

Islamic Militancy in Central Asia: What Is To Be Done?

By Robert M. Cutler

A new report by the International Crisis Group (ICG) helps answer the question about what the appropriate responses are to Islamic militancy in Central Asia. The ICG is a highly respected, well connected, very expert, private, multinational organization that describes itself as “committed to strengthening the capacity of the international community to anticipate, understand, and act to prevent and contain conflict.” In its new report titled “Central Asia: Islamist Mobilisation and Regional Stability,” ICG makes recommendations to Central Asian governments, external powers, and international organizations.

The ICG report focuses mainly on the Ferghana Valley, a region that first leapt into the headlines of Western newspapers in the late 1980s when ethnic clashes erupted even before the disappearance of the Soviet Union. Because of the way the Soviet administrative territories were configured, the region today is split among the independent states of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The major part of the ICG report compiles information from the past few years about the activities of militant groups—including, but not limited to, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which has garnered perhaps the greatest publicity of all such groups for its armed incursions in the region.

The ICG report usefully differentiates between the IMU and other militant but nonmilitarized popular Islamic organizations, such as the Hizb-ut-Tahrir group, which distributes materials about Islam (“educational” or “propagandistic” depending on one’s viewpoint) free of charge and, instead of promoting armed combat, seeks to penetrate existing political institutions with “agents of influence.” The ICG report correctly attributes growing popu-

lar support for such militancy in the region to increasing government repression—particularly in Uzbekistan—of all nonstate-sponsored religious activity.

Religious Freedom is a Security Issue

The report’s most interesting and cogent new perspective is its conclusion that freedom of religious practice in the region is not only a human rights issue but also a security issue. It recommends that Western states work to ensure that donor assistance is not misused to suppress religious observance or nonviolent religious groups. Care is needed to make certain that governments do not portray foreign assistance as endorsing repressive policies. In light of moves by regional governments toward accommodation with the Taliban, the ICG report also advocates that Western governments review their policies toward Afghanistan. Finally, it suggests more frequent consultation “with China and, especially, Russia, which have important security interests in and special knowledge of the region.”

The ICG’s recommendations are based on an extremely high-quality discussion of events and first-hand knowledge gained from the presence of researchers and analysts on the ground. They deserve attention at the highest decisionmaking levels of states in the region and outside, and by international and nongovernmental organizations.

The report appropriately focuses mainly on Uzbekistan and its “ethnic reach” through northern Tajikistan and southern Kyrgyzstan. This is where Uzbeks have long lived and where the IMU has also been active. For a decade



there have been intensive international efforts to resolve the civil war in Tajikistan. The Council for Foreign Relations, for example, established a Center for Preventive Diplomacy partly to deal with this issue and its crossborder spillover into northern Afghanistan (a mainstay of the armed opposition to the Taliban regime, where ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks are also to be found). However, Uzbekistan itself is where to look for the most acutely strained social and political situation.

One hopes, and has reason to expect, that future reports from the ICG will deal with such key neighboring areas as southern Kazakhstan and western China. Southern Kazakhstan, for example, contains, not far from the Ferghana Valley, the city of Turkestan, which has been the cradle of empires in the region from the late sixth century to the present. For that reason, it could well be the area ultimately targeted by at least some of the strategists associated with Islamic militants in the region.

Western China, which Beijing calls the Xinjiang province and which the native Uighur ethnic group has never stopped calling East Turkestan, is increasingly well known (partly as a result of recent Amnesty International reports) as a region of harsh racial oppression of the Uighurs by the dominant, ethnic-Han Chinese, whose in-migration into the area has skyrocketed in recent years. China has, through unremitting diplomatic pressure, repeatedly coerced the Central Asian countries examined by the ICG report to violate their international treaty obligations by returning to China, without due process and to likely death, individual Uighurs from the Xinjiang province, including many apolitical ones, who had sought asylum as refugees claim-

ing racial persecution. (The more "political" Uighurs tend to be assassinated without being first returned to China, as has repeatedly happened in Kyrgyzstan in recent months.)

ICG recommends that U.S. and other interested parties consult more regularly with China and Russia about Islamic militancy in Central Asia. But given that these two nations, especially China, have agendas that are at odds with ICG's own recommendations, one wonders just how fruitful such consultation would be. Take the cases of China's policy in Tibet or toward the Falun Gong, for example. While the ICG argues that religious freedom must increase in order to promote security, such responses by China do not augur well for its cooperation in influencing Central Asian states to adopt a more enlightened policy direction.

Pivot of Geopolitics

It is also time for the new administration to realize that the whole of Central Asia is not just the hinterlands of other peoples and nations. It is a pivot of geopolitics in the early twenty-first century that will inevitably affect the balance elsewhere. One of the more short-sighted but little-noticed failures of recent American diplomacy was its failure in the mid-1990s to accept an invitation to serve on the Executive Organizing Committee of the Conference on Interactions and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA).

In September 1999 CICA adopted a "Declaration of Principles" that provides an interesting comparison with the Final Document of the 1975 Helsinki Conference. It will soon enter its second stage with the establishment of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Asia

(CSCA). The CSCA does not seek to organize a collective security regime nor to reproduce the Conference/Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe in the Asian theater. However, it is a forum where over a dozen states as geographically far-flung as Israel and China will have the opportunity to discuss problems and organizational mechanisms to assure security in all domains.

The CICA initiative has already spun off a number of issue-specific formations. One of these is the Shanghai Forum (previously the "Shanghai-5"). Currently, the Shanghai Forum is concerned with Islamic militancy in Central Asia, among other issues of regional concern.

In the mid-1990s, the CICA was one of the principal forums where Russia and China began to formulate their common interests. Lately these common interests have taken the direction of a declared strategic cooperation between Russia and China that is overtly hostile to the principal orientations of U.S. policy both in the region and on the global level. Had the U.S. chosen to participate in CICA in the mid-1990s, it would have had the chance, and the very real possibility, to influence the course of regional cooperation in a more agreeable direction. For Washington to have declined the invitation from Kazakhstan (the host and driving force of the CICA/CSCA) was folly.

For years during the cold war, the U.S. did not have an embassy in Mongolia, although that was a unique and irreproducible listening post for what was happening in Sino-Soviet relations and in Asia generally. Such a mistake should not be repeated. The CICA/CSCA is a potentially valuable diplomatic instrument in the hands of not only its own participants but also the broader international

community. It certainly deserves enhanced American attention as well. It is hardly becoming for a bald eagle to hide its head, ostrich-like, in the sand, not the least because covering

one's eyes is the easiest way to make certain of being blind-sided.

(The ICG report is posted at URL: <<http://www.crisisweb.org/projects/project.cfm?subtypeid=6>>.)

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