

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

Robert M. Cutler

The air strikes on Afghanistan put U.S. policy in Central Asia in a delicate position. On the one hand, Central Asian governments will be tempted to harden further their authoritarian domestic policies toward dissent and opposition, driving people further toward Islamic-based protest. If popular opinion in the region comes to identify the U.S. too directly with those policies, then the post-authoritarian transitions could see widespread Islamic militancy, tied to anti-Americanism, come to the fore.

The terrorist acts on September 11 and the U.S. response with military action against Afghanistan change drastically all considerations about Islamic militancy in Central Asia and any attempts to address it as a problem of social and political stability. It is likely that U.S. government criticisms of human rights violations throughout the region will decrease, at least in the short term.

The country where political stability is most at risk from events around Afghanistan, including long-term instability from human rights violations, is Uzbekistan. A strong Islamic influence in Uzbekistan, present underground even during the Soviet period, threatens to intensify anti-American sentiment, arising from the military operations against Afghanistan. Reports from Kyrgyzstan in the Russian press in Moscow confirm that this attitude is not limited to Uzbekistan. Since those who feel this sentiment link it directly with U.S. support for Israel's policy toward the Palestinian Authority, it is very likely that this reflects the influence of the underground Hizb-e-Tahrir movement.

By contrast, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which had some military clashes with Uzbekistan's forces inside the country in 1999 and 2000, seems composed at least

as much of disaffected members of the Uzbekistani opposition (driven out of the country by Karimov's repressive policies beginning in 1993) as of actual Islamists, despite logistical support it had received from the Taliban regime.

Tajikistan is the only country in the region where an Islamic party participates in national political life. Its leaders avow that Tajik culture and society are averse to fundamentalism, at least of the Taliban variety, although there is anecdotal evidence suggesting some influence by Hizb-e-Tahrir, which the government does its utmost to discourage by all possible means. In Kyrgyzstan, fundamentalist sympathies are most prevalent in the south of the country, where ethnic Uzbeks are found. The extremely repressive and authoritarian nature of Turkmenistan's regime under President Saparmurad Niyazov (who had the best relations of any Central Asian leader with the Taliban regime) makes it unlikely that Islamic militancy will appear in his country.

Uzbekistan has more geopolitical and military leverage to offer on Afghanistan than does Kazakhstan. Yet if tolerance for political opposition further decreases in Uzbekistan because of heightened American attention to official Tashkent, there is a danger this intolerance will increase in Kazakhstan because of Washington's inattention to Almaty. However, for historical and cultural reasons, Kazakhstan is not threatened by Islamic militancy, except perhaps to some degree in the south of the country, which is also the most traditional and ethno-nationalist Kazakh region.

In Kazakhstan today there is no real opposition to the president Nursultan Nazarbaev, whose daughter runs the largest media conglomerate

in the country and whose son-in-law runs the second-largest. It is possible to do opinion polls in the country, but it is impossible to speak of public opinion because there are no public forums for it to aggregate and manifest. However, there is a political opposition that is half-underground and hidden in the institutions. Also, there is the new Forum of Democratic Forces of Kazakhstan, founded earlier this year, largely on the initiative of the exiled leader of the Kazakhstani opposition (the country's former prime minister Akezhan Kazhegeldin), in response to criticisms of Kazakhstan's electoral procedures made by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. It has since branched out into a Central Asian Forum that brings together leaders of political oppositions from other countries in the region as well.

Both the Kazakhstani and the Central Asian Forums are valuable listening posts that tap into popular opinion in Central Asia, offering also a means of potential influence. Since many opposition leaders are in exile, it would not be diplomatically embarrassing for the U.S. to maintain con-

tact with them, as it could be if they had been allowed or encouraged to remain in their home countries. Congressional hearings have already put on record the concern of the legislative branch with violations of human rights and free political expression in the region.

The answer to the question, "What is to be done?" is three-fold. First, the U.S. should increase its funding of Uzbek-language broadcasts to Central Asia, which it almost committed the folly of totally eliminating earlier this year. The younger generations of Uzbeks have not been learning much Russian since the Soviet Union disappeared.

Second—since the leaders in the region will follow their own interests first rather than Washington's—the U.S. has to be clear about the message it sends. In particular, it is necessary to stress that along with the new, stronger cooperation some gradual liberalization is the only way to preserve peace and stability in the region along with its social, economic, and political development.

Finally, the large package of economic assistance to Central Asia as a

region that has been discussed in Washington will be helpful, but only if it actually promotes such reform and gets down to the grass roots. The region's endemic corruption has blocked or diluted the effects of such attempts by international institutions in the past.

The present situation offers the opportunity to impress upon the countries of the region the need to overcome bureaucratic lethargy and, especially in Uzbekistan, to transform the banking system and eliminate still-existing restrictions on foreign exchange to make economic activity more functional in the country. It is necessary to go beyond previous half-hearted efforts to promote small and medium enterprises, because only this can produce a middle class capable of providing the crucial political support for democratic evolution under the current authoritarian regimes.

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