

# WebMemo



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## Central Asian Terrorism: An Emerging Threat to U.S. Security

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Last month, Kazakhstan's Parliament approved the sending of troops to Afghanistan. The Taliban immediately issued a threat, warning Kazakhstan that its willingness to participate in the war on terrorism would make the country a target for violence. Days later, Kazakh security services' headquarters in the northwestern city of Aktobe and the capital city of Astana were attacked by suicide bombers.<sup>1</sup>

These incidents are new to Kazakhstan, a country that prides itself on a peaceful society enriched by ethnic diversity. While terrorist threats are typically associated with other Central Asian countries, these recent events in Kazakhstan are cause for concern. Further attacks could jeopardize vital transit facilities and massive energy projects.

As the United States and NATO battle al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, radical Islamic organizations are expanding north through the porous borders of Central Asia. The U.S. and NATO must pay closer attention to the spread of international terrorism and the negative implications for U.S. and Central Asian security.

**Kazakhstan's Vulnerability to International Terrorism.** Kazakhstan has been a crucial partner to the U.S. since its independence in 1991, taking the lead in giving up its Soviet-era nuclear arsenal. It joined NATO's Partnership for Peace in 1994 and is an active participant in military exercises, including with U.S. Central Command.<sup>2</sup>

In the wake of the September 11 attacks, President Nursultan Nazarbayev granted overflight rights and the use of airbases to U.S. and coali-

tion forces. Under a five-year military cooperation agreement, extended to 2012, Kazakhstan granted additional support to the coalition in combating terrorism, developing peacekeeping capabilities, and assisting with security in the Caspian Sea. In addition, Kazakhstan provides important civilian support to Afghanistan and allows NATO countries to ship non-lethal cargo through its territory.

Independent and tolerant, Kazakhstan has developed with negligible levels of religious extremism and is practically devoid of international terrorism. Before the most recent incidents, the last terrorist attack, believed to have been carried out by the Uighur Liberation Organization, occurred more than a decade ago when two police officers were gunned down in Almaty. Over the past several years, the government has cracked down on terrorism, including an incident in 2007 when members of the Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami (HuT) terrorist organization surrendered to security forces.

In the aftermath of the recent suicide attacks, authorities repeatedly denied the accusation that these were acts of terrorism.<sup>3</sup> Rather, the Interior Ministry called one of the incidents "a spontaneous explosion."<sup>4</sup> Despite this denial of terrorist activity,

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the government quickly announced that it would send only four non-combat troops to Afghanistan, thereby deemphasizing its partnership with the United States and NATO.<sup>5</sup>

Kazakhstan is more stable than neighboring Central Asian countries and is better equipped to protect itself from Islamic militancy. The government's religious policies, combined with counterterrorism initiatives at home and abroad, have reduced the threat.<sup>6</sup> However, Kazakhstan's willingness to take a greater role in the war on terrorists and the expulsion of al-Qaeda and Taliban insurgents from Afghanistan and Pakistan make Kazakhstan a target for terrorist activity.

**Militant Islam in Central Asia.** Social tensions and poverty in Central Asia provide opportunities for radical Islam to imbed itself in society. The state-supported imams and madrassahs are a poor match for well-educated and well-financed Islamists. According to Admiral Dennis Blair, the former U.S. director of national intelligence, Central Asian governments are plagued by highly "personalized politics, weak institutions, and growing inequalities."<sup>7</sup> They are "ill-equipped to deal with the challenges posed by Islamic violent extremism."<sup>8</sup>

The two revolutions against the Kyrgyz government and internal conflicts in Uzbekistan and Tajik-

istan add instability to an already volatile region. As some governments in Central Asia are plagued with corruption, their ability to fight terrorism is poor, and disruptions create opportunities for terrorism to expand.

The most active terrorist organization in the region is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). After being banned from its native Uzbekistan, the IMU and its affiliated groups spread south to Afghanistan and Pakistan, where its members continue to fight alongside al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Yet some of these militants circled back home. Weak border controls and harsh terrain make it easy for militants to travel undetected from Waziristan through the mountains to the Ferghana Valley and beyond. Drug traffickers also use this route to smuggle narcotics into the region and to Russia and Europe, and the proceeds are used to fund terrorism.

**Threats to U.S. Interests.** Since 2001, U.S. and NATO forces have partnered with Eurasian countries in fighting the war on terrorism. The Northern Distribution Network (NDN) has provided the U.S. and coalition forces with a vital transit corridor to deliver non-military supplies to Afghanistan. Connecting the Baltic and Black Sea ports with Afghanistan through Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus, the NDN serves as a key vehicle for U.S. engagement in the region.<sup>9</sup> A U.S. presence in Afghanistan

1. Dana Rysmukhamedova, "Two Killed in a Car Blast in Kazakhstan," AFP, May 23, 2011, at [http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5ikoZX0WL6jJfpoBL\\_TP6bNvBl6uw?docId=CNG.6e80a402d4f7614c65257c23ec625a13.981](http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5ikoZX0WL6jJfpoBL_TP6bNvBl6uw?docId=CNG.6e80a402d4f7614c65257c23ec625a13.981) (June 10, 2011).
2. Jim Nichol, "Kazakhstan: Recent Developments and U.S. Interests," Congressional Research Service *Report for Congress*, October 5, 2010, at <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/97-1058.pdf> (June 13, 2011).
3. Aleks Tapinsh, "Rare Suicide Bombing Shocks Kazakhstan," AFP, May 17, 2011, at [http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20110517/wl\\_afp/kazakhstanunrest](http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20110517/wl_afp/kazakhstanunrest) (June 10, 2011).
4. "Car Explodes in Kazakh Capital, Killing Two," Central Asia Security Newswire, May 24, 2011, at <http://centralasianewswire.com/Security/viewstory.aspx?id=4114> (June 10, 2011).
5. "Kazakhstan Offers Token Troop Presence for Afghanistan," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, May 24, 2011, at [http://www.rferl.org/content/kazakhstan\\_afghanistan\\_troops/24194820.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/kazakhstan_afghanistan_troops/24194820.html) (June 10, 2011).
6. "Kazakhstan," in American Foreign Policy Council, *World Almanac of Islamism*, March 14, 2011, at <http://almanac.afpc.org/Kazakhstan> (June 10, 2011).
7. Thomas M. Sanderson, Daniel Kimmage, and David A. Gordon, "From the Ferghana Valley to South Waziristan: The Evolving Threat of Central Asian Jihadists," Center for Strategic and International Studies, Transnational Threats Project, March 2010, p. 1, at [http://www.humansecuritygateway.com/documents/CSIS\\_EvolvingThreatCentralAsianJihadists.pdf](http://www.humansecuritygateway.com/documents/CSIS_EvolvingThreatCentralAsianJihadists.pdf) (June 10, 2011).
8. *Ibid.*
9. Andrew C. Kuchins and Thomas M. Sanderson, "The Northern Distribution Network and Afghanistan: Geopolitical Challenges and Opportunities," Center for Strategic and International Studies, Transnational Threats Project and Russia and Eurasia Program, January 2010, at [http://csis.org/files/publication/091229\\_Kuchins\\_NDNandAfghan\\_Web.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/091229_Kuchins_NDNandAfghan_Web.pdf) (June 10, 2011).

and Pakistan therefore necessitates the expansion of security partnerships with Central Asia.

It is unlikely that IMU, HuT, or other terrorist organizations in the region pose immediate and existential threats to the U.S. homeland. However, they could attack U.S. and other sensitive targets, expand their base of operations, or access critical technologies, including weapons of mass destruction.

Up to 5,000 militants fighting in Afghanistan and Pakistan call Central Asia home. Since the start of the war, they have become seasoned fighters adept in destabilizing governments. In order to address these threats, the United States must reenergize its engagement with Central Asia by taking the following steps:

- **Integrate Central Asia into the Afghanistan–Pakistan strategy.** The war in Afghanistan is the Administration's top foreign policy priority. Central Asian security should be addressed not just through the lens of U.S. logistics, but also by sharing counterterrorism know-how, strengthening civil societies, improving governance, and boosting the rule of law. However, any U.S. non-military technical support should be conditioned on improvements in good governance.
- **Expand and improve U.S. intelligence in the region.** The U.S. intelligence community should improve intelligence-sharing with reliable Central Asian partners to identify and counter emerging radical Islamist organizations. This should target the financial sector, as terrorists use money laundering and the black market to raise funds. The U.S. must also work more closely with local authorities to track militants' movements and neutralize their deployments early. However, the recent upheavals in the Middle East teach that one cannot rely exclusively on local intelligence

services. U.S. analysts and operatives should develop greater linguistic, political, and cultural skills and spend more time in the field recruiting assets.

- **Strengthen border controls.** The porous borders throughout Central Asia pose major security challenges. The U.S. should prioritize the strengthening of border controls through the State Department's Central Asian Regional Strategic Initiative (RSI). The RSI assists partner countries in building capacity to combat terrorism, and it should emphasize the links between drug trafficking, terrorism, and border security. However, U.S. assistance must be careful not to strengthen the repressive law enforcement and security services components that the regimes deploy against political opposition.

**U.S. and Kazakhstan: An Ounce of Prevention Is Worth a Pound of Cure.** Suspected suicide bombings in Kazakhstan are a warning shot that Islamist radicalism may be increasing its clout in Central Asia. Clearly, Kazakhstan's government must balance its security interests with its international commitments. However, kowtowing to terrorists' demands will only make Kazakhstan and its regional neighbors more vulnerable.

The United States and its allies cannot afford to wait for the terrorist threat to emerge in the heart of Eurasia. In such a vital region, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

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