

September 28, 1990

GORBACHEV'S CENTRAL ASIAN TIME BOMB IS TICKING

INTRODUCTION

The Soviet Union is the world's fifth largest Muslim state. With 55 million Muslims living on Soviet territory, only Indonesia, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh have larger Muslim populations.¹ Following in the footsteps of the Baltic states and other non-Russian peoples who seek independence from Moscow, the Muslim republics of Kazakhstan, Kirgizia, Tadjikistan, Turkmenia, and Uzbekistan are ready for what could be a violent showdown with the Soviet central government on the road to independence. There are five reasons for this: 1) the Moscow-built colonial economy is in severe crisis; 2) Soviet Central Asia is suffering an ecological disaster; 3) the region has the lowest standards of living and health care in the Soviet Union; 4) the population growth is explosive; and 5) Islamic fundamentalism is growing swiftly.

Huge Land. Unrest in Soviet Central Asia would have important economic, political, and strategic implications for the Soviet Union. The five Central Asian republics occupy 1,537,200 square miles (of the U.S.S.R.'s total of 8,662,400 square miles), stretching 1,900 miles from the Altai Mountains in the East to the Caspian Sea in the West and 1,325 miles from Siberia in the North to the Soviet Union's southernmost point, the town of Kushka in Turkmenia. This huge land mass, almost six times larger than Texas and five times the size of Britain and France combined, is the home of 17 million Uzbeks, 8 million Kazakhs, 4 million Tadjiks, 3 million Turkmen, and 2.5 million Kirgiz — a total population of 34.5 million, or 12 percent of the U.S.S.R.'s inhabitants.

1 In the Soviet context, the word "Muslim" does not necessarily describe a true believer who follows daily all the rules and rituals of Islam. Rather, it describes the inhabitants of the areas where hundreds of years of Islam have made it inseparable from the ethnic and cultural identity of the population.

Peaceful Change Unsure. The Central Asia republics have formed nationalist, pro-independence movements that enjoy widespread popular support. Examples include *Birlik* and *Erk* in Uzbekistan, *Kirgizstan* in Kirgizia, and *Rastokhez* in Tadzhikistan. Yet the evolution of legitimate political structures having the people's trust has been painfully slow in Soviet Central Asia. Because of that, and given the disastrous economic conditions of the area, a peaceful transition to a new political, social and economic organization in a post-Soviet Central Asia is by no means a certainty.

This makes it very important for the Bush Administration to pay close attention to what is happening in Soviet Central Asia. At stake here is a region close to the Middle East and United States interests there: Persian Gulf oil and ties with Israel. The battle for independence in this region has already been joined, and it is between a hope for eventually democratic and secular states on the one hand, and authoritarian, clergy-dominated states on the other. The victory of the latter could be as destabilizing for the Middle East and South Asia as has been the emergence of the fundamentalist Islamic state in Iran in 1980.

It is in America's interests to use whatever influence it has to keep this from happening.

American policy toward Soviet Central Asia should address short-term and long-term concerns. The short-term strategy should include identifying and supporting, to the extent possible and prudent, the forces of democracy, non-violence, and religious tolerance. The long-term task should be to help create economic, social, and political conditions so that these forces could gain an upper hand in their struggle with Soviet communists on the one hand and anti-Western Islamic fundamentalists on the other. To achieve these goals, the U.S. should:

◆ ◆ **Double the number of Radio Liberty broadcast hours in the languages of Central Asia.** The U.S.-funded Radio Liberty, based in Munich, West Germany, is the only Western radio station that broadcasts regularly in the languages of Central Asia. Doubling the broadcast hours in these languages would require increasing Radio Liberty's budget by \$950,000, or 0.5 percent, for fiscal 1991. The added hours of broadcast would help defuse tensions by giving Central Asians access to democratic and free market ideas.

◆ ◆ **Identify and aid Central Asian political organizations that advocate democracy and secularism.** This would encourage budding democratic political movements in Soviet Central Asia and discourage potential ethnic and religious conflicts by promoting democratic political models. The aid could be channeled through such organizations as the United States Information Agency (USIA) and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

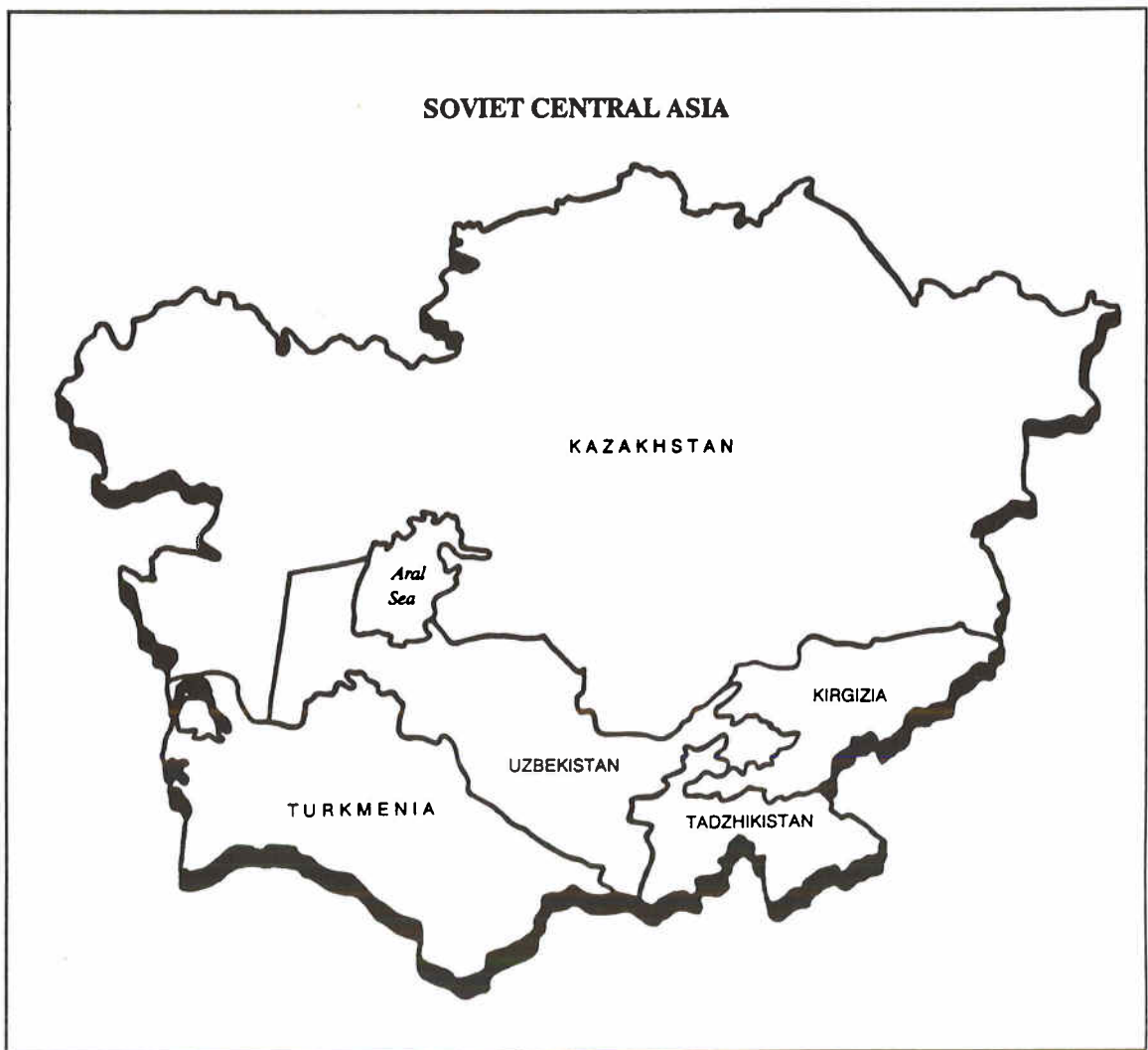
◆ ◆ **Help establish a Western economic presence in Central Asia by encouraging private U.S. entrepreneurs to explore business opportunities there.** American businesses could serve as an example of private entrepreneurship and provide a model for local free-marketeers to emulate, and jobs created by Western businesses could help to alleviate poverty and thus increase political stability. The Office of East European and Soviet Affairs at the U.S. Department of Commerce's

International Trade Administration should include analysis of business opportunities in Central Asia in its briefing package on doing business in the U.S.S.R., which is sent on request to American businesses.

◆ ◆ **Promote ties between Turkey and Central Asia.** With the exception of Tadzhiks, the Central Asian peoples are of Turkic origin. The upsurge of Turkic national pride has created a desire for greater unity among the Turkic peoples and an interest in the history, culture, and political institutions of the only democratic secular Turkic state in the world – Turkey. As a democracy and a member of NATO, Turkey could be held up by the West as a more constructive alternative than the theocratic and repressive model of Iran.

◆ ◆ **Expand cultural and scientific exchanges between the U.S. and Central Asia to provide greater exposure to U.S. democratic institutions and the free market economy.**

◆ ◆ **Provide medical, ecological and agricultural assistance to Central Asia.** Soviet Central Asia is undergoing a severe environmental and health care crisis. The U.S. could help alleviate this by providing medical care to decrease infant mortality and assist in the detoxification of soil and water.



THE CENTRAL ASIAN REPUBLICS OF THE SOVIET UNION					
	KAZAKHSTAN	KIRGIZIA	TADZHIKISTAN	TURKMENIA	UZBEKISTAN
CAPITAL	Alma-Ata	Frunze	Dusharibe	Ashkhabad	Tashkent
Area (in thousands of sq. miles)	1,049,200	76,600	54,000	188,400	172,700
Population* (in millions)	16.023	4.051	4.648	3.270	18.487
ETHNIC COMPOSITION**					
Native Population	36%	48%	59%	68%	69%
Russians	41%	26%	10%	13%	11%
Ukrainians	6%	—	—	—	—
Uzbeks	—	12%	23%	9%	⊗
Tatars	—	—	—	—	4%
Kazakhs	⊗	—	—	—	4%
Tadzhiks	—	—	⊗	—	4%
Kirgiz	—	⊗	—	—	—
Turkmen	—	—	—	⊗	—
Others	17%	14%	10%	10%	8%

* All population figures are as of 1989.

** A "⊗" symbol indicates that this group is the native population.
A blank indicates less than 1% composition.

THE FIVE FUSES OF GORBACHEV'S CENTRAL ASIAN TIME BOMB

There are five crises common to Soviet Central Asia that could ignite a violent upheaval. They are:

Fuse #1: The Devastation Caused by the Soviet Colonial Economy.

Moscow pursued for sixty years a classic colonial policy in Central Asia. It imported such raw materials from Central Asia as cotton, gold, oil, and uranium while exporting such industrial finished products to the region as machinery and equipment.

Nowhere has the colonial nature of Moscow's Central Asian economic policy been so obvious as in cultivation of cotton. The Russians introduced American cotton in the Fergana Valley, Uzbekistan, in 1884 to satisfy the need of the Russian textile industry for cheap domestic cotton. The best lands of the region were taken over for cotton cultivation, which caused resentment among the local population and made cotton the symbol of Russian imperialism. Before the Bolshevik victory in October 1917, the founder of the Soviet state, Vladimir Lenin, accused the

Czarist government of transforming Central Asia into “a cotton appendix of Russia.”²

As with other aspects of the Czarist colonial rule, the Bolsheviks not only continued the policies of the Russian Czars, but strengthened them. For example, traditional crop rotation was eliminated in the 1940s. For the following half-century, nearly all arable land in Tadzhikistan, Turkmenia, and Uzbekistan has been used to grow cotton. Cultivating cotton over long periods of time and without crop rotation is very hard on soil. The result has been the massive exhaustion and erosion of agricultural land in Soviet Central Asia.

“White Gold.” Cotton has been very important to Moscow’s economic planners. Along with oil, gas, arms, and gold, cotton is one the very few Soviet mass exports that can be sold on the world market to earn the hard currency needed for food imports. For decades, official Soviet media labelled cotton *beloe zoloto*, or “white gold.” From 1950 to 1980, the production of cotton in all of Central Asia more than doubled from 2.6 million tons to 5.6 million tons. Uzbekistan, which accounts for two-thirds of the Soviet cotton crop, produces almost as much cotton as the entire U.S. The First Secretary of the Uzbek Communist Party, Islam Karimov, admitted that “there is not one person in the Republic of Uzbekistan who is not anxious about the price of cotton, [which] determines literally everything, [including] the social well-being of millions of people.”³

Although the Soviet Union continues to keep secret the amount of land devoted to cotton, estimates are that it occupies over half of all arable land in Tadzhikistan, Turkmenia, and Uzbekistan – and the best, most fertile land. Cotton is grown on so much land in Tadzhikistan, Turkmenia, and Uzbekistan that these republics cannot feed their population, despite having some of the best soil and climate conditions in the world. Food is so scarce that an inhabitant of Uzbekistan consumes fewer vegetables, fruit, meat, and milk each year than any other citizen in the Soviet Union.⁴

Colonial-Style Robbery. In the classic colonial pattern, though 90 percent of all Soviet cotton is grown in Central Asia, only 4 to 5 percent of the harvest is processed locally and only 7 percent of Soviet textiles are produced there. In a speech this March to the Uzbek Supreme Soviet, the republic’s parliament, the Uzbek Prime Minister Shukrullah Mirsaidov complained that Moscow takes away the entire cotton crop even when Uzbekistan exceeds its quotas, thus depriving the republic of an opportunity to earn hard currency by selling cotton abroad.⁵

2 Michael Rywkin, *Moscow’s Muslim Challenge* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1990), p. 46.

3 *Pravda Vostoka*, September 27, 1989.

4 Gregory Gleason, “Birlik’ and the Cotton Question,” *Report on the USSR*, June 15, 1990, p. 22.

5 *Pravda Vostoka*, March 29, 1990.

While unemployment for the Soviet Union as a whole is estimated at 4.3 percent, it is 7.3 percent for Central Asia.⁶ In Uzbekistan, for example, there are one million unemployed, which is one out of every ten able-bodied Uzbeks.⁷

Fuse #2: The Ecological Disaster.

The exclusive cultivation of the "cotton monster," as the Soviet press now often calls it, has led to one of the world's worst ecological disasters. Overcultivation of the land in Tadzhikistan, Turkmenia, and Uzbekistan has resulted in the thousands of square miles of wasteland, poisoned by toxic pesticides, defoliants, and fertilizers long banned in the West.

It has even caused the disappearance of the Aral Sea in Northern Uzbekistan. Since cotton requires much more water than is provided by natural rainfall, the Soviets since 1953 have diverted huge amounts of water from Central Asia's largest river, the Amudar'ya, to the Kara Kum canal, which runs through a desert in eastern Turkmenia. This water irrigates cotton fields. The result has been a rapid depletion of water in the Aral Sea, into which the Amudar'ya river flows. Once the world's fourth largest inland body of water, the Aral used to be a beautiful sea teeming with fish. But today, after the loss of 65 percent of its water, all that is left is a salty, arid seabed covered with puddles of water full of pesticides. The salt and toxic chemicals from the Aral's sea-bed are dispersed by the wind and are believed to have increased infant mortality and throat cancer.

Fuse #3: Declining Standards of Living and Health Care.

By every economic indicator Central Asia is the poorest region of the Soviet Union. According to a 1988 survey of four of the five Central Asian republics — Kirgizia, Tadzhikistan, Turkmenia, and Uzbekistan — this region has the largest portion of Soviet citizens living below the official poverty line of 78 rubles per person per month, or \$13 at the official tourist exchange rate. Thus, while 14.5 percent (or 41 million people) of the population of the Soviet Union as a whole live below the official poverty line, 59 percent of the population do so in Tadzhikistan, 45 percent in Uzbekistan, 37 percent in Kirgizia, and 37 percent in Turkmenia.

According to Soviet sources, consumption of meat in Uzbekistan is only one-third the Soviet average, and in many regions of Uzbekistan it is as low as 50

6 I. Adirim, "A Note on the Current Level, Pattern and Trends of Unemployment in the USSR," *Soviet Studies*, Vol. XLL, 3 (July), 1989, p. 450.

7 James Critchlow, "Uzbeks Demand Halt to Russian In-Migration," *Report on the USSR*, March 2, 1990, p.18.

pounds (20 kilos) per person per year. The average American eats 245 pounds of meat per year.⁸ *Izvestia*, the largest government newspaper, on January 2, 1989, expressed its outrage over malnutrition in Tadzhikistan, saying that the region presented "a semi-real mirage: an emaciated child, suffering from malnutrition in a time of peace."⁹ This spring the Soviet Union was shaken by the revelation in the press that the death of children from hunger is common in Turkmenia.¹⁰

One of the most tragic consequences of Moscow's neglect of Central Asia is the health care disaster. Unsanitary living conditions, polluted water, unhygienic and inadequate medical facilities, and the presence of highly toxic defoliants have produced the U.S.S.R.'s highest infant mortality rate. While the average Soviet infant mortality is 25 per thousand of live births (as compared with 9.7 per thousand in the U.S.), it is 49 in Tadzhikistan, 53.3 in Turkmenia,¹¹ and 47 in Uzbekistan. It is reported to be around 100 in the areas surrounding the Aral Sea in Uzbekistan. Infant mortality from infectious diseases in Turkmenia is four times the national Soviet average, and Central Asian women die in childbirth two to three times more often than do those in the Soviet Union as a whole.¹²

Most of Soviet Central Asia has extremely poor hygienic standards. Thus, for example, 87 percent of the rural population of Turkmenia have no access to potable water and are forced to use water from open canals and ditches heavily contaminated by defoliants, fertilizers, and pesticides. As a result, the incidence of such intestinal disease as typhoid is eight times higher in Turkmenia than in the U.S.S.R. as a whole. At 65.2 years, the life expectancy in Turkmenia is almost five years lower than the national Soviet average of 69.8 years.¹³ By comparison, the average life expectancy in the U.S. is 75.2 years.

Fuse #4: Explosive Population Growth.

Despite horrendous infant mortality, the Central Asian population grows rapidly because of the highest birth rate in the Soviet Union. The decline of the economy and the miserable living standards are aggravated by a population explosion. Muslims are by far the fastest growing segment of the Soviet population: while the non-Muslim population grew by 5.5 percent between 1979 and 1989, the Muslims grew

8 Yuri Chernichenko, "Grass from under the haystack." In Yuri N. Afanasiev, ed., *There is No Other Way* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1988), p. 595.

9 A. Karpov, S. Tutorskaya, "Legkoli byt' malen'kim" ("Is it easy to be a child?").

10 *Moscow News*, April 2, 1990. The article by the Turkmenian writer Ak-Mukhammed Velsapar was accompanied by a picture of a Turkmenian child who died of starvation.

11 According to *Moscow News* (June 27, 1990), Turkmenia has the fifth worst infant mortality record in the world. Only in Angola, Chad, Nigeria, and the Philippines do more babies proportionately die before reaching the age of one.

12 *Moscow News*, July 12, 1987.

13 Annette Bohr, "Turkmenistan under Perestroika: an Overview," *Report on the USSR*, March 23, 1990, p. 25.

by 27 percent. As a result, the number of Soviet Muslims is expected to increase from 55 million to 76 million by the year 2000, at which time they will rise from the current level of 19 percent to 25 percent of the total Soviet population.¹⁴

This population growth strains the already depressed economies of the Central Asian republics and increases political instability. As millions of Muslim “baby boomers” enter the work force, they are finding jobs increasingly difficult to get. In Uzbekistan, where already one in ten able-bodied Uzbeks is unemployed, there are 240,000 new people seeking a job every year.¹⁵ Similarly, only half of the young people leaving school in Tadzhikistan have a chance of finding a job.¹⁶ The young unemployed have been involved in the bloody riots that have erupted since summer 1989 with increasing frequency and violence. In Dushanbe, the capital of Tadzhikistan, which saw bloody riots this February, 117,000 young people, or 23 percent of the total city population, are reported to be employed only seasonally, while 70,000, or 14 percent, are permanently unemployed.¹⁷

The rapid population growth exacerbates one of the politically most explosive issues in Soviet Central Asia – housing. By the year 2000 the available living space in this region must double to accommodate the increased population. This is impossible given the state of the Central Asian economy.

Fuse #5: The Rise of Islamic Fundamentalism.

Fundamentalist unrest takes various forms. In one of the first manifestations of the Muslims’ growing political power, hundreds of Muslims demonstrated on February 3, 1989, in Tashkent demanding the removal of Shamsutdinkhan Babakhan, the Moscow-appointed Chairman of the Muslim Religious Board for Central Asia and Kazakhstan, the chief official Muslim cleric of Central Asia. The demonstrators accused him of being Moscow’s puppet and of violating the Muslim ban on drinking alcohol. Three days after the demonstration, Babakhan was fired, and that March a much more independent and orthodox cleric was elected by the Congress of the Muslims of Central Asia, an assembly of official Muslim clerics appointed by Moscow.

Other examples of the rapidly increasing political and social influence of Islam:

- ◆ ◆ An unprecedented appearance on Soviet national television of the new leader of Soviet Muslims, Mukhammad Sadyk Mukhammad Yusuf, in spring 1989. During the 30-minute special broadcast entitled “The Religion of Islam and Nationality Relations,” he criticized Moscow for its ignorance of Islam, its interference in the religious affairs of Soviet Muslims, and its

14 Rywkin, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

15 *Pravda Vostoka*, March 24, 1990.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 453.

17 *Pravda*, February 18, 1990.

restrictions on access of the Islamic clergy to the mass media.

- ◆ ◆ An unusual meeting between Mukhammad Sadyk Mukhammad Yusuf and the head of the Political Department of the Turkestan Military District, which is in charge of the military in Soviet Central Asia. Among the issues discussed were draft deferments for students of the Bukhara *medrese* (a Muslim religious academy) and allowing Muslim draftees in the Soviet army to say daily prayers.
- ◆ ◆ The opening of sixty mosques in the first half of 1989 in Uzbekistan.
- ◆ ◆ The publication this March of the first official periodical for Soviet Muslims in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. The four-page newspaper, *Islam Noori (The Light of Islam)*, appears biweekly in Arabic, Cyrillic, and Uzbek scripts, and carries information on Islam with original Arabic quotations from the Koran and the *hadis*, or sayings of Muhammad.
- ◆ ◆ A mass *haj*, or pilgrimage, this summer of Soviet Muslims to Mecca in Saudi Arabia, Islam's holiest site. Following Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's order, Aeroflot, the Soviet Union's state-owned airline, added special flights to Saudi Arabia, with which Moscow does not have diplomatic relations. Some 1,500 Muslims were permitted to fly to Mecca.

The Muslim renaissance has given rise to a violent strain of Islamic fundamentalism. In August 1986, for example, Soviet authorities arrested a self-proclaimed *mullah* named Abdulla Saidov in a Tadzhikistan district just north of the Soviet-Afghan border. He was demanding publicly that an Islamic state be created in Central Asia by taking up arms against the Soviet state.

In February 1990, a previously unknown Islamic group called "Islam and Democracy," based in the Kazakhstan capital of Alma-Ata, claimed credit for orchestrating the removal of the corrupt chief of Central Asian Muslims, Shamsutdinkhan Babakhan. This organization's charter demands that its members act "within the strictly established framework of the commandments of the Koran," and declares as the group's main goal the "spiritual cleansing of people from immorality" as well as "joining religion and state in a democratic form of people's power."¹⁸

18 *Report on the USSR*, February 24, 1989, p. 23.

Attracting Young People. "Islam and Democracy" infuses the struggle against Moscow's domination with the fundamentalist fervor of the religious war. The group's leader, Almaz Estekov, said in February: "With its policies Moscow has shown its true nature, and its true nature is that of a two-horned devil. And it is precisely cooperation among religious societies that can help to create a united front against the power of Moscow's policies."¹⁹ According to Estekov, his group is attracting young people "disillusioned with life and with the system, and it is in Islam that they find refuge."

There are indications that Estekov's assessment may be on the mark. During the February 1990 riots in the Tadzhikistan capital of Dushanbe, for example, the protestors, most of them young workers and students, demanded that a pork-processing plant in the city be closed because eating pork is against the Islamic law.

Most recently, on August 5, a militant Muslim political party was formed in the city of Namangan, 140 miles east of Tashkent, by more than 3,000 delegates from all five Muslim republics. According to its leader, Dadakhan Hassanov, the party's objective is to gather all Central Asian Muslims into a new pan-Turkic state called "Turkestan." This state would be governed in accordance with the Islamic religious law. Said Hassanov: "We want freedom, independence and Islam. When we say independent, we mean a completely sovereign state, politically, economicaly and culturally."²⁰ Hassanov has called the late Iranian ruler Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini a "great leader." In a recent public opinion poll of the residents of Tashkent, Hassanov was named among the ten most admired men.

MOVING AWAY FROM MOSCOW

Seeking to co-opt the growing independence sentiment in Central Asia and to prevent a violent uprising against Moscow, the local Communist leaders have been trying to distance themselves from Moscow. Thus the republican government of Uzbekistan forced Moscow in summer 1989 to recall the widely unpopular ethnic Russian "outsiders" in the republican leadership. These were: the Second Secretary (Deputy Head) of the Uzbekistan Communist Party, the First Deputy Prime Minister, and the Deputy Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Uzbekistan. They were replaced by local, ethnic Russians who had spent their lives in Uzbekistan and who were for this reason considered more trustworthy by the Uzbeks.

At the same time, Moscow withdrew Russian law enforcement officials brought in to fight corruption in Uzbekistan. Among those recalled to Russia was the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs of Uzbekistan, who controls the police. His dis-

¹⁹ *Report on the USSR*, March 17, 1990, p. 19.

²⁰ *Los Angeles Times*, August 6, 1990.

missal was a concession to the public opinion that widely considered Gorbachev's "anti-corruption" campaign as an excuse for the further strengthening of Moscow's colonial control.²¹

Personnel changes have been followed by legislative action intended to make Central Asia more independent of Moscow. Among the most important steps in this direction:

- ◆ ◆ **The Supreme Soviet of Tadzhikistan passes a "Declaration of Sovereignty" on August 24, 1990.** The declaration established the supremacy of Tadzhik laws over Soviet laws and places the republic's domestic and foreign policy under the authority of the government of Tadzhikistan.
- ◆ ◆ **The Supreme Soviet of Turkmenia passes a "Declaration of Sovereignty" on August 22, 1990.**
- ◆ ◆ **The Uzbek Supreme Soviet passes a "Declaration of Sovereignty" on June 20, 1990.**
- ◆ ◆ **Tadzhikistan bans export of all foodstuffs on May 31, 1990.** The ban asserts republican, at the expense of central, control over resources in Tadzhikistan at a time when goods are scarcer across the Soviet Union.
- ◆ ◆ **The Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet creates the position of the President of the Republic on April 24, 1990, to strengthen its autonomy.** This legislation specifies that the President is empowered to protect Kazakhstan's sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity. He is given the right to overrule decisions of the government of the U.S.S.R. if these violate the interests of the republic.
- ◆ ◆ **Uzbekistan limits the export from the republic of certain categories of goods, including fruit and vegetables, on April 18, 1990.**
- ◆ ◆ **Uzbek Prime Minister Shukrullah Mirsaidov declares "economic independence" of the republic from Moscow on March 28, 1990.** He insists that "all the most valuable elements" in the republic, especially the natural resources, belong to Uzbekistan and not to the Soviet Union. The declaration may have set Uzbekistan on a

21 From 1985 to 1987, Gorbachev promoted the eradication of corruption in the state and Party apparatus as a means of improving the Soviet economic and political situation. This "anti-corruption" campaign was a continuation of the same policy conducted by his predecessor, Yuri Andropov, in 1983 and 1984.

collision course with Moscow over the ownership of the 1990 cotton crop.

- ◆ ◆ **Kazakhstan on March 13, 1990, bans exports of all industrial products from the republic, except for those already contracted under state orders.**
- ◆ ◆ **Kirgizia bans a number of exports from the republic on February 25, 1990, among them foodstuffs and wool.**
- ◆ ◆ **Uzbekistan declares Uzbek the state language of the republic on October 21, 1989.**
- ◆ ◆ **Kazakhstan establishes a 1995 deadline for mandatory knowledge of Kazakh in the republic on September 25, 1989.**
- ◆ ◆ **Tadzhikistan declares the Tadzhik language (Farsi) the state language of the republic, replacing Russian, on July 27, 1989.**

THE RUMBLING OF THE FUTURE STORM

The relaxation of the colonial regime by Moscow, the greater autonomy of the local communist leadership, and the emergence of pro-independence popular movements may be too little too late to prevent large-scale violence. Already the deteriorating economic conditions and ethnic conflicts, for decades suppressed and contained but not resolved by Moscow, have triggered dozens of violent protests and riots. Since spring 1989, the largest violent outbreaks in Central Asia have occurred in:

The Osh region, Kirgizia, June 4 to July 17, 1990. *Participants:* Uzbeks and Kirgiz, mostly collective farmers. *Casualties:* at least 186 dead; 500 houses burned; hundreds of Uzbek refugees fleeing Kirgizia for Uzbekistan. *Immediate causes:* protest by ethnic Uzbeks against housing for ethnic Kirgiz in the predominantly Uzbek area. *Demands:* Equitable distribution of land between Uzbeks and Kirgiz for housing.

Dushanbe, Tadzhikistan, February 12 to February 15, 1990. *Participants:* workers, students, and the unemployed. *Casualties:* 22 dead, 568 injured. *Immediate causes:* a rumor that Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan were given apartments in the city. *Demands:* removal of Armenian refugees from Dushanbe; resignation of the Communist leaders of the republic; return of the profits from cotton sold abroad by Moscow; closing down of an aluminum plant in the city because of the pollution it generates; deportation of non-Muslims from Tadzhikistan; and a ban on Western attire for women.

Novyi Uzen', Kazakhstan, June 17 to June 20, 1989. *Participants:* young workers, unemployed, and high school students. *Casualties:* 5 dead, 118 injured; 3,500 refugees. *Immediate causes:* resentment over the high prices charged by

private stores, or “cooperatives,” owned mostly by the Chechens, Ingush, and Lezgins settlers from the nearby Caucasus region. *Demands*: closing the “cooperatives” and the expulsion of non-Kazakhs from the city of Novyi Uzen’.

The Fergana Valley, Uzbekistan, June 3 to June 13, 1989. *Participants*: Young, mostly unemployed Uzbeks. *Casualties*: 99 dead; 1,010 injured, 748 homes burned, 34,000 refugees. *Immediate causes*: a killing of an Uzbek by a group of Meskhetian Turks, who are Georgian Muslims deported on Stalin’s orders to Central Asia in November 1944. *Demands*: removal of all Meskhetian Turks from Uzbekistan; raising the price paid by Moscow for Uzbek cotton; an end to employment discrimination against Uzbeks.

THE POPULAR FRONTS

It will be very difficult for the local communist leadership and Moscow’s newly found tolerance to stifle the growth and radicalization of the pro-independence nationalist movements in Central Asia. What makes the situation explosive, meanwhile, is that the Central Asian republics lag behind other areas of the Soviet Union in forming mass, non-violent, democratic, pro-independence political organizations, sometimes called Popular Fronts. The paucity of such groups bodes ill for the prospects of the “Baltic route” for Central Asian independence, in which the republics pursue independence, democracy, and economic growth peacefully.

The independent political movements in Central Asia are very new. They began to form a year ago and have been growing ever since. Although differing in specific objectives and tactics, they all want to improve the living conditions, end colonial economic relations with Russia, and achieve greater autonomy.

Central Asian independent grass-roots organizations that appear to enjoy the greatest popular support are:

***Birlik*, or “Unity” (Uzbekistan).** The organization’s full name is “Unity for the Preservation of Uzbekistan’s Natural, Material and Spiritual Riches.” Started as a working group by eighteen intellectuals in Tashkent in November 1988, it held its first congress on May 28, 1989, with 300 delegates from all regions of Uzbekistan. Led by Rakhim Pulatov, *Birlik* is by far the largest popular movement in Uzbekistan, enjoying the support of an estimated several hundred thousand Uzbeks. On October 15 1989, some 50,000 people participated in a Tashkent demonstration called by *Birlik*. A mass movement, rather than a political party, *Birlik* consists of many often conflicting subgroups, including those propagating violent Uzbek nationalism. The movement’s program calls for greater political and economic independence of Moscow and strengthening of Uzbek cultural, religious, and social traditions.

***Erk*, or “Will” (Uzbekistan).** Formed by Uzbek intellectuals on April 11, 1990, in Tashkent, this group is led by Mukhamed Salih. The founding members broke away from *Birlik* because they believed it to be insufficiently devoted to democracy and increasingly prone to violence and Uzbek nationalism. Close to a Western-style political party, *Erk* is committed to ethnic and religious tolerance. Its pro-

gram calls for a national referendum to decide which form of association with Moscow they would prefer: the present-day "federation" with greater autonomy, a much looser union or "confederation," or total independence.

Kyrgyzstan (Kirgizia). The full name is "Kyrgyzstan Democratic Movement" and it was formed on May 26, 1990 in Frunze, the capital of Kirgizia. It unites 22 "informal" or non-official groups from various regions of Kirgizia, including four organizations representing ethnic Russians. The names of the leaders are still unknown in the West. The program calls for "radicalization" of political and economic reforms and further democratization of the Kirgiz society.

Rastokhez, or "Renaissance" (Tadzhikistan). This was formed in September 1989 to promote *perestroika* in Tadzhikistan and "advance Tadzhik national interests."²² The leadership committee includes Tokhir Abdudzhabor, Abdukodyr Kholikzade, and Khalifabobo Khamidov, about whom very little is known in the West. *Rastokhez* came to prominence during the February 1990 riots in Dushanbe by appealing on television for calm, and negotiating with republican authorities on behalf of the protestors. Like other Central Asian popular movements, the group calls for greater political and economic autonomy. The main emphasis, however, is on the restoration and strengthening of the Tadzhik cultural identity and heritage through literature, the arts, and architecture.

Tadzhik Democratic Party (Tadzhikistan). This appeared in Dushanbe last month, formed by representatives of several non-official Tadzhik movements, and it claims a membership of about 4,000. Led by Shodmon Yusupov, it calls for Tadzhik sovereignty within a loose confederation of independent states. Its short-term objectives include the removal of the Communist Party's cells from the police and the armed forces.

Agzybirlilik, or "Unity" (Turkmenia). This emerged this spring in Ashkhabad, the capital of Turkmenia. Its leaders are Shirali Nurmuradov, Mehmet Sehedov, and Nurberdi Nurmahmedov. The movement's program calls for the creation of a "state of law" in Turkmenia, a multi-party political system, national and religious tolerance, and a democratic and non-violent solution to the problem of Turkmenia's membership in the Soviet Union. "Unity" organized its first mass meeting on January 14, 1990, in Dushanbe, when 10,000 Tadzhiks commemorated the 109th anniversary of the fall of the last Turkmen fortress to the Russian Czarist colonial troops.

The Central Asian Summit. An important step toward consolidating Central Asian popular movements was made at the first conference that independence organizations held in the capital of Kazakhstan, Alma-Ata, on June 22 to 23, 1990. Attending were representatives from all Central Asian republics except Turkmenia, whose delegates were detained by the Turkmen authorities for organizing a demonstration in Ashkhabad.

22 Bess Brown, "Unrest in Tadzhikistan" *Report on the USSR*, February 23, 1990, p. 29.

The conference participants discussed ways to reduce inter-ethnic conflicts in Central Asia, particularly the fight over land between the Kirgiz and the Uzbeks in the Osh region of Kirgizia. They also sought to improve cooperation between organizations in the different republics and regions of Central Asia. Finally, they adopted an "Appeal to the Peoples of Turkestan," the name of Central Asia before the imposition of Soviet power. The "Appeal" emphasizes the common religious, linguistic, and cultural background of the peoples of Central Asia and calls for them to cooperate in search of a better future for the region.²³

LIKELY SCENARIOS FOR A POST-SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA

The current colonial status of Central Asia is not likely to last much longer and may end within two years. Moscow appears to be unwilling or unable to reimpose Stalinist terror on the republics seeking independence. This partly is the result of the electrifying effect which the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan had on the Central Asian peoples, all of whom, especially the Tadzhiks, have ethnic brethren in Afghanistan.²⁴ Soviet Muslim journalist Timur Pulatov wrote in the August 5, 1990, *Moscow News*: "It is clear now that the Soviet leaders did not take into account that such a step [as invading Afghanistan] would rapidly activate the suppressed feelings of Islamic fundamentalism in the Soviet Central Asian republics."

As for the political arrangements after the breakaway from Moscow, two scenarios for a post-Soviet Central Asia are possible:

Scenario #1: Several Muslim states are established. These are likely to be impoverished, politically unstable, and hostile to one another. The animosity is especially strong between the Uzbeks, who traditionally claimed for themselves the leading role in Central Asia, and the Kazakh, Kirgiz, Tadzhik, and Turkmen, who reject this claim. The resentment against Uzbek hegemony is especially strong among Tadzhiks, who consider themselves the heirs of classical Persian culture, which they deem superior to the cultural legacy of their Turkic neighbors. This cultural rivalry has ignited border disputes. This February's rioters in the Tadzhik capital of Dushanbe, for example, demanded that the cities of Samarkand and Bukhara, historic centers of Tadzhik culture which are today part of Uzbekistan, be returned to Tadzhikistan.

Instability and violence may be aggravated further by the foreign powers vying for influence in the area. Likely to be competing directly are Afghanistan, China, Iran, and Turkey. They either border on Central Asia or have sizeable ethnic minorities related to the peoples of the region and strong linguistic and cultural ties to them. The Soviet-Chinese border, for instance, cuts off 200,000 Uighurs from the main body of their people – estimates range between 5 million and 10 million – who live in China's Xinjiang province.

23 Paul Goble, "Central Asians Form Political Bloc" *Report on the USSR*, July 13, 1990, p. 19.

24 There are four million Tadzhiks in Afghanistan and two million Uzbek, Turkmen, Kirgiz, and Kazakh.

These states could stoke the fires of ethnic conflicts, supplying arms and possibly even waging, Lebanon-like, proxy wars there. A post-Soviet Central Asia, in fact, could become a huge Lebanon: restless, impoverished, prone to violence, and bristling with weapons and ammunition from abroad.

Scenario #2: The five Central Asian peoples avoid conflict and form a confederation of states. An important step toward this was taken at the June 22 to 23 gathering of the leaders of five Central Asian republics in Alma-Ata. Among other documents calling for Central Asian solidarity, they signed an "Agreement on Economic, Scientific, Technical and Cultural Cooperation." This envisions a kind of Central Asian Common Market to facilitate direct trade between the republics, bypassing Moscow and spurring regional economic autonomy. This Central Asian summit created a permanent coordinating council, to be based in Alma-Ata, which could become the nucleus of a future political confederation of the five states.

If the Alma-Ata initiative is successful and leads to further steps toward a Central Asian confederation, ethnic violence and warfare could be avoided. This would spur economic growth and contribute to political stability. Under circumstances of political and economic stability, the ideal of democracy and the free market could possibly take root in Central Asia.

TOWARD A PEACEFUL DECOLONIZATION OF SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA

Central Asia badly needs Western attention and help. Should the region's forces of religious fanaticism and authoritarianism prevail, the results could be very destabilizing for the Middle East and American interests there. Islamic fundamentalist states, for example, hostile to the West and close to either Iran or Iraq, could support anti-American terrorists or threaten Pakistan and other Muslim states friendly to the U.S. It is in America's interests to prevent a post-Soviet Central Asia from becoming yet another destabilizing factor in the Middle East.

To be sure, the U.S. ability to influence political arrangements in a post-Soviet Central Asia is limited. Soviet Central Asia is far away, and U.S. diplomats have little experience or interest in the region. This does not mean, however, that the U.S. can do nothing to influence events there. The U.S. could identify and support the forces of democracy and secularism, and it could encourage Western economic ventures. The U.S. should lead an international effort to help Central Asia redress the disastrous legacy of Moscow's colonial rule, especially in ecology, agriculture, and health care. To achieve these goals, the Bush Administration should:

◆ ◆ **Double the number of Radio Liberty broadcast hours in the languages of Central Asia.** Radio Liberty, the U.S.-funded broadcaster based in Munich, is the only Western radio station broadcasting regularly in the Central Asian languages:

4 hours per day in Kazakh, 2 hours each in Kirgiz and Tadzhik, 1.5 hours in Turkmen and 3 hours in Uzbek.²⁵ At this time of increased political tension and ethnic strife, the hours of broadcast in these languages need to be doubled. This will require an increase in Radio Liberty's fiscal 1991 budget of \$195,000, or only 0.5 percent of its total budget. Radio Liberty can supply timely and unbiased information and analysis of the events in this area largely cut-off from the outside world and rife with rumors and ugly ethnic stereotypes. So doing, Radio Liberty would help advance ethnic tolerance and non-violence, which are essential preconditions for democracy and free markets in the region. Radio Liberty, in exceptional cases, can play a pacifying role directly, as when it broadcast an appeal this June 6 for the peaceful resolution of the Kirgiz-Uzbek conflict in the Osh Region by the preeminent Kirgiz writer Chingiz Aitmatov.

An additional \$195,000 for Radio Liberty would: double the hours of broadcasts in each of the five languages of Central Asia; double from eight to sixteen the number of "stringers," or part-time free-lance local correspondents, in Central Asia; and enable the station to hire two additional broadcast producers.

◆ ◆ Identify and aid Central Asian political organizations that advocate democracy and secularism. The National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a U.S.-funded organization chartered to help democratic forces all over the world, so far has ignored Central Asia. Yet democratic organizations exist in the region that merit NED's help. Examples: *Erk* in Uzbekistan, *Kyrgyzstan* in Kirgizia, Tadzhik Democratic Party in Tadzhikistan and *Agzybirlik* in Turkmenia. These organizations are poorly funded and lack office space and elementary communication and printing equipment. They badly need advice on how to organize grassroots political organizations. In the current free market exchange rate of 15 rubles for one dollar, a few thousand dollars from NED would provide each of those organizations with a computer and a printer and thus encourage the inchoate movement of Central Asian democracy.

◆ ◆ Help establish a Western economic presence in Central Asia. This would serve as an example of private entrepreneurship for local free-marketeers to emulate and would provide jobs. Central Asia is rich in natural resources, including gold and oil. Uzbek Prime Minister Shukrullah Mirsaidov disclosed last spring that between 59 tons and 81 tons of gold are extracted in the republic each year, worth between \$790 million and \$910 million.²⁶ (By comparison, the total Soviet annual gold production is estimated at between 250 tons and 350 tons and that of South Africa at 650 tons.)²⁷ The Tengiz oil field in western Kazakhstan was the world's largest oil discovery of the last decade: it is estimated to hold two-and-one-

25 The only other Western radio to broadcast in a Central Asian language is Voice of America, which broadcasts two hours in Uzbek daily.

26 *RFE/RL Daily Report*, May 21, 1990, p. 9.

27 *Izvestia*, November 30, 1988.

half times as much oil as Prudhoe Bay in Alaska. The oil deposits of Kazakhstan have already attracted the attention of Western firms. This summer, the San Francisco-based Chevron Corporation entered into a \$5 billion joint venture with Kazakhstan to explore the Tengiz oil field in Western Kazakhstan. Oil production, which will begin next year, is expected to be at least 60,000 barrels a day.²⁸

The Central Asians are eager for Western investment. Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbaev travelled to the U.S. this July for talks with U.S. officials and private businesses. His goal: to attract U.S. capital.

One way to encourage American business to explore opportunities in Central Asia is to apprise them of the potential of the area. This could be done, for example, by including information on Central Asia in the briefing package on doing business in the U.S.S.R., which is distributed by the Office of East European and Soviet Affairs of the International Trade Administration of the Department of Commerce.

◆ ◆ **Promote ties between Turkey and Central Asia.** With the exception of the Tadzhiks, the Central Asian peoples are of Turkic origin. Throughout Central Asia, the upsurge of Turkic national pride has created a desire for greater unity among the Turkic peoples and an interest in the history, culture, and political institutions of the only democratic secular Turkic state in the world – Turkey. As a democracy and a member of NATO, Turkey could be held up by the West as a more constructive alternative than the theocratic and repressive model of Iran. Military and economic aid to Turkey for fiscal 1990 was \$564 million. Several million dollars of this amount should be earmarked to promote Turkey's ties to fellow Turks in Central Asia.

◆ ◆ **Expand cultural and scientific exchanges between the U.S. and Central Asia to increase knowledge of American democratic institutions and the free market economy.** American cultural and scientific exchanges with Central Asia are minimal. Though the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) targets no programs specifically at Central Asia, representatives of Central Asia have participated in several USIA-supported programs. These programs, which should be expanded, are:

A joint arid land study run by the University of Arizona and Turkmenia, begun in 1989. The program could be expanded to include other Central Asian republics.

An annual trip to the U.S. by ten undergraduates from the Alma-Ata (Kazakhstan) Pedagogical Institute. The number of students should be increased and should include students from Kirghizia, Tadzhikistan, Turkmenia, and Uzbekistan.

The "High School Partnership" program that brings ten to fifteen high school students from Dushanbe, Tadzhikistan, and Tashkent, Uzbekistan, every year to the U.S. An expanded version of the program could include students from Alma-Ata, Ashkhabad (Turkmenia), and Frunze (Kirghizia).

◆ ◆ **Provide medical, ecological and agricultural assistance to Central Asia.** Such humanitarian assistance, one of the greatest traditions of U.S. foreign policy, is badly needed in Soviet Central Asia to help stabilize the region and make its independence from Moscow more peaceful. U.S. assistance is especially needed in:

Obstetrics to reduce the high infant mortality rate;

Soil rehabilitation to regenerate wheat, fruit, vegetable and rice production on former cotton fields;

Detoxification of soil and water, poisoned by defoliants, especially around the Aral Sea in Uzbekistan.

U.S. aid must not be channeled through Moscow or the local Communist Party or state institutions. It should be distributed by the U.S. with the help of pro-democracy political organizations (such as *Agzybirlik* in Turkmenia, *Erk* in Uzbekistan, *Kyrgyzstan* in Kirgizia and Tadzhik Democratic Party in Tadzhikistan) or democratically elected local leaders.

CONCLUSION

The end of Moscow's colonial empire in Central Asia is in sight. That is the good news. The bad news is that this could be accompanied by violence. A severe economic crisis, rampant unemployment, grinding poverty, ecological disaster, and explosive population growth are factors beyond Moscow's power to contain, much less rectify, and they are fueling the fires of independence throughout Soviet Central Asia. Barring a re-establishment of a powerful and lasting Stalinist regime in Moscow, Central Asia could be independent in as little as two years.

The political and economic future of a post-Soviet Central Asia, however, is far from bright. The rise of religious fundamentalism, the history of ethnic hostility and violence, and the lack of democratic tradition could prevent the region from evolving peacefully into democracy and a free market economy. The result could be a string of impoverished, authoritarian, belligerent, Islamic fundamentalist states. This would roil the Middle East even more.

Creating a Stable Confederation. But this is not the only alternative. What could emerge is a confederation of Muslim states, dedicated to stability and closer to regional U.S. allies such as Turkey than to Iran. It is in America's interest that this occur. To promote this, Washington should aid secular democratic forces in Soviet

Central Asia by supplying communication and printing equipment and by providing advice on grass-roots politics. To promote democracy and peaceful solutions to ethnic problems, the U.S. should increase funding for Radio Liberty, the only Western station that broadcasts regularly in the languages of Central Asia. Another task is to establish and expand the Western economic presence in the region by encouraging U.S. entrepreneurs to start exploring investment opportunities. Finally, increased U.S. humanitarian assistance to Central Asia could contribute to the political stability as the republics of Central Asia make their way to independence.

The Soviet Muslim journalist Timur Pulatov wrote on August 5 in the flagship newspaper of *glasnost*, the weekly *Moscow News*: "It is extremely important now to find, support and develop such democratic forces in the region that could become a counterweight to those who may throw the Central Asian society far back in time."²⁹ U.S. interests require that this plea for help be heeded.

Leon Aron, Ph.D.
Salvatori Senior Policy Analyst in Soviet Studies

Heritage Foundation Research Assistant Ivan Lozowy contributed to this study.

All Heritage Foundation papers are now available electronically to subscribers of the "Nexis" on-line data retrieval service. The Heritage Foundation Reports (HFRPTS) can be found in the OMNI, CURRNT, NWLTRS, and GVT group files of the NEXIS library and in the GOVT and OMNI group files of the GOVNWS library.

²⁹ *Moscow News*, August 5, 1990.