Global Terrorism
Genesis, Implications,
Remedial and Countermeasures

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Combating Terrorism in Afghanistan: Implications for Central Asian Stability

DR. ISHTIAQ AHMAD

Introduction

In this paper, I argue that the United States-led counter-terrorism campaign in Afghanistan has indeed improved the immediate security of Central Asian states by disempowering the Taliban and al-Qaeda forces and combating their remnants in Afghanistan in the nearly last four years, thereby preventing Central Asia's radical religious forces from using Afghanistan as a base for their militant operations in the region. However, I further argue that the same counter-terrorism campaign, rather paradoxically, seems to have further fuelled authoritarian tendencies in the Central Asian regimes, particularly Uzbekistan. Even before the start of this campaign, these regimes had mastered the art of exaggerating the threat from religious extremists — be they the Taliban of Afghanistan or the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)
— to justify their political authoritarianism. What the “war on terrorism” has done is that it has provided Central Asia’s former communist ruling elites with an additional justification to suppress their political opponents, by instantly branding them “Islamic extremists” and “terrorists.”

The paper begins with a brief overview of the Central Asian security dilemma preceding the war on terrorism in Afghanistan and the region. Then it goes on to explain how counter-terrorism campaign in Afghanistan has contributed to Central Asian security in the short term by disempowering the Taliban and al-Qaeda and disabling them to export religious extremism in Central Asia through their proxies such as IMU using northern Afghanistan as a base during the Taliban era. This is followed by a discussion on how US policies in the region aimed at facilitating the Afghan war effort have indirectly given rise to authoritarian tendencies among the regional governments, particularly Uzbekistan, which, in turn, may be fuelling political unrest and the consequent religious radicalism. The paradox resulting from expedient US policies — such as mild reaction from the US government to gross human rights violations, harassment of the mass media and curbing religious freedoms in these countries — is the subject of the concluding section of the paper. The discussion focuses on the revival of religious radicalism and its potential terrorist consequences in the region as a direct outcome of the repressive policies of local governments.

**Fighting terrorism in Afghanistan:**
**Central Asia’s role**

Following its declaration of the “War on terrorism” in response to the 11 September 2001 events, the US government focused on states of Central Asia as important
allies in this war in Afghanistan. Central Asian states also declared, though in varying degrees, their readiness to support Washington in this war. US and other international forces were granted basing rights by Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and general support for counter-terrorism and overflight rights by these and the other three Central Asian states; Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.\(^{(1)}\)

By 2001-2002, approximately 2,000 US troops and some additional international forces were deployed in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and several aircraft refuelling posts were established in Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. The United States currently has about 1,000 troops based at the old Soviet Khanabad airbase in Uzbekistan. About 700 personnel are based at Manas airbase in Kyrgyzstan which serves as a logistical hub and refuelling station for US aircraft and host for some squadrons of combat aircraft from NATO countries. Kazakhstan provided the United States with land access for logistical transfers. Unlike other regional states, Turkmenistan granted US and allied forces with overflight rights only for humanitarian missions. Regional governments were also rewarded with significant US security related funding and credit flows. Annual US aid to the five Central Asian states amounts to nearly $600 million. In 2002, US aid to Uzbekistan alone was nearly $300 million.\(^{(2)}\)

The Central Asian help in toppling the Taliban regime was crucial in a number of ways. Even before the start of the air campaign against Taliban targets, US Special Forces were able to infiltrate into northern Afghanistan from Central Asia for intelligence gathering and coordinating the impending war effort with the Northern Alliance. The rapid advance of the Alliance forces from northern Afghanistan up to Kabul could have been difficult in the absence of the air campaign, launched from US bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Even in the post-Taliban
period, during which Afghanistan has faced continued resistance from the remnants of Taliban and their militant allies, Central Asia’s role in combating terrorism in Afghanistan cannot be underestimated. The Central Asian regimes’ “zero tolerance” policy towards religious radicalism, which is the subject of criticism in the following pages, as well as the existence of US bases and overflight facilities in the region have prevented Afghan militants from linking up with radical religious elements in Central Asia, and vice versa.

**Radical Islamist reversal, a short-term success**

After the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Central Asia’s and Afghanistan’s fates became closely tied together. Central Asian Muslims drew inspiration from the Mujahideen in Afghanistan, and the Afghan jihad had a spillover impact on Central Asia after the 1989 Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. From 1992 to 1997, during the Tajikistan civil war, opposition forces found a safe haven and staging ground across the border in Afghanistan. At the end of the civil war, those who refused to participate in a new, united Tajik government stayed in Afghanistan and joined the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance. Others joined forces with the IMU, which was formed by two ethnic Uzbeks from the Ferghana Valley with the goal of overthrowing the government of President Islam Karimov and establishing an Islamic state in Uzbekistan. Using Tajikistan as its base, the IMU carried out kidnappings, assassinations, and other violent acts, including a series of armed raids deep into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan that also targeted foreign visitors and tourists. Eventually, it relocated its base of operations into Afghanistan, extended its mandate to overthrowing all regional governments, and threw in its lot with the Taliban. On the eve of 11 September 2001, Central Asia seemed on the verge of
becoming an extension of the turmoil in Afghanistan, with potentially disastrous consequences. (3)

In response to these developments and the resultant security vacuum, regional states, including Russia and China, improvised mechanisms to combat terrorism. A Central Asian anti-terrorism centre with rapid reaction forces was proposed, and joint military exercises were conducted. However, the new arrangements were stronger on process than on concrete action and did little to improve the general security situation or to deter the IMU. It was only the US-led military intervention in Afghanistan that curtailed IMU activities in Central Asia. The Afghan war, first of all, removed the main challenge to Central Asia’s security by toppling the Taliban regime. Second, the IMU was at least temporarily neutralised since its military commander Mulla Namangani was killed in action with the Taliban near Mazar-e-Sharif in Afghanistan in November 2001, and its political leader Tahir Yuldashev went into hiding. The overthrow of the Taliban and the demise of the IMU had the single most important effect on Central Asian security since the Soviet collapse. These events removed, or at the very least diminished, a threat that had hung over the region since the 1990s. They also eased border tensions inflamed by militant incursions and galvanised other major powers into action. Finally, the war resulted in extensive US assistance for border security and other regional security challenges. (4)

**Growing authoritarianism an indirect outcome**

The elimination of the threat posed by the Taliban and IMU, on the basis of which Central Asian regimes had justified their authoritarian practices prior to the “war on terrorism,” should have opened the way for political and economic reforms in Central Asia. The improved security
environment should have also created the ground for economic development as well as ameliorate human rights situation in the region. Instead, the opposite has happened. The “war on terrorism” has equipped the region’s authoritarian regimes, which are convinced that “their bargaining power with the West has palpably risen,”(5) with an additional justification to repress their political opponents as well as clamp down on social protest and non-traditional forms of religious expression.(6) Their dictatorial rulers have tried their best to ensure that the anti-terrorist agenda overshadows democratisation and human rights in their discourse with the West.(7)

Uzbekistan is Central Asia’s most prominent country, but it is also known to have the most horrible democratic and human rights track-record. The situation has further worsened since the start of the counter-terrorism campaign in Afghanistan. Portraying itself as the primary victim of terrorism emanating from Taliban, Uzbekistan was the first Central Asian state to offer its territory to Washington in the war against terrorism in Afghanistan after 11 September 2001. Uzbekistan has indeed been targeted by extremist violence dating back to 1999, and there have been at least five major episodes of such violence since the start of 2004. However, President Islam Karimov’s response to such threats is to criticise his neighbours and international security agencies for failing to stop terrorist infiltration and to label all opposition as belonging to Hizb-ut-Tahrir, the IMU, or al-Qaeda.(8)

The last such episode took place on 13-14 May 2005 in the eastern city of Andijan and the surrounding area, where the Uzbek authorities brutally suppressed a popular uprising. President Islam Karimov announced his forces had acted to end a revolt by Islamist extremists, yet over 700 dead victims of the government repression were mostly unarmed civilians, including many children. The uprising
was the climax of six months in which especially ruinous economic policies had produced demonstrations across the country. The uprising began with protests over the trial of 23 local businessmen accused of involvement in Islamic extremism and acts against the state. There is no publicly available evidence for the involvement of religious extremists: the businessmen were part of a self-help collective of entrepreneurs that, although motivated by religion, has shown no inclination to violence.\(^{(9)}\)

Despite Kyrgyzstan’s better performance on the democratic front, as compared to Uzbekistan, its president Askar Akaev was overthrown in a popular uprising in March. Pent up demand for economic change, alienation from corrupt power holders, and the increasing hardships of poverty combined to create a political tinderbox that needed only one spark to ignite. By manipulating parliamentary elections days before his flight to Moscow, President Akaev basically sealed his own fate. Akaev was replaced by an interim government headed by Kumanbek Bakiyev, who on 10 July 2005 won the first free and fair presidential elections held in Central Asia.\(^{(10)}\) The democratic upsurge in Kyrgyzstan has raised serious questions about Central Asia’s future stability. Even though the revolt demonstrated that authoritarianism was untenable in the long term, it failed to clarify a path towards successful governance in the region.\(^{(11)}\)

In Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, where religious radicalism does not pose any particular threat, political authoritarianism remains a state priority. Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov is determined to carve out a model of political and economic development that is supposedly in keeping with national cultural characteristics but in reality largely focuses on making a secular religion or cult around the person of the country’s first president. The Kazakh government of Nursultan Nazarbaev has as
well sharply restricted the freedom of action of its citizens and has eliminated any meaningful role political opposition groups can play.\textsuperscript{(12)}

In Tajikistan as well, hard-won peace and stability is increasingly at risk. Indeed, the agreement that ended the bloody civil war in 1997 seemed briefly under threat in early 2004 when a series of confrontations between President Emomali Rakhmonov and former warlords sharply increased tensions in the country’s murky political life. He has used the parliamentary elections to further consolidate his power, at the expense not only of the warlords, but also of opposition groups, including the legal Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). But this has dangers. Discontent is finding expression in radical fringe religious groups. Continued pressure on the IRPT, and failure to draw a clear line between it and more radical religious groups, has sometimes threatened the basis of the peace.\textsuperscript{(13)}

As far as the US policy towards the region is concerned, it has failed to address the democratisation problems effectively, largely because the message conveyed to these governments has been inconsistent. Given the US government’s preoccupation with counter-terrorism concerns vis-a-vis Afghanistan, Washington’s reaction to gross human rights violations, harassment of the mass media and curbs on religious freedoms in the region has been mild. For instance, during his February 2004 trip to the region, US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld ignored the international criticism of the Uzbek government’s human rights violations, and, instead, extolled Karimov for his “key role” in the “war on terrorism.”\textsuperscript{(14)}

For his part, the Uzbek strongman seems to be preoccupied with “the cost-benefit analysis of its
geopolitical concerns and future alignment of national security” than “the human rights balance sheet.”

Like Uzbekistan, the authoritarian regimes of Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan are clearly alarmed by a wave of liberal reform unfolding in the post-Soviet space, particularly in Georgia and Ukraine, where they suspect the complicity of the US-led West. Their perceptions of the Kyrgyz democratic upsurge have been the same. To prevent a similar scenario in their countries, they warn that a mass social protest could turn into a civil or ethnic war or be exploited by “radical Islamic groups.” They have actively courted Russia and China as a safeguard against regime change, as is clear from their recent pronouncements about the withdrawal of US bases from the region. In fact, Central Asian leaders are trying to test the extent of Washington’s dependence on them in the anti-terrorist and geopolitical contexts.

Radical religious resurgence a growing trend

By resorting to greater authoritarianism as a consequence of the “war on terrorism,” the Central Asian regimes, primarily Uzbekistan, risk further exacerbation of social tensions and political stability, by pushing opposition to the fringes of the political scene, thereby playing into the hands of radical religious and other violent forces.

Since the start of the “war on terrorism” there have been signs that radical religious groups such as Hezb-ut-Tahrir are becoming increasingly popular in Central Asia. Unlike the IMU, which aspires for political change through violence. Hezb-ut-Tahrir has focused on addressing grievances through the restoration of traditional Islamic values and grassroots activism. It has gained popular support as the champion of social and economic justice and has rapidly become an alternative political movement for
disaffected populations with other opposition constrained. The Hezb is now seen as the new threat to Central Asian security if its members choose to turn to violence against suppression of the Uzbek government. Even those who may not share Hezb-ut-Tahrir’s political goal of a restored caliphate may find it a useful tool for organising opposition, whether the motivation is religious, nationalist or involves some other ideology.

Hezb-ut-Tahrir is banned by the Uzbek, Tajik, Kyrgyz, and Kazakh governments, which claim it seeks to overthrow them by force. The Hezb denies this, and, instead, accuses the region’s governments of using charges of terrorism to suppress all opposition movements they cannot control. Crackdowns in Uzbekistan, where the group appears to have the most members, include mass arrests of suspected sympathisers and lengthy detentions while awaiting trial. However, as regional governments try to crack down on groups like the Hezb, there is no sign yet that the movements are disappearing. The repression of the Central Asian regimes and the lack of any kind of political expression forces politically-oriented people to go underground and to become radicalised, and then join these Islamist groups.\(^{18}\)

As far as the IMU is concerned, until its recovery from the losses it has suffered since the start of the war on terrorism in Afghanistan, it may coordinate its actions with organisations like the Hezb-ut-Tahrir.\(^{19}\) The revival of the IMU in Uzbekistan, however, remains a near-term possibility, since the conditions that helped create and sustain the IMU remain unchanged. Recent media reports have even cited renewed extremist activity among Uzbek diasporas in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.\(^{20}\)

The situation in Uzbekistan, in particular, is like a human pressure cooker. If the top is lifted suddenly, there
may be an explosion. To deny the Islamists any political role is only to turn up the heat under the pressure cooker. To integrate them gradually into political life is a step toward reconciliation. Uzbekistan will either embark on a path of much greater repression or it will accept a path of paced reform that might enable the government to get through this crisis intact. If it chooses the path of repression, it seems fairly certain that, along with Afghanistan and Iraq, the US and its allies will face another centre of terror exporting unrest.\(^{(21)}\)

**Afghanistan’s continuing security dilemma**

While Central Asia’s future political stability is not just linked to political developments in Uzbekistan and its authoritarian counterparts, it will continue to be impacted by the evolving security situation in Afghanistan — which had been a major cause of Central Asian instability during much of the 1990s, especially during the Taliban era, until the start of the counter-terrorism campaign. Despite making important electoral gains under President Hamid Karzai’s internationally-supported regime, the country continues to confront a security predicament — especially in the south and east. The remnants of the Taliban and their militant allies, particularly the forces loyal to Hezb-e-Islami leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, continue to strike at government, International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) and US-led coalition forces targets. However, there are some factors which seem to have contributed to relative improvement in the security environment recently, including the progress made in the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration programme; the increased strength and quality of the Afghan national army and Afghan national police; and the expansion of ISAF beyond Kabul in northern and north-eastern Afghanistan bordering Central Asia.
NATO has partially fulfilled its commitment to increase the strength of ISAF and expand its operations beyond the Afghan capital. With an increased strength of nearly 9,000 peacekeepers, ISAF has provided an essential contribution to the security of Kabul, and the northern and north-eastern regions. In March, ISAF also assumed an additional role for security through a staged transfer of responsibility from the coalition Provincial Reconstruction Teams in western Afghanistan. However, since the insurgency is confined mostly to southern and eastern Afghanistan, the real challenge for NATO is to extend ISAF operations to these more troublesome regions. The US-led coalition forces have also faced major reversals in the past two months, primarily the killing of US and Spanish troops in two successive helicopter crashes as a result of militant attacks. For now, Afghanistan’s northern regions bordering Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan remain relatively secure. However, the prevailing climate of insecurity in the rest of the Afghan frontier is likely to have negative fallout on not just the security situation in northern Afghanistan but also across it in Central Asia.

Conclusions

The “war on terrorism” has provided neither the basis nor the encouragement for a new phase of reform in Central Asia. Instead, it has empowered governments to continue aggressive campaigns against their opponents and given an added impetus to repression. It has provided further justification for eliminating political dissent and social protest, and for clamping down on unsanctioned forms of religious expression and observance.

The growing authoritarianism in Central Asia may lead to greater public unrest. Given that the organised
political opposition in post-Soviet Central Asia has been mostly led by radical religious groups, the instant public reaction to greater authoritarianism in the region, which may not necessarily have religious undertones, is likely to translate into religious radicalism. And if religious radicalism is presumably the cause, and terrorism its effect, then the growth of authoritarianism in Central Asia as a by-product of the “war on terrorism” may actually prove counter-productive to the very aims of the counter-terrorism campaign in Afghanistan and the region.

The success in the war on terrorism in the region will be contingent on linking strategies to counter militant groups to political reform and improving social conditions. Moderate Muslim voices, which Central Asia’s religious organisations such as Hezb-ut-Tahrir have traditionally represented, can best be supported by promoting real reforms that provide an environment in which people of all persuasions can constructively contribute to political processes and in which the rule of law is upheld. Closed political systems that serve the elites rather than the entire population in each country will only foster deep resentment and force groups to advance their agendas outside the constitutional frameworks. In effect, it is bad policies that could trigger radical Islam and terrorism in Central Asia.

As long as the “war on terrorism” premised on the “rules of the game” determined by the Bush administration continues, it is unlikely that US policy towards Uzbekistan and the rest of Central Asia will move from emphasising security and stability, defined as support for existing regimes, to the priority of democratic reform. Merely supporting the US counter-terrorism campaign in Afghanistan and getting military and financial aid in return will not solve the problem of terrorism in Central Asia. In Afghanistan itself, the security situation remains precarious, despite the presence of international peacekeepers and US-
led coalition troops. If stability cannot be ensured in Afghanistan over the long term, and if there is a resumption of the Afghan civil war, then Central Asia will face the same prospects of spillover and entanglement that it did in the 1990s. Conversely, if Afghanistan’s security situation gradually improves as a by-product of greater and more effective international input on political and economic and security-related fronts, there will remain a possibility of countries like Uzbekistan crumbling due to growing public unrest. The consequent anarchy in the region, in the absence of any viable alternative of credible governance, is likely to give way to religious radicalism and its militant ramifications.

Notes and References


3. For details, see Ahmed Rashid, Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). In the above, as well as many other publications, Ahmed Rashid has sufficiently explained as to how Central Asia’s dictatorial rulers have often used the threat from Islamic extremists, from domestic as well as external sources, to divert international attention from their sustained repression of political opponents. What I have done in this paper is to build on the same thesis and argue that the ‘war on terrorism’ seems to have further contributed to this debilitating process, which could push Central Asia towards a perpetual state of political instability.
16. On July 5, Russia and China convinced the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, four members of which are Central Asian states, to ask the US to provide a deadline for withdrawal of its military bases from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The US response came on July 25, when US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld visited Tajikistan

17. Azizian, op.cit.


22. Ahmad, op cit, pp. 52-57.