious leaders began to preach tenets of the new thinking. Extremists among them narrowly interpreted the Koran’s words “listen not to the unbelievers” and “strive against them with the utmost strenuousness” as a clear message that faithful believers of Islam cannot exist fruitfully under any non-Islamic government.² One new ideology that began to gain power and influence was Wahhabism, which concerns the idea of jihad, or holy war, against infidels. The teachers of Wahhabism “preach *ibahit* as the central point of their religious ideas, which is a permission to murder those who violate the purity of Islam.”³

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Economic factors. The relative decline in regional living standards has disaffected the population with ruling secular powers. Ordinary citizens are gradually recognizing the fact that the “social and economic reforms failed.”⁴ An Islamic state dictates societal norms and economic structures, so the disaffected population can see Islam “as an alternative to the current situation in which . . . the states have failed to deliver the expected results [and] democracy is seen as a by-product of Western pop-culture.”⁵ This dynamic could logically lead to fundamentalism, but it does not necessarily lead to militant extremism. However, extremist leaders and propagandists use a state’s poor performance to help convince citizens that overthrowing the established government is the only recourse. Extremists know that “living amid economic crises and being exposed to social stratification and corruption, people begin to doubt the political future of democracy in their countries.”⁶ If extremist leaders can show that only through force and militant activity will the government adjust, its support increases.

Fergana Valley. One area in this region has been a political powder keg—the Fergana Valley. Although historically a politically unified area, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan now claim various parts, thanks to Soviet cartographers who drew complicated republic boundaries.⁷ As a result, large pockets of ethnic Uzbeks live in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and a concentration of ethnic Kyrgyz live in Uzbekistan. This dispersion becomes problematic when, for example, Uzbekistan tightens borders after a militant extremist

attack emanating from Tajikistan.

Although surrounded by forbidding mountainous terrain, its own area is extremely trafficable and has served as a natural rest and transfer point for ancient trade routes and today's drug routes. Its high population density and high unemployment ensures a ready pool of manpower for any movement, religious or otherwise. Much of the Islamic movement's local ideological leadership is based in the Fergana Valley.

Even before the Soviet Union dissolved, during the perceived loosening of control under Mikhail Gorbachev, the number of mosques in Namangan, Uzbek, rose from two to 26.⁸ During December 1991 members of different Islamic organizations, to include Wahhabis, organized a rally and "captured a Communist Party building with the intention of establishing an Islamic center."⁹ What later emerged was an actual "movement for Muslim self-government in Namangan."¹⁰ Tahir Yuldosh led this movement and would become the future political leader of the IMU. The event was significant because it highlighted the role the valley would play in the next 10 years of religious movements. Until 1993 the greater region experienced an initial explosion of Islamic thought, preachings and organized movements. During the middle of the decade, governments began suppressing this activity. The current phase began in the final years of the decade, during which extremism has played a growing role in pursuing Islamic goals.¹¹ At each phase of this process, the Fergana Valley has been at the forefront of all related activities.

Repressive government. The Uzbek government, in particular, has exercised extremely repressive tactics. In the Fergana Valley more than 900 mosques have been shut down.¹² Many men shave their beards for fear of being labeled extremist; many arbitrary arrests occur. During Ramadan, the government recently "banned broadcasts of the call to prayer from mosques by loudspeakers."¹³ In 1998 nongovernment organization Human Rights Watch accused Uzbek President Islam Karimov of "carrying out unchecked repression."¹⁴ Intended to target extremists, these government policies have repressed innocents as well, resulting in the accelerated growth of extremism.

External assistance. Tajikistan provides assistance to extremists in the region, and the Taliban assists locally. The two states play a critical role in the continuing armed struggle in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Tajikistan. After the Soviet Union fell, the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan emerged as the focal point of anti-government sentiment. It radicalized its methods of opposition, provoked a costly civil war and founded the United Tajik Opposition (UTO). Following the movement for Muslim self-

government in Namangan in December 1991, many members of the involved organizations fled south, joined the UTO and fought as separate armed detachments during the Tajik civil war.¹⁵ Thus began the connection to the militant groups that would rise years later. At the end of the civil war, under the

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provisions of a national truce, the opposition received "30 percent of the leading posts in executive structures."¹⁶ The government's official recognition of the opposition was a tremendous lesson for extremist organizations to the north.

Finally, there is the issue of the Karategin Valley of Tajikistan, which runs north to south in the middle of Tajikistan and connects northern Afghanistan to the Fergana Valley. It is a natural funnel for protected movement and has been out of Tajik government control since 1992. Controlled by the opposition during the civil war, it is the site of militant extremist bases.¹⁷ Karategin Valley is a frequently used invasion route north for extremists. Although the civil war is over, Tajikistan has not effectively interdicted this route, and several armed incursions have recently and repeatedly passed through it. This questions whether the war's end and the signed treaty have actually changed control of the area. It serves UTO interest to have a similarly recognized political brother across the border. If armed incursions will foster eventual recognition and an ensuing political power base of northern extremist groups, the UTO should want to limit the Tajik government's interference with the IMU.

Afghanistan. The Taliban currently control most of Afghanistan and have allowed not only extremists from the north to train on its territory but also armed groups from regions such as Chechnya. It is also the home base of Osama bin Laden, the wealthy Saudi citizen who has conducted and supported numerous terrorist acts in the name of Islam. Afghanistan supports northern-based militant extremism for several reasons. First, the Taliban understand the benefits from the Tajik opposition's official political status and power, and want to encourage this process in Uzbekistan. Second, it would be far easier for the Taliban to have a locally initiated movement topple an unfriendly secular government in the region than

for the Taliban to have to eventually move north. As the most powerful political and military force in the region, Uzbekistan also assumes the role of “the main obstacle to the expansion of radical Islam in the region.”¹⁸ Finally, the lingering anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan—termed the Northern Alliance—would receive less concentrated support

Islamic extremism, emanating from Kazakhstan’s Uighur diaspora or from a northward expansion of the IMU’s area of operations, threatens the interests of all three external powers. Kazakhstan understands too well the competing goals of Russia, China and the United States for its oil. Each country maintains close ties, military and otherwise, to Kazakhstan, and it is in Kazakhstan’s interest not to jeopardize any of the relationships.

from northern secular governments if these governments were forced to concentrate their efforts internally.¹⁹ By eliminating Central Asian countries’ efforts, the Taliban gain another opportunity to consolidate power.

Recent Militant Activities

On 16 February 1999 Tashkent, Uzbekistan’s capital, suffered a series of car bomb attacks that left 16 dead and 100 injured. One of the bombs was detonated in a large square, shortly before the arrival of Karimov. In the immediate aftermath, the Uzbek government accused foreign powers of involvement; many foreign nationals, including Turkish citizens, were expelled from the country. Early that summer, Turkey recalled its ambassador from Tashkent, as the Uzbek government “accused elements in Turkey, most notably Erbakan’s Islamist Welfare Party, of supporting the terrorism.”²⁰ However, during their trial, the accused bombers specifically referred to the IMU and its military leader, Juma Namangani. The defendants stated that support for the IMU comes, in part, from a “fund of Islamic Extremists . . . whose headquarters is in Afghanistan.”²¹

During August 1999 a group of several hundred militants of Namangani’s IMU moved into the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan, along the Tajikistan border, and took 13 hostages. Among the hostages were four Japanese mining engineers and the commander of the Kyrgyz Interior Ministry troops. In the opinion of Kyrgyz President Askar Akayev, the militants’ goal was to restore the Kokand Khanate, an Islamic state. The resurrected Khanate would include three provinces in the Fergana Valley—Kyrgyzstan’s Osh province, Tajikistan’s Leninobod province and Uzbekistan’s Fergana province.²² Af-

ter two months of combat operations, the militants escaped to Tajikistan where they began to negotiate the return of the Japanese hostages for a \$2-million ransom.²³

During August 2000 IMU militants again launched a three-pronged attack into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and one group emerged only 60 miles from Tashkent.²⁴ Rebels announced their goal to replace the secular Uzbek government with an Islamic state—a goal similar to the 1999 incursion’s. After two months, both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan had expelled the militants, who retreated to the mountainous border areas from which they had launched their attack. Namangani reportedly has bases in Afghanistan and a force of more than 1,000 personnel in Tajikistan, of whom roughly half are Tajiks who “were part of the UTO during the civil war but did not accept the peace process.”²⁵ Significantly small groups of Chechens, Arabs sent by bin Laden and Pakistanis have recently joined this group.²⁶

External Connections to Regional Extremism

The scope of the extremist movement and the area’s strategic location have generated much attention from regional and world powers. The following topics outline the security agreements among groups of countries that have been signed; the efficacy of such agreements; and the issues that are specific to Russia, China and the United States:

Security pacts. A security agreement signed in April 2000 by the presidents of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan “aimed at coordinating intelligence and security agencies, and pledging joint military action if any come under attack.”²⁷ A second security agreement, called the “Shanghai Five,” includes China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan. This group already existed when its members met in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, on 5 July 2000. The summit focused on the “joint struggle against international terrorism, religious extremism, separatism and other types of transborder crime.” Notable decisions included setting up an antiterrorist center in Bishkek, capital of Kyrgyzstan; permitting Uzbekistan to join the group as an observer; and changing the group’s name to the “Shanghai Forum.”²⁸ In addition, an existing alliance—the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)—has begun to play a larger role. At a June 2000 meeting, the CIS created a joint anti-terrorist center in Moscow which is led by a general from Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB)—successor to the KGB.²⁹

Analysis of the pacts. The pacts, which were all in place during the August 2000 armed incursion, have not been very effective. For example, the members’ militaries have standardized command and control systems; yet, loud pronouncements of new security pacts demonstrate to in-country organiza-

tions that the local government is taking steps to prevent regional destabilization. These organizations bring aid into the country, and it is important to convince them to stay. Fledgling countries must also demonstrate proactive steps to resolve domestic issues and prevent their spread.

Russia. Russia's problems with regional Islamic extremism relate to decades-old issues with Afghanistan. The Taliban continue to consolidate military gains achieved during fall 2000 against the Northern Alliance. The Taliban continue to offer bases for various extremist groups. In May 2000 during large-scale military operations in Chechnya, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov warned that Russia might launch air strikes against Afghanistan for assisting the Chechen rebels (according to Russian intelligence).³⁰ Russian soldiers currently guard the Tajik/Afghan border. On 20 November 2000 Colonel General Nikolai Reznichenko, the first deputy director of Russia's Federal Border Service, stated the Russian soldiers would remain and "be put on full alert to prevent any spillover into Tajikistan from the current conflict in Afghanistan."³¹

Russia is justifiably concerned about Islamic extremism moving north from the Afghan border. After the civil war in Tajikistan, extremist bases began to operate from that country. The next logical move for base formation would be within the critical Fergana Valley. During a Shanghai Five meeting, Russian Interior Minister Vladimir Rushailo



for them to adopt, through carefully loaned guidance from imported ideologues, extremism. Even if some Muslims were unwilling to adopt extremism, they might see the movement as future independence. Russian intelligence believes that a portion of the militants who took part in the August 1999 incursion "had been trained at terrorist bases in Chechnya."³³ Although the Chechens have already established contact with the region's extremist movement, Russia will not permit further moves toward independence.

China. In northwest China is the country's largest internal autonomous region, the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Composed of 47 ethnic groups, approximately one-half of XUAR's population is Muslim Uighurs. Furthermore, most Uighurs live in the southern regions of XUAR, adjacent to the region of extremist activity. The Uighurs have embarked on an extremist path toward a united Uighur state, Uighuristan, which would include XUAR; the Seven Rivers area of Kazakhstan; the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan; and the Fergana province of Uzbekistan in the Fergana Valley.³⁴

Recent Uighur extremist activities have been linked to the extremist movement in the former Soviet Central Asian Republics where a 400,000-member diaspora of ethnic Uighurs lives. In December 1997 a Saudi citizen and ethnic Uighur donated a large sum to Tahir Yuldosh, half of which was relayed to Uighur militants from China. Uighur extremists also use the diaspora to collect "funds for the fight against the Chinese authorities back home."³⁵ Kyrgyz authorities arrested an armed group that included Chinese citizens whose aim was to establish

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stated, "we have to join forces to combat the activities of terrorists, armed separatists and international extremist organizations that give them financial support."³² Russia's strategic interests in this region are great, including using the Baikonur Cosmodrome, an international space station, in Kazakhstan and the southern countries' buffer role against a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan. Furthermore, Russia desires secular, cooperative regional governments to address transnational narcotics trading and exploiting fossil fuels from the Caspian Sea.

A number of Russia's indigenous people are Muslim. A Russian worst-case scenario would be

Civil Affairs soldiers participate in refurbishing an orphanage in a former Soviet Republic.



US Army

This region has always been historically significant. The ancient Silk Road passes through here [and] planning is under way for modern transportation routes and oil pipelines through the region. . . . US interest in this region checks Russia's aggressive policies. Russia seeks to use the extremist threat as a means for drawing the former Republics closer to its fold, both militarily and politically. Strong US involvement can thwart these plans.

an independent Uighur state in China.³⁶ Some Uighur extremists have acquired combat experience in other theaters. In March 2000 during combat operations in Chechnya, Russian fighters took several prisoners of war who were ethnic Uighurs from China.³⁷ Recently, Chinese authorities arrested heavily armed militants along the Pakistani border who allegedly trained in Afghanistan to support Muslim separatists in XUAR.³⁸

China has an interest in stabilizing the region. One of the quickest means is to support military and security forces of the countries in question. China sent \$450,000 worth of equipment to Tajikistan's airborne forces and to a Tajik border guards hospital.³⁹ China pledged \$600,000 worth of military aid to Uzbekistan and has offered to assist in training the Uzbek military.⁴⁰ This offer was made after the most recent incursion of IMU-led militants into Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in August 2000. Additionally, China must lower the threat from militants without disturbing already-established strategic relationships. The incident in which militants were arrested along the Pakistani border offers an excellent example of the conflicting issues. China has a good relationship with Pakistan and has supported its efforts as a counterweight to Indian influence in the region. China, therefore, must pressure Pakistan—which supports the Taliban—to diminish its assistance to Uighur separatists but not jeopardize this strategic partnership against India.

United States. The United States, like Russia, has its own problems within the region. When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, the United States was obliged to support the opposition mujaheddin. Pakistan was the setting for a number of cross-border operations involving arming and training mujaheddin. Many Arab-speaking freedom fighters supplemented US assistance. On one level, it was a fight for the Islamic way of life against communist forces that professed no religion. With the Soviet Union's demise and the end of the Cold War, an interesting phenomenon emerged: the rise of the local Taliban extremists still relied on foreign Islamic extremists' patronage. Now, however, the United States finds itself on the enemy side of militant Islamic extremism.

Following the 2000 armed incursions, the United States acknowledged that the IMU may be linked to bin Laden.⁴¹ Strengthening security structures in the troubled region's countries has become an indirect means to thwart bin Laden's plans. This process becomes especially critical now, as "reports from Afghanistan say he [bin Laden] sees the fragile Central Asian States as a potential and vulnerable arena to bring about an Islamic revolution."⁴² After the militant incursion in 2000, the United States sent military equipment for Kyrgyz border guards as part of a comprehensive US equipment and training support package—a \$3-million allocation.⁴³ US Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright articulated the initial aid promise during an April 2000 visit to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Albright also pledged similar support for Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. At the same time, leaders from the FBI and CIA also visited this region. CIA Director George J. Tenet met with his Uzbek counterpart in Tashkent to "discuss American aid with satellite intelligence information and other special equipment to combat terrorism."⁴⁴

The region's strategic location offers another incentive for US involvement. Situated among Russia, China and the Middle East, this region has always been historically significant. The ancient Silk Road passes through here. Planning is under way for modern transportation routes and oil pipelines through the region. Kyrgyzstan and China have already designed a railway connecting Osh, Kyrgyzstan and Kashgar, China.⁴⁵ Interestingly, this line would connect two areas of strong Islamic extremism. US interest in this region checks Russia's aggressive policies. Russia seeks to use the extremist threat as a means for drawing the former Republics closer to its fold, both militarily and politically. Strong US involvement can thwart these plans.

The Narcotics Trade

The quantity of drugs flowing out of Afghanistan, their destabilizing effect in Russia and Europe, and

their accompanying profits are central to regional security and stability. The opium poppy is harvested in Afghanistan and transported over portions of the ancient Silk Road to Europe and China as opium or processed heroin. More narcotics travel through this region than through even Southeast Asia's "Golden Triangle"—Myanmar (formerly Burma), Laos and Thailand.⁴⁶ At the UN Millennium Summit, Ivanov said that Afghanistan's drug trafficking concerns both Russia and the United States.⁴⁷

The Fergana Valley plays a large role in this issue. In the Kyrgyz portion of the valley, Osh has become a major "transshipping point for drugs and weapons."⁴⁸ A portion of the drug route begins in Afghanistan, continues through the forbidding passes of the Pamir Mountains and descends to Osh. Given the Fergana Valley's characteristics, it is no surprise that armed groups have begun to exploit this trade for income. Kyrgyz government officials claim that Namangani controls 70 percent of the heroin-trafficking business in the region.⁴⁹

A vicious cycle emerges in this region. One socioeconomic factor feeds another, which in turn, accelerates existing problems such as the drug trade. For example, high unemployment in the valley offers potential recruits for armed groups and leads others into the drug trade as an alternative form of income. The absence of effective, comprehensive government programs to assist unemployed people makes the decision to work in the narcotics trade all the more easy. Nearly all of Osh's factories are closed, so for the four million residents in the city and surrounding villages, "the drug trade is the only viable business left."⁵⁰ Drug-trade profits help fund the destabilizing militant extremist groups, forcing even more government outlays to combat the problem. Funds that could be focused on the underlying problems in the valley, which would inevitably marginalize the support of the armed groups, are squandered in the ongoing struggle against the end product of this cycle—an extremist armed incursion or other terrorist act. As long as the conditions in the valley remain the same, funds flow to armed groups undisturbed, and support continues to flow from local Muslims who might not profess such a militant brand of Islam but who have no other viable course.

Role of Caspian Sea Oil and Natural Gas

During the post-Cold War period, western oil companies have converged on countries surrounding the Caspian Sea to capitalize on the huge potential profits from extracting and transporting fuel. Regional politics and national strategies influence decisions about future pipeline locations and routes. One US interest is limiting Iran's role, and the United States scored a victory at the November 1999 European Security Summit in Istanbul, Turkey. The

presidents of Turkey, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkmenistan agreed to begin work on pipelines from Baku, Azerbaijan, across Georgia and Turkey, to the Mediterranean (Turkish) port of Ceyhan, avoiding Iran.⁵¹ Given current oil availability, however, the Baku pipeline is not commercially viable; it requires more oil. Thus far, oil exploration in Azerbaijan's portion of the Caspian Sea has "yielded disappointing results."⁵²

The answer to the Baku pipeline appeared in May 2000 when a new, enormous oil field was discovered in Kazakhstan's portion of the Caspian Sea. Named the Kashangan field, it was the largest find

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in 20 years; "so large as to surpass even the size of the North Sea oil reserves."⁵³ The United States wants enough of this oil to be shipped across the Caspian to the Baku pipeline to ensure the pipeline's economic viability. Russia, however, would like to see most Kazakh oil shipped through pipelines across Russian territory, leading to a Russian port such as Novorossisk on the Black Sea.⁵⁴ The November 1999 Istanbul Summit agreement made this goal all the more critical. Until the agreement, Russia pressed for a Baku-Novorossisk pipeline; China had pushed for a pipeline from Kazakhstan to its resource-poor XUAR.

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Realpolitik and the IMU

The opposition party in Tajikistan and the Taliban in Afghanistan have much to gain from the IMU's successful operations. Other countries might also gain from a strong extremist threat. For example, a strong IMU equates to acquiescence by former Soviet Republics to participate in Russian-led

security arrangements. The extremist threat requires continued military integration and future dependence on Russian-produced arms. If the extremist threat were to threaten oil shipments from Kazakhstan to China, Russia would benefit in at least two ways: the amount of Kazakh oil shipped north and west through Russia would increase, and Chinese influence in the region could decrease as a necessary result of a large, bilateral pipeline project. Russian military commanders have approached the IMU in Tajikistan and offered assistance, according to unconfirmed reports.⁵⁵

Extremist problems in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have not led to an all-out civil war like the one that ravaged Tajikistan in the past decade. Preventing such conflict is in the interest of regional political leaders and the world community, for ensuing infrastructure breakdown would favor organized criminal elements that transport narcotics out of Afghanistan. In addition, movement of extremist bases north to the Fergana Valley and beyond would threaten the development and exploitation of Caspian Sea oil. Finally, lost investment represents

tremendous hidden cost to the countries in this region. Japanese geologists who were taken hostage in Kyrgyzstan, for example, had been investigating sites for mining gold. Each militant action causes more foreign firms to abstain from investing in these nascent market economies. This isolation contributes to the poor economic realities of the Fergana Valley, which play into the hands of extremist movements seeking unemployed recruits.

In January 2001 regional governments met in response to reports that Namangani had crossed from Afghanistan into Tajikistan and was preparing for combat.⁵⁶ Another armed incursion could occur when the weather improves. This latest movement occurred just before the UN Security Council imposed sanctions against Afghanistan because of its role in the drug trade. In addition, the United States is continuing to press for bin Laden's extradition. The US response to these regional issues must weigh all factors outlined here and offer the Taliban a political out. Only with its assistance can the United States be relatively assured of removing bin Laden's dangerous, direct threat to US interests. 

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