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*Central Asia- Caucasus Institute
Silk Road Studies Program*

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THE CENTRAL ASIA-CAUCASUS ANALYST

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BACKGROUND: 300-450 words of analysis about what has led up to the event or issue and why this issue is critical to the region. Include background information about the views and experiences of the local population.

IMPLICATIONS: 300-450 words of analysis of the ramifications of this event or issue, including where applicable, implications for the local people's future.

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RUSSIAN POLICIES IN THE NORTH CAUCASUS FUELS A NEW GENERATION OF INSURGENTS

Murad Batal al-Shishani

On February 4, the North Caucasian jihadist website Kavkaz-Tsentr published a video featuring the “Islamic Emirate of Caucasus” (IEC) rebel leader, Doku Umarov, in which he said a special operation would be carried out in Moscow. He threatened to “make this year a year of blood and tears” for Russians. Umarov said he had arrived at a base of the Riyadus Salikhiyn brigade before a mujahid was sent on a mission to Russia. Umarov appeared to be sitting beside Amir Khamzat, the chief of Riyadus Salikhiyn, and another person identified as “Mujahid Saifullah,” who was assigned to carry out an unspecified attack in response to the Russian government's actions in the North Caucasus.

BACKGROUND: The next day, most Russian media outlets suggested that Saifullah was the suicide bomber who carried out the January 24 Domodedovo Airport bombing, which left 36 people dead. On February 7, the same website released a video of Umarov in which he clearly

claimed responsibility for the attack.

In the Russian media, Saifullah was identified as Magomed Yevloyev, a 20-year-old coming from the Ali-Yurt settlement in the Republic of Ingushetia. Yevloyev is the son of a school teacher and a retired bus driver. He was thrown





(Photas/Tass/Press Association Images)

out of a local college, where he was studying accounting, because of low grades.

Russian authorities were obviously unable to identify the airport bomber from the beginning. In addition to pointing out to Yevloyev, there were at least two other hypotheses regarding the identity of the Domodedovo bomber. The first one initially postulated that the bomber had between 35 and 40 years old, and of European or Arab descent. He was then tentatively identified as Vitaly Razdobudko, a Russian convert to Islam from Pyatigorsk in Stavropol Krai, and a member of the Nogai jamaat or battalion, whose members reportedly come from villages in Stavropol on the border of Dagestan. A second hypothesis came about after the authorities concluded that the first one had been inaccurate. It suggested that Nazir Batyrov, aged 26 and a member of the Dagestani wing of the North Caucasus insurgency, had been responsible. This explanation was later also downplayed in favor of the hypothesis pointing out Yevloyev from Ingushetia.

The confusion displayed by the Russian security services in their attempts to identify the suicide bomber at the Domodedovo Airport indicates that the new generation of North Caucasian insurgents and jihadists are outside their radar.

Although the Russian authorities employed the strategy of targeting insurgent and jihadist leaders during the 1990s, for example in the

assassination of the President of the Chechen Republic and leader of the nationalist movement Jokhar Dudayev in 1996, it only became official Russian policy in Chechnya in 2001. This policy was launched as a means for combating the leadership of the Chechen independence movement and jihadists arriving from Arab countries to support the movement and bringing with them extreme religious ideologies. The policy can be traced back to the elimination of Arbi Barayev, Salman Raduyev (who died in captivity under mysterious circumstances), Khattab (assassinated with a poisoned letter), former Chechen interim President Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev (who was killed in the Qatari capital Doha), Ruslan Gelayev, Abu al-Walid al-Ghamdi, Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov, Abu Hafs al-Urdni, and Shamil Basayev.

IMPLICATIONS: Later, after the Chechen insurgency movement spilled over to the neighboring republics and declared the establishment of the IEC as an umbrella for the North Caucasian armed groups, the Russian

policy continued and targeted leaders such as Anzor Astemirov, Emir Magas (who was arrested, but not killed), Said Buryatsky, and others. The result of this policy was the emergence of a new generation of North Caucasian insurgents, the members of which are little known to the Russian security services. The lack of information available on these younger insurgents implies that the present instability in the North Caucasus will likely continue.

As long as grievances among North Caucasian residents persist, the insurgent movement will continue to grow in the region. As the Economist noted, the socio-economic situation in the region, which fuels the insurgency and provides the insurgents with new recruits to the IEC, is related “to the Kremlin’s policies in the mainly Muslim north Caucasus. While Chechnya has been brutally pacified, the region is in a simmering civil war. Republics such as Dagestan and Ingushetia are formally part of the Russian federation, but have long ceased to be treated as such either by Moscow or by their own inhabitants. Corruption and the failure of everyday politics have made governance in the north Caucasus completely ineffective”.

Furthermore, the recent divisions within the IEC between the Chechen nationalist wing and those who want to link the Emirate to wider agendas and expand their attacks in the region and Russia suggest that jihadist ideology is increasingly becoming attractive to younger generations in the above mentioned areas of the North Caucasus.

The previously mentioned dire circumstances explain why the region is generating its own local jihadists such as the Domodedovo Airport suicide bomber. Whether he was a Nogay,

Dagestani, or an Ingush, he was linked to the jihadist faction of the IEC. Other examples of locally produced jihadists are Buryatsky, Astemirov, and the two Dagestani female suicide bombers who attacked the Moscow Metro on March 28, 2010. Maryam Sharipova and Dzhanet Abdurakhmanova had no direct connections to Chechnya, suggesting that increasing numbers of insurgents from other areas are influenced and inspired by jihadist ideology, a development which is certainly fuelled by local grievances.

CONCLUSIONS: Commenting on the airport bombing, columnist Fareed Zakaria wrote that “outside the Af-Pak region and Iraq, Islamic terrorism has not been able to strike with great force in recent years. Except in Russia. In fact, one could argue that the Russian government, far more than Osama bin Laden, has managed through its actions over the past two decades to create the largest and most active new centre of Islamic terrorism in the world today”. Zakaria’s assessment could certainly be exaggerated, as al-Qaeda and affiliated groups are in the process of building strongholds and safe havens in various places such as Yemen, Somalia, and of course the Af-Pak region. However, if the current Russian policies in the North Caucasus continue, they run a high risk of confirming Zakaria’s conclusion.

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AZERBAIJAN AND HUMAN RIGHTS: NOT AS SIMPLE AS IT LOOKS

Stephen Blank

Events in Egypt and Tunisia have already triggered apprehensive reactions from Central Asian governments and Azerbaijan. These authoritarian governments, like Egypt, try to portray their domestic oppositions as Islamist while suppressing human rights and political opposition. But the issues in Azerbaijan are somewhat different than those in Central Asia. Azerbaijan's human rights problem is directly tied to the Iranian context. Azerbaijan's admittedly defective human rights situation is directly connected not only to Iranian policy but also to Iran's own much more serious human rights violations.

BACKGROUND: Azerbaijan is a unique community. Its people are mainly Turkic-speaking Shia Muslims with a long-standing tradition of tolerance and orientation toward Turkey and the West, not toward Iran. Iran, Azerbaijan's neighbor to the south, contains a huge minority of Azerbaijanis in Northwest Iran whom Tehran has oppressed for years because of fears of separatist agendas. This situation would foster Iranian-Azerbaijani tensions even if Iran were not a militant Islamic state. But that factor, which is Iran's defining attribute of statehood, introduces explosive elements into the relationship, because the Islamic Republic is a militant upholder of the centralizing tradition of centralization that the 1979 revolution took over from the deposed Pahlevis.

For many reasons, including the unease generated by the large Azerbaijani minority there, Iran has been threatening Azerbaijan since 1992. In the conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh Iran has supported Christian Armenia over its Shiite co-religionists. Iran fired on Azerbaijani oil exploration ships in the Caspian in 2001, built up its navy there while blocking any final agreement on the Caspian Sea legal status, repeatedly threatened Azerbaijan overtly with

military action if it should consent to a U.S. base, attacked its leaders in the press for their pro-Western, and particularly their pro-Israeli policies, and organized armed groups among the Islamic opposition parties in Azerbaijan that command little support, including members of the clergy opposed to the state and its Westernizing proclivities. Also, for years, Iran has backed subversive and armed groups in Azerbaijan that seek to subvert the regime. President Ilham Aliyev recently specifically cited Iranian financing of Ashura ceremonies in Nakhichevan, the organization of demonstrations in front of Azerbaijani consulates in Tabriz and Istanbul, a recent violent religious procession in Baku, and the placement of his photograph next to the star of David on Iranian Azeri-language broadcasts on television beamed into Azerbaijan.

The latest episode in Azerbaijan's "twilight struggle" between the government and the Islamist opposition revolves around the government's ban of the Hijab for teenage girls in Azerbaijani high schools. As we know from other Islamic countries like Iran, the Hijab signifies not just extreme religious affiliation but also a political statement about the nature of the society, state, and the role of women in society. Azerbaijan's government, with its



Movsum Samadov

traditional tolerance for a looser form of Muslim observance and Western tendencies, has opposed this kind of medievalism and sought to ban it from its schools. Naturally, this ban aroused the ire of the religious Islamic community leading to demonstrations at the end of 2010 and beginning of 2011. The leader of the outlawed and overtly pro-Iranian Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (AIP), Movsum Samadov, was then arrested on January 7 after he posted videos denouncing President Aliyev. While this arrest may have violated his civil rights, as we understand them, Samadov was not just opposing the Hijab ban. Instead his screed came right out of the Iranian and Islamic playbook. He accused Aliyev of destroying mosques, trying to ban the Muslim call to prayer, harassing women who wish to wear the Hijab, and compared him to Yazid, a seventh century caliph vilified by Shi'a Muslims. He urged a revolution to oust the despotic regime and its personality cult, quoted Mohammed for

people to give up their lives for religion's salvation, and asserted that Azerbaijan will face even bigger tragedies as long as the government is fully controlled by the Zionists.

The government rightly claimed that Samadov was not only inciting revolution and suicide attacks on the government, but also that they found weapons in his home as he and over 20

other believers were arrested. The AIP naturally denied all these charges and from here, it is impossible to ascertain who is right. But Samadov clearly was inciting revolution and violence, and his party rejected the authority of the official Muslim religious leader of Azerbaijan who is appointed by the government. And since the controversy began, the Iranian media has weighed in by attacking the Azerbaijani government in unprecedented terms over the Hijab ban, suggesting again that it is led by or inspired by Israel to attack Islam.

IMPLICATIONS: Unlike states like Belarus, Azerbaijan clearly does face Iranian-backed threats of subversion from domestic Islamist elements. While this does not justify human rights violations, it provides a context for distinguishing between it and Belarusian President Lukashenka who faces merely the threat of losing power while Azerbaijan also confronts an assault upon the nature of the

state. Yet at the same time, the authoritarian elements of Azerbaijan's political system, along with massive corruption and inequality that has soared with the country's oil wealth, contains dangers to the state, and is arguably a partial cause for the resurgence of Islam among the people – amid much evidence that banning the Hijab is deeply unpopular.

Accordingly, there is good reason to argue that timely economic and political reforms might defuse the tensions lest they develop, over time, into a Tunisian or Egyptian scenario. Nevertheless, the coincidence of an Iranian press campaign denouncing Azerbaijan's anti-Shiite, pro-American, and pro-Israeli policies with this crisis suggests that Iran is, or would like to be, involved behind the scenes. Moreover, the merit of the ban of the Hijab notwithstanding, Samadov's advocacy of violent revolution and suicide attacks represents a clear and present danger. In the Islamic world such threats are generally not idle ones.

CONCLUSIONS: While criticism of the Aliyev government's human rights record is justified, it is important to remember that Azerbaijan's constitution and government, like the U.S. Constitution, in Justice Robert Jackson's memorable words, "is not a suicide pact". Insecure states (like the US in 1798, 1861-65, and 1917-1920) may easily interpret such attacks by revolutionaries as genuine incitements to violence and revolution. Reform in Azerbaijan may well be desirable, as U.S. reports have noted an increase in the regime's attacks upon Islamic parties and institutions. But there is little doubt that many of these targets are affiliated with forces seeking to undermine the state, not just the regime.

In that context, the human rights violations in Azerbaijan do not compare with those of Belarus or with the kangaroo court and show trial of Mikhail Khodorkovsky in Moscow. That does not mean that the Azerbaijani government's argument that it is under threat from foreign human rights groups should be taken at face value. Human rights advocacy, to be effective, must recognize these differences along with the similarities and proceed accordingly to effectuate real and lasting reforms in countries that are falling short of their treaty obligations. Governments, too, must discern real threats from imagined ones. Where a genuine external threat exists, linked to an internal minority disposed towards violence and subversion, it will inevitably be difficult to convince governments that timely reforms are needed lest the government fall prey to Tunisian or Egyptian-like uprisings.

Failing to grasp the real situation in which Azerbaijan finds itself will only lead Baku to disregard calls for reform from abroad. Azerbaijan is not Belarus, and it is wrong to treat these two countries whose geopolitical situations are so different as identical twins merely because there are human rights violations in both countries. Nonetheless, the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings confirm the wisdom of reforming government from above lest it start to reform itself from below.

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JIHADISM SPREADS TO KYRGYZSTAN

Dmitry Shlapentokh

On January 17, 2011, Kyrgyz authorities arrested several jihadists who had either been engaged in terrorist actions or planned to do so. The group was known as Jaysh al-Mahdi and its members were engaged in killing members of the local law enforcement, robbing U.S. citizens and attacking Jewish targets. They also planned an attack on the U.S. base in Manas. Most of the members of the group were ethnic Kyrgyz. These events indicate the continuous spread of jihadism to an area where it has not previously been recorded and the increasing interaction between jihadist forces throughout Eurasia.

BACKGROUND: The importance of the new group of jihadists lies in the fact that they were ethnic Kyrgyz. The ethnicity of the group is important, since Jihadism is not yet present in all states of Central Asia. It is not Kyrgyzstan but its neighbor Uzbekistan that is most seriously affected by jihadism, with the presence of the most infamous Central Asian jihadist party, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The importance of jihadism in Uzbekistan is underscored not only by the fact that it is the most populated country in Central Asia, but also because a considerable Uzbek diaspora exists in other countries of Central Asia, including in Kyrgyzstan. There is also a large Uzbek community in Afghanistan. After the end of the civil war in Tajikistan, Uzbek jihadists, especially those of the IMU, were extremely active in Uzbekistan where they engaged in serious terrorist attacks and possibly played a role in the 2005 uprising in Andijan against the authoritarian regime of Islam Karimov. In all of these actions, Uzbek jihadists ignored Kyrgyzstan almost completely. At best, Kyrgyzstan had been a transit to Uzbekistan where jihadists from Afghanistan expected to find a susceptible public.

The assumption of Afghani jihadists that Kyrgyzstan was not a place where they would find a receptive audience was hardly

groundless. Kyrgyzstan is one of the most unreligious countries in Central Asia, with an educated population and elite and in many ways Russified. It was not accidental that Kyrgyzstan produced Chingiz Aitmatov, one of the most popular Russian language writers in the entire Soviet world. Aitmatov's legacy represents the spirit of a considerable segment of the Kyrgyz intelligentsia and explains the nature of two out of three post-Soviet Kyrgyz leaders. Askar Akayev, the first post-Soviet president of Kyrgyzstan, was an academician. The current president Rosa Otunbaeva is a Moscow State University graduate.

Kurmanbek Bakiyev, in turn, was influenced by nationalism but not by universalistic jihadism. The June 2010 violence in Southern Kyrgyzstan, where hundreds of Uzbeks perished, could well be traced to this nationalistic fervor. Still, there were no signs of jihadist animus in these events. However, the emergence of Kyrgyz jihadists indicates that universalistic jihadism has started to emerge as an alternative to nationalistic animus in locations where Islam has previously played a secondary role or has not been present at all. It is also important to note that these groups were inspired by Said Buryatsky, ethnically half Buryat and half Russian, who was killed in 2010. His life and preaching indicated that jihadism could be accepted not only by a person for whom Islam



is just an element of national tradition but even by someone who had never been exposed to Islam as a part of his national heritage. Buryatsky fought and died in the Northern Caucasus, and his supporters are located in either the North Caucasus or in the Russian heartland; and this is where the Kyrgyz jihadists had received their training, far away from their homeland.

IMPLICATIONS: These events are part of a trend throughout Central Asia and beyond. It is a transition from nationalistic animus as the inspirational motivation for the majority of those Central Asians who wished to create independent states after the collapse of the USSR to universalistic jihadism. Jihadism has become the Islamic substitute for the leftist radicalism of the last century, where Marx' famous slogan, "The proletariat of all countries unite!" has been replaced by a structurally similar slogan: "Muslims of all lands unite!" A communist/utopian/harmonious society of the

future has been replaced by an image of a different kind of utopian society — a global caliphate. Similar to the radicals of the last century, jihadists have acquired increasing numbers of "heroes" – martyrs – who are the most important role models and recruiting tools.

It is the emergence of these role models and jihadist ideology in general that explains the recent conversion to jihadism among groups of ethnic Kyrgyz who would hardly have been suspected of being Islamists in the past. Not only have they become ardent jihadists but they are ready to fight and die for the cause; and their existence alone could explain similar processes in other parts of the former USSR and beyond. In all of these cases, increasing numbers of people who either have a very perfunctory engagement with Islam as a part of their national heritage or who had no connection with Islam have suddenly

undergone a process of radicalization and become engaged in terrorist activities.

This is the case with increasing numbers of converts of Slavic origin. There is a strong tradition of conversion in Russia, although Russian historians and political scientists are reluctant to discuss it. They tend to emphasize different facts, such as Russians taken prisoner by Muslim forces, who were ready for martyrdom but not for embracing Islam. Still, these cases are apparently much rarer in history than the opposite; Orthodox converting to Islam. The origin of this phenomenon can be traced to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when Russia was been engaged in long wars with the Ottoman Turks and with Persia. At that time, quite a few prisoners converted to Islam to make their life easier and to be fully integrated in new societies.

During Moscow's wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya, some Russian soldiers became converts for the same reason. Still, there are numerous cases of conversion unrelated to captivity but caused by alienation and psychological transformation of Slavs who had little or no exposure to Islam before. Some of them became jihadists. The most important among them was probably Pavel Kosolapov, who was credited for several of the most spectacular terrorist attacks, including the

bombing of the train Nevskii Express. The recent attack against Domodedovo airport was also originally attributed to a certain Vitaly Rozdobudko, a resident of the Stavropol region and, judging by his name, a Ukrainian. Thus, the emergence of Kyrgyz jihadists indicates the spread of jihadist ideology far away from fundamentalist hotbeds in Central Asia. This makes the case of several arrested Kyrgyz an indication of a new phase in the development of jihad in the post-Soviet space.

CONCLUSIONS: While the recent arrests of several terrorists in Kyrgyzstan could be regarded as trivial by the casual observer, this is not the case. The jihadist ideology has started to spread even among ethnic groups that had not previously been affected by jihadism. For members of some ethnic groups, i.e. Kyrgyz, Islam was just a part of their national tradition and fully integrated in nationalistic animus. For others, such as ethnic Russian and Ukrainians, Islam is historically an alien creed. Still, members of all these groups could well become universalistic jihadists. The events in Kyrgyzstan and other parts of the former USSR also indicate that the process of radicalization could actually take place anywhere.

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THE SCO'S FAILURE IN AFGHANISTAN

Richard Weitz

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization has pursued a narrow approach toward Afghanistan that focuses on countering narcotics trafficking from that country and little else. The SCO also engages in little concrete activity regarding Afghanistan besides issuing declarations. The SCO could more effectively achieve its goals in Afghanistan if the SCO focused on developing that country's legal economy and improving its basic economic infrastructure, including that related to transportation. Measures to promote this goal could include financing joint projects in Afghanistan, reducing barriers to SCO trade with that country, and otherwise helping integrate Afghanistan into the rest of Central Asia.

BACKGROUND: Afghanistan has been an area of collective interest by the SCO since its founding. The organization adopted its first policies toward Afghanistan shortly after the September 11 terrorist attacks, the U.S.-led invasion of the country and the removal of the Taliban-led government in Kabul. In January 2002, the SCO foreign ministers held an extraordinary meeting in Beijing. The resulting ministerial statement “welcomed” the Taliban’s downfall and called on regional organizations to join in eliminating the anti-terrorist networks in Afghanistan. The ministers took care, however, to emphasize the lead role of the United Nations in the post-conflict reconstruction effort in Afghanistan. They also called on the international community to respect Afghanistan’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, and to avoid excessive interference in the country’s internal affairs.

The organization gained notoriety in NATO capitals, when at their July 2005 summit in Astana, the heads of the SCO governments issued a statement that unexpectedly asked NATO governments to establish a timetable for removing their military presence from the region “considering the completion of the active military stage of the antiterrorist operation in Afghanistan”. A vigorous diplomatic response

by the U.S. and its allies helped limit the damage to the loss of the bases in Uzbekistan, which was due to an independent dispute between that country and the West, unrelated to the SCO.

Since then, the SCO has focused on the surge of narcotics that are grown and exported from Afghanistan through SCO members’ territory. According to United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Afghanistan supplies approximately 90 percent of the world’s opium consumption, making it the world’s leading heroin producing and trafficking country.

In their August 2007 Bishkek Declaration on international security, the SCO leaders expressed alarm about “the threat of narcotics coming from Afghanistan and its negative effect on Central Asia” and called for “combining international efforts on the creation of anti-narcotics belts around Afghanistan”. The heads of state at the SCO’s Bishkek summit also affirmed their readiness “to participate in the efforts to normalize the political situation in Afghanistan” and “develop economic cooperation with the country”, but took no concrete action in this area.

On March 27, 2009, the Russian government hosted a special international conference on

Afghanistan under SCO auspices in Moscow when it held the organization's chairmanship. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that the purpose of the conference was to consider Russian proposals to increase "the efficiency of international cooperation in the work of supporting the efforts of the government of Afghanistan in the struggle against the threat of terrorism and illegal drugs". Another purpose of this conference was to highlight the narcotics threat the SCO members and their allies perceived from Afghanistan. The Moscow meeting occurred shortly before a UN-chaired conference on Afghanistan in the Hague on March 31, 2009. Foreign Ministry spokesman Andrei Nesterenko said that his government hoped the Hague attendees would consider the Moscow conference results when formulating their recommendations regarding Afghanistan. When he attended the Hague conference a few days later, Lavrov highlighted counternarcotics issues when summarizing the key recommendations of the Moscow conference.

Countering narcotics has continued to preoccupy SCO leaders since then. For example, at the April 23 meeting of the SCO Security Council secretaries, Russian Secretary Nikolay Patrushev stated that the SCO had an important role in countering narcotics trafficking from Afghanistan because national law enforcement agencies could not address this problem individually.

IMPLICATIONS: Despite all these declarations and common interests, the SCO's activities regarding Afghanistan have been limited to issuing joint declarations and sharing information about drug-related developments through the Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Center and other mechanisms. Unlike the Collective

Security Treaty Organization, SCO members have not engaged in collective counternarcotics operations. And unlike NATO and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the SCO has not provided joint training to Afghan counternarcotics and other law enforcement officers. The SCO members have done little to implement the action plan adopted at their March 2009 conference, which itself was quickly overshadowed by other conferences that actually raised money and launched collective projects regarding Afghanistan.

The reason for the SCO's preoccupation with Afghan narcotics trafficking is simple. All the member governments oppose narcotics trafficking, making it an easy collective priority for the organization. The Russian government calculates that more than two million of its citizens are now addicted to Afghan-supplied drugs, and that some 30,000 Russians die yearly from using Afghan-based heroin—either through drug overdoses or through contracting AIDS from contaminated needles. The Chinese have also encouraged the SCO to assume a more prominent role in countering Afghan narcotics exports. Although China is not situated along the "Northern Route" through which Afghan narcotics have traditionally entered Central Asia, Russia, and Europe, new trafficking networks have developed since 2005 that transport illicit drugs from Afghanistan through Pakistan and Central Asia into China. In late May 2010, Public Security Minister Meng Jianzhu said the volume of Afghan heroin entering China has soared in recent years and "escalates tensions" in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, whose vicinity to Afghanistan makes it a popular entry route for drug traffickers.

The Central Asian governments have found that they cannot manage the narcotics threat from Afghanistan by themselves. The lax border regimes between Russia and the former Soviet republics of Central Asia facilitate the smuggling of narcotics and other contraband throughout much of Eurasia. The Afghan drug trade encourages domestic drug use and exposes their citizens to crime, corruption, drug addiction, HIV, and the other maladies associated with narcotics trafficking. To meet this onslaught, they have turned to foreign powers, especially Russia, and international organizations such as the SCO and the United Nations, to assist them. A major drug trafficking route passes from Afghanistan through Central Asia and into Russia and Europe.

In addressing Afghan counternarcotics so frequently in its joint statements, the SCO reaffirms its relevance to meeting members' security needs. The Taliban has exploited its positions in Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan to profit from the narcotics trade and used some of the resulting revenue to support other Eurasian terrorist movements, to the alarm of SCO governments. Issuing declarations is also a relatively low-cost activity since the SCO has declined to contribute combat troops or money to ISAF and instead allowed NATO and other countries to do the fighting on their behalf. Meanwhile, the SCO has yet to pursue even non-combat operations that would reduce Afghanistan drug production and trafficking. For example, the special March 2009 SCO conference on Afghanistan restated SCO complaints about the trafficking of Afghan-made narcotics, but declined to commit to provide financial or other assistance to the Afghan government to help counter the drug dealers.

CONCLUSIONS: The SCO has yet to develop institutional mechanisms to fund major economic reconstruction projects in Afghanistan or finance other forms of aid. Thanks to the membership of Russia and China, the combined GDP of the SCO members ranks third in the world economy, behind only the European Union and the United States. They could contribute large sums to Afghanistan's economic restoration if they had the will to do so. They would also be helping their own exports by enhancing the transportation infrastructure of Afghanistan, which for geographic reasons should be an important transit country linking SCO members with European markets. In addition, the SCO has yet to pursue action to reduce trade barriers between Afghanistan and its members. Commerce between Afghanistan and the SCO remains at very low aggregate levels. Although some of these barriers are justified on security reasons—the need to prevent infiltration by terrorists and narcotics traffickers—they unduly restrain legitimate commerce given that terrorists and drug couriers can easily cross through less well protected border regions. The SCO could designate a small number of special border trading areas with Afghanistan. These could have simplified visa and preferential custom regimes as well as concentrated security monitoring to discourage illicit trafficking through the crossings.

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FIELD REPORTS

EARLY PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN KAZAKHSTAN SCHEDULED FOR APRIL

Georgiy Voloshin

The clouds of suspense around the issue of a national referendum for the extension of President Nazarbayev's mandate have been finally cleared. The Constitutional Court decided that the proposed constitutional amendments were illegitimate as they do not explicitly specify in which way the suggested referendum could be fitted into the existing legal framework.

In response to this solemn declaration, Kazakhstan's President made a brief statement on the same day, January 31, voicing the idea of early presidential elections, which would curtail his current term by almost 2 years. The presidential advisor for political matters Ermukhamet Ertysbayev immediately informed the press that such early elections could be held around May 1, 2011. But a few days later the presidential decree published in the official government newspaper stated that the first round of electoral competition would be organized on April 3, following the prompt adoption by the Parliament of minor constitutional amendments authorizing the head of state to decide on the appropriateness of an early presidential contest.

Despite the fact that numerous observers and experts have been pointing to the absence of any legal grounds for the organization of early voting such as an overly strained political situation, the president's legal incapacity or other pressing circumstances, Kazakhstan's external partners rapidly agreed to this tactical move. The EU's High Representative for foreign affairs and security policy Catherine Ashton stressed that by putting an end to the proposed referendum "President Nazarbayev has acted in the best long-term interest for Kazakhstan". She also expressed her desire to

see Kazakhstan fully comply with accepted democratic standards by ensuring that the elections are free and fair.

The reaction of the U.S. State Department voiced by its official spokesperson Philip J. Crowley was similarly positive, though he intentionally declined to comment on the legality of early presidential elections, only saying that the State Department welcomed the abandonment of a national referendum. The OSCE Secretary General Marc Perrin de Brichambaud spoke in the same vein, his organization being particularly interested in avoiding a situation where last year's OSCE chairman would be in clear breach of its multilateral commitments.

Before submitting his application to the Central Election Commission, President Nazarbayev attended the 13th Congress of the National Democratic Party "Nur Otan" of which he is the official leader. In a speech given on February 11, the head of state solemnly proclaimed that all the national priorities he had outlined after the last election in 2005 have been achieved ahead of schedule. He also familiarized the party members with the six most important goals for the next few years. Kazakhstan's medium-term development will now be aimed at improving the living conditions of ordinary people, providing accessible high-quality education and healthcare, resolving the housing problem, readjusting economic growth in order to achieve greater competitiveness and ensuring further political modernization through comprehensive dialogue and sustainable social peace. Attending the Congress was the Chairman of the International Conference of Asian Political

Parties, Jose de Venecia, Jr., who decorated Nazarbayev with an Order “For outstanding achievements and service of humankind”, reiterating a years-old proposal to nominate Kazakhstan’s president for the Nobel Peace Prize for his decision to give up nuclear weapons.

On the same day, the acting President successfully passed the Kazakh language examination by a special linguistic commission that had previously declared another candidate’s knowledge of the official language incompatible with adequate standards. The second competitor who managed to obtain a satisfactory result at the examination is Musagali Duambekov, the leader of an environmentalist movement. Despite his presidential bid, Duambekov has already declared that he is not counting on victory at the polls. “It is utopian to think that I may be pretending to the first place. Everybody knows that I do not represent the opposition. I am a person from science. Our position has been initially neutral and we do support

the president” he said, casting a serious doubt on the real scope of his political ambition.

The leader of the main opposition party “Azat”, Bulat Abilov, earlier stated his personal wish to run for presidency, but later disavowed all previous statements, saying that his participation in the presidential elections will depend upon some clear preconditions. He explicitly cited such concessions as the reversal of the decision to hold an early electoral contest, fair access to national media for political advertising and removal of administrative barriers. This declaration was perceived by the majority of experts as a vivid manifestation of the opposition’s unwillingness to engage in serious political competition with the current president.

Ertysbayev only strengthened the initial impression by saying that Nursultan Nazarbayev’s triumph was a foregone conclusion, given the fact that in the first round he would be facing no one but “dwarf rivals”.

EVICTIONS OF IDPS CAUSE PUBLIC OUTCRY IN GEORGIA

Jenny Söderström

On January 20, the process of evicting internally displaced persons (IDPs) from temporary accommodation in Tbilisi was resumed after being halted for several months, following sharp criticism from local and international organizations.

The eviction process was initiated during the summer of 2010 when several thousand IDPs were evicted from temporary settlements in Tbilisi and instead offered either alternative accommodation or financial compensation of US\$ 10,000. International organizations such as the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), Amnesty International (AI) and the Council of Europe, criticized the Georgian authorities for failing to meet international standards during the process. Residents were not given prior notice of the exact date of eviction, alternative accommodation was inadequate or not

offered at all, and the financial compensation promised was not always paid to those eligible. Many IDPs also refused to accept the alternative housing offered, as it was located in remote rural areas lacking essential infrastructure, basic services and employment opportunities.

The eviction process has been highly politicized and triggered a series of protest rallies in Tbilisi. The street protests were supported by the oppositional Conservative Party and People's Party, which were criticized for using the situation for their own political gain. Since the first wave of evictions, some IDPs have also been camping outside the office of the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees (MRA), demanding accommodation in Tbilisi. In November, one IDP

woman set herself on fire outside the Ministry in protest of the relocation to rural areas.

Most of the evicted IDPs were displaced during the Georgian-Russian war in August 2008, although some fled the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia already during the wars of the early 1990s. Legally speaking, the IDPs have never been given the right to stay permanently in the buildings that are being vacated, as they were merely meant as temporary shelter after the August war. Therefore the authorities are now relocating these IDPs to long-term accommodation or offering them financial compensation. The relocation is part of a process initiated in 2009 to integrate the around 250,000 IDPs in Georgia and provide them with durable housing solutions – until they can return to their original place of residence.

In response to the public outcry, the MRA halted the evictions pending the adoption of standard procedures to regulate the eviction and relocation. Based on these standards, the process was resumed in January, but again sparked criticism. In a public statement, AI expressed concern that the standard procedures were not fully adhered to and that the observers monitoring the process were not granted full access to the affected IDPs. The MRA in turn replied in a statement that these allegations were “biased and unfair” and that AI did not possess full information about the process.

Adding to the already complex situation is the fact that the police – and not the MRA – is responsible for the actual forced eviction, making it difficult for

the latter to effectively control the procedure. The NGO Transparency International-Georgia also identifies the government’s inadequate public communication as contributing to the problem and asserts in a blog message that “[m]ore effective public communication about decisions” concerning how and why the evictions are carried out would serve to mitigate public concerns.

In an attempt to prevent further politicization of the issue, UNHCR issued a statement on February 3 acknowledging that the recent evictions were an improvement and that they had largely been in line with international standards. The statement was viewed with disappointment by other stakeholders, as it was perceived as being out of touch with the harsh reality of the evicted IDPs. However, UNHCR recognized that relocation and eviction may cause “significant hardship for persons concerned” and called upon the parties to refrain from polarization emphasizing that “[t]he plight of IDPs is too important to be abused for quick political gain.”

Whether the eviction process meets international standards or not, uprooting and relocating IDPs to isolated settlements lacking essential infrastructure is unlikely to ease the burden of an already vulnerable group. Durable housing is a start, but without means to earn a living and access to basic services such as grocery shops, schools and medical centers, the IDPs cannot be said to have been offered a long-term solution.

TAJIKISTAN SEEKS TO RESTRAIN ISLAMIZATION

Suhrob Majidov

During a meeting of Tajikistan’s Security Council on February 10, 2011, President Emomali Rahmon expressed concern about “the growth of religious-extremist feelings in the society”. According to the President, these “feelings” threaten national security and stability in Tajikistan.

As a result of the Security Council meeting, Emomali Rahmon instructed the State Committee on National Security, the Committee on Religious Affairs and other responsible state bodies “to strengthen explanatory work” among the population in order to curb the development of radical

islamization. The President claimed that the rise of illegal religious-extremist groups in different parts of Tajikistan is supported by “their foreign patrons” and aim to overthrow the constitutional order in Tajikistan in a violent manner.

According to the President, there are two key issues which need to be resolved. The first issue relates to the operation of mosques. Emomali Rahmon believes that most of these operate illegally and that “the number of mosques exceeds the number of schools”. Another issue of concern to the President is that many students from Tajikistan study in illegal religious educational institutions in different Islamic countries. Thus, Emomali Rahmon urges relevant state bodies to make an effort to return these students to Tajikistan.

The relevant state and law-making bodies have taken previous initiatives to curb islamization by introducing several restrictive measures. The first was the introduction of new amendments to the Administrative Code. These amendments toughen the punishment for “illegal distribution” of religious literature. The authorities state that illegal religious literature comes to Tajikistan from Pakistan, Egypt and Iran. According to the regulations, the distribution of any religious literature is prohibited without special permission from the State Committee on Religious Affairs. The authorities believe that new regulations will help control the distribution of religious literature in Tajikistan.

The second step was a regulation of the operation of mosques. According to different sources, more than ten large mosques have already been closed in Dushanbe. According to a statement made by the State Committee on Religious Affairs, these mosques were closed since they have been operating illegally and were not registered with relevant state bodies. The imams of the closed mosques were warned that if they continue their sermons they will be considered criminally liable.

However, the closure of mosques stirred widespread discontent among religious leaders and ordinary believers. Imams of closed mosques assert that they have been operating for 30-40 years without any

complaints from the authorities. Moreover, all the mosques were constructed by the means of *hashar*, i.e. the mosques was constructed for money donated by the believers themselves. Besides, the imams of closed mosques claim that they have been trying to officially register the mosques several times but relevant authorities refused to register them without offering any explanation.

The Committee on Religious Affairs under the Government of Tajikistan decided to go further in controlling the operation of mosques, teaching the imams how to deliver a sermon “in a correct way”. The head of the Committee Abdurahim Kholikov organized a meeting with the eight most well-known imams in the country. During the meeting, the Committee discussed the content of their sermons with the imams and pointed out “that most of them violate basic ethic principles and some contradict the law”. According to Kholikov, the imams took all the remarks into consideration and proposed the Committee to organize special training courses on legislative issues for imams.

Furthermore, the Committee on Religious Affairs announced that a special manual for imams will soon be published. The manual will be called “52 Friday sermons” and will be oriented at all heads of mosques: imams, *khatibs* and *imam-khatibs*. The manual will contain 52 themes for Friday sermons, one for each week of the year. According to the Committee, all the themes were determined by the special commission which was composed of theologians, relevant scientists and officials. The Committee expects that imams will not “digress” from the proposed themes.

Finally, the Minister of Education of Tajikistan Abdujabbor Rakhmonov signed a decree which prohibits teaching the discipline “Theory of Islam” in schools and ordered to remove this discipline from the school curriculum. This discipline was introduced to school curricula just recently, in September 2010. Instead of the “Theory of Islam” subject, the Ministry decided to increase the number of hours for the “History of the Tajik Nation” subject. As one representative of the Ministry declared “the history of Islam is tightly linked with

the history of the Tajik nation”, therefore, it is enough to study the history of Tajik nation.

Tajik authorities have thus started a wide-ranging campaign on curbing radical islamization in the country. However, many experts agree that this campaign may result in active confrontation

between the authorities and religious leaders supported by ordinary believers. Moreover, some experts assert that such efforts from the Government to curb islamization could worsen the situation further, inducing ordinary believers to take the side of radical extremists.

LEADER OF ISLAMIC PARTY ARRESTED IN AZERBAIJAN

Mina Muradova

The social upheavals in Tunisia, Egypt and other countries of the Middle East have caused a risk of social and political instability also in post-Soviet countries, which are ruled by authoritarian regimes. In Muslim countries of the post-Soviet space, in particular in Azerbaijan, the unrest in the Maghreb region has encouraged Islamic groups supported by Iran to call for protests against the government, voicing complaints about corruption and strategic ties with the U.S. and Israel.

On February 14, local media reported that the embassies of the U.S. and Israel in Baku had suspended their activities because of a potential threat. The alert, disseminated by the U.S. Embassy on January 29, was warning Americans of a “potential for attacks in Azerbaijan, including against American interests”. It said the warning was “based on terrorist threat information” and added that that U.S. citizens in this Muslim-majority country “should remain vigilant, particularly in public places associated with the Western community”. The alert did not elaborate on the nature of the threat or who might be behind it. The spokesperson of the U.S. Embassy, Keith Bean, said that the Embassy worked in a “normal” manner, but that “we deem the threats to be credible” without going into details about the source of the threat. “We work with the relevant institutions of the Government of Azerbaijan to ensure that the U.S. Embassy has the appropriate level of security”, Bean stated.

Following the U.S. alert, similar warnings have been issued by the diplomatic missions of the United Kingdom and Israel in Baku. The alerts were distributed following the arrest of several members of the unregistered Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (AIP) along with their leader, Movsum Samadov. The Islamic Party ultimately seeks the end of Azerbaijan as a secular state, and its members publicly share the views of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The party's main aim is to create an Iran-type state in Azerbaijan.

Political analysts believe the arrests were prompted by a speech that Samadov made on January 2. In remarks widely circulated on YouTube, Samadov compared President Ilham Aliyev with one of the most hated figures in Shia history and called for the overthrow of Aliyev’s government. “Ilham Aliyev has made an idol of his father and forces people to worship him..., thousands of people are behind bars. Where is Azerbaijan going to? If this continues, then the tragedy of 1937 (Stalin’s repressions) will be repeated ... Speak out, we should speak about the truth openly”, Samadov stated.

Referring to an article in the Washington Post, Samadov accused the President and officials around him of “plundering billions of national wealth” to buy property abroad. The article from last year alleged that President Aliyev’s family owns property worth millions of dollars in Dubai. The Chairman of the Islamic party also compared Aliyev with Yazid ibn Muawiya, whose forces killed the Prophet Muhammad’s grandson Huseyn

and caused the split between Sunni and Shia Muslims.

The AIP was established in 1991 and officially registered one year later. However, the party's registration was annulled in 1995 and it has not been re-registered. Samadov has studied in Iran's main Shia clerical centre, Qom, and became head of the Islamic Party in 2007.

Samadov also strongly criticized a ban on girls wearing headscarves to school and a closedown of mosques in past years. Last year, the Ministry of Education officially banned the use of hijab for school girls by new rules defining what kind of uniforms pupils should wear in this mainly Shia Muslim country. The ban caused public protests numbering about a thousand Muslims in front of the Ministry in Baku and much smaller protests in a few other towns.

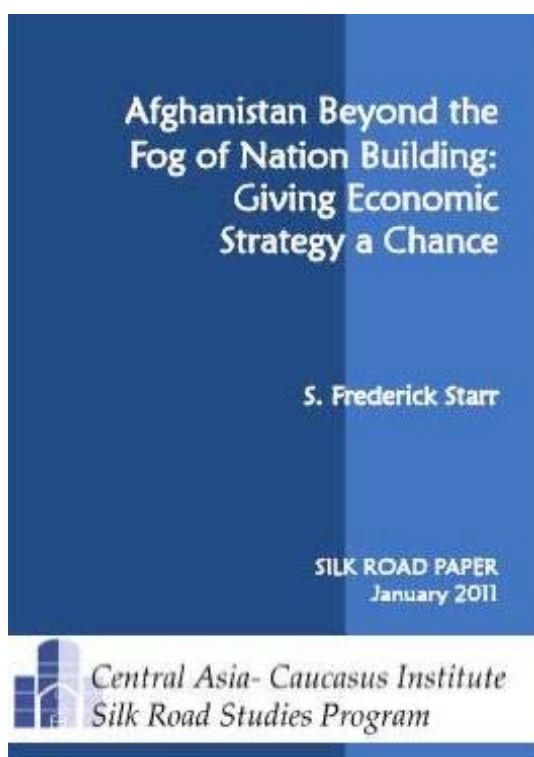
"In a time when your religion is under threat, give your life for the faith" Samadov said, referring to the Prophet Muhammad. "... the Azerbaijani people must rise up ... If anyone sticks his hands into our religion and morality, then we will thrust our hands in our world. The Azerbaijani people must put an end to such a cruel regime and its head". Attendees at the meeting chanted slogans such as "Allahu Akbar!". At the end of the speech, Samadov said

that "the current authority is fully in the hands of Jews and they lead Azerbaijan where they want".

Samadov has been sentenced to three months in pretrial detention on charges of illegal arms possession, inciting terror, and seeking to change the constitutional system. He was initially detained along with several members of his party on January 7 and was held for 13 days, allegedly for resisting police. Media reported about the additional detention of up to 30 Muslim activists, including Samadov's relatives.

Arif Babayev, the spokesperson for the Azerbaijani National Security Ministry, did not rule out the presence of a terrorist threat in the country. However, he assured that the situation is under control and that necessary preventive measures against possible threats to national security and the country's interests have been taken.

Human rights defenders considered the detained Islamists as political prisoners. "These people are not terrorists. They were arrested because of Movsum Samadov's furious comments against the current authority. The authorities want to intimidate opposition minded people who are critical of their actions" said Zardusht Alizade, a politician known for his ties with Iran.



New Silk Road Paper:

Afghanistan Beyond the Fog of Nation Building: Giving Economic Strategy a Chance

By S. Frederick Starr

This Silk Road Paper discusses U.S. policies in Afghanistan and provides recommendations for the development of a comprehensive economic strategy.

The Silk Road Paper can be downloaded free at www.silkroadstudies.org. Hardcopy requests should be addressed to Paulette Fung at caciz@jhu.edu.

NEWS DIGEST

SAAKASHVILI MEETS MERKEL

5 February

President Saakashvili met with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Munich on February 5 on the sideline of the 47th Security Conference. The 40-minute meeting was held in “a warm and friendly atmosphere,” the Georgian President’s administration said in a press release. It said that Chancellor Merkel expressed “unconditional support” to Georgia’s territorial integrity and reassured the Georgian leader that “during her dialogue with Russia she always raises an issue of fulfillment August 12 cease-fire agreement.” Georgian Deputy Foreign Minister, Nino Kalandadze, told reporters in Munich before the meeting: “We will ask the German side once again to call on the Russian Federation to fulfill its commitments.” The two leaders also talked about internal political and economic developments in Georgia and discussed bilateral relations, the Georgian President’s administration said. (Civil Georgia)

KARZAI CRITICIZES EXTRA-LEGAL GROUPS IN AFGHANISTAN

6 February

Afghan President Hamid Karzai today criticized what he called “parallel structures” operating outside the law in Afghanistan, such as foreign aid organizations and private security firms. He told an international conference in Munich that such structures weaken the state’s efforts to assume security and governance for the country. Karzai also announced a handover date for when Afghan security forces would begin to take control of the country. He named March 21, the first day of the New Year in Afghanistan and throughout the region. Karzai said some foreign-run private institutions do more harm than good for Afghanistan. “The parallel structures are there in order to help Afghanistan ... in order to help Afghanistan’s improved governance. Unfortunately, the real effect of that is in reverse of the objectives,”

he said. Karzai said in the coming year he intends to focus on the “drivers of corruption” by enforcing laws and working out land-management programs as part of his goal to take over full security in the country by 2014. (RFE/RL)

AZERBAIJAN’S PRESIDENT MEETS CHIEF OF TURKISH NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ORGANIZATION

7 February

President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev has today met head of the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MIT), Hakan Fidan. The Head of State expressed satisfaction with the first visit of Hakan Fidan to Azerbaijan as the head of the Turkish National Intelligence Organization. President Ilham Aliyev said relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey base on the principles of friendship and brotherhood. The President expressed confidence cooperation on national security between the two countries would be rapidly developing as much as in other fields. President Ilham Aliyev stressed the necessity of strengthening security issues in the region, adding development of Azerbaijan-Turkey relations in this field has positive impact on the whole region. Mr. Fidan conveyed greetings of Turkish President Abdullah Gul and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to Head of the Azerbaijan State. The Turkish chief said he was honored to visit Azerbaijan as the head of the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MIT). Mr. Fidan said he saw big changes and development in Baku during the visit and he was very pleased with what he saw here. The Head of State asked Fidan to deliver his greetings to Turkish President Abdullah Gul and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. (AzerTAc)

KAZAKHSTAN TO DEPORT WIVES OF JAILED UZBEK ASYLUM SEEKERS

9 February

The wives of two young Uzbek asylum seekers face imminent deportation from Kazakhstan, RFE/RL’s

Kazakh Service reports. A court in Almaty ruled on February 8 that Dildora Amirkulova and Shakhnoza Muratova should be deported to Uzbekistan by February 13. Amirkulova and Muratova are married to two brothers -- Sunatulla and Sukhrob Kuldashiev -- who have been in jail in Almaty since January 25. Authorities in Kazakhstan said the two men are on a wanted list in Uzbekistan on unclear charges and that their passports are missing. The two couples came last year to Kazakhstan, where Sunatulla, 25, and Sukhrob, 22, sought asylum. Their wives told RFE/RL that the men had been detained by Uzbek police last April and questioned about the whereabouts of their eldest brother, Oibek. Oibek Kuldashiev is among a group of 29 Uzbek asylum seekers detained by Kazakh authorities last June at the request of Tashkent. Uzbekistan has officially asked Kazakhstan to extradite the 29, all men described by Tashkent as Islamic extremists. Kazakh authorities denied the Uzbeks refugee status. Their fate has not been decided yet. Amirkulova told RFE/RL that an officer of Almaty's Turksib District police had tricked her and Muratova.

She said they were invited to the Turksib District Interior Affairs department to obtain their confiscated passports. But instead, she said, they were brought to court, where the judge quickly discussed their case and issued the deportation ruling. The two women said that they cannot leave Kazakhstan while their husbands are still in jail and no decision has been made regarding their fate. They said they are concerned that their husbands will face jail and torture if they return to Uzbekistan. (RFE/RL)

US SIGNS FUEL DEAL OVER AFGHANISTAN AIRBASE

9 February

The U.S. signed a deal over Afghanistan fuel contract allowing Manas Refuelling Complex in Kyrgyzstan to supply 20 % of fuel to the Manas Air Base, Kazakhstan Today reports. The US on Tuesday signed a deal to pass part of a \$630m (?392m) Afghanistan fuel contract to a newly formed state company in Kyrgyzstan, in a compromise designed to safeguard its airbase in the small but strategic former Soviet republic, The Telegraph reported.

The deal will help to keep Mina Corp, the existing holder of the contract, supplying the Manas Air base, despite a campaign against the company by Kyrgyz politicians, including President Roza

Otunbayeva, who claim that the families of two previous leaders benefited improperly from its dealings. The base, near the capital, Bishkek, is a crucial supply hub for the war in Afghanistan. "A mutually agreed portion of the requirements of the United States for fuel and for related services at the Transit Center will be reserved for supply by an entity or entities designated by the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic," said Larry Memmott, the US deputy chief of mission. "We want this process to be completely transparent." After signing a separate deal with the US Department of Defense, the state-run Manas Refuelling Complex will now be free to supply fuel to the base, starting at 20 per cent of its requirements, and moving up eventually to 50 per cent. The rest will continue to be supplied by Mina Corp, which, along with its sister company Red Star Enterprises, has held the contract to supply the base since 2002. Mina Corp, which is registered in Gibraltar, based in Dubai, and controlled by an American businessman, has come under fire since Kurmanbek Bakiyev, the former president, was deposed last April, and was put under investigation by US Congress last April. But the Congress investigators in December reported that they had found no evidence to back up claims that the Mr Bakiyev's family benefited financially from the company's operations. (Kazakhstan Today)

CASPIAN LITTORAL STATES' BORDER SERVICE CHIEFS MEET IN BAKU

9 February

Chiefs of border services of the Caspian littoral states (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Iran, Russia and Turkmenistan) today had a working meeting in Baku. Participants had exchange of views on current situation on the Caspian, state of cooperation among the borders structures, the prospects of security measures and cooperation mechanism in this field. Also in the center of focus were issues related to the results of the last year summit of the heads of state of the Caspian coastal countries and preparation of the cooperation draft. Heads of delegations stressed necessity of developing cooperation to combat against threat of international terrorism, illegal migration and drug trafficking. (AzerTAc)

ANTI-IRANIAN RALLY HELD IN BAKU

10 February

A rally has taken place in front of the Iranian embassy in Baku to protest what are widely perceived to be anti-Azerbaijani statements

appearing in the Iranian media and Iran's warmer ties with Armenia, RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service reports. The demonstrations were organized separately by the opposition National Democratic Party and a nongovernmental organization, International Diaspora Center. The picketers protested recent comments made on the Iranian Sahar-2 television channel made by Iranian officials and clerics as well as Iran's improved relations with Armenia. They chanted such slogans as "Put an end to provocations against Azerbaijan!" and "Ahmadinejad, don't play with our patience!" They also held portraits of the Iranian and Armenian presidents together. The police did not disperse the protest, but briefly detained some demonstrators afterward. A similar picket was organized in front of the Iranian embassy in Baku on February 2. On February 1, during the Azerbaijani parliament's opening session, a number of deputies made anti-Iranian statements that blamed Iran for exporting drugs into the country and for promoting fundamentalist Islam. Iran's Sahar-2 station regularly broadcasts anti-Azerbaijani programs. They recently criticized Baku's ban on girls wearing the hijab in middle schools and hinted that the Naxcivan Autonomous Republic has remained a part of Azerbaijan only due to Iran's support. An estimated 15-25 percent of Iran's 76 million people are ethnic Azeris. (RFE/RL)

AZERBAIJAN PREPARING FOR KARABAKH WAR: MINISTER

11 February

Azerbaijan is seriously preparing for war with Armenia over the disputed region of Nagorno Karabakh, the country's defence minister told international peace mediators in Baku on Friday. "Azerbaijan is seriously preparing to liberate its territories," Safar Abiyev said in comments published by the ministry's press service. This is not the first occasion that a top Azerbaijani official has used bellicose rhetoric over a possible new conflict. Azerbaijan has repeatedly threatened to use force to win back Karabakh if peace talks do not yield results, while Armenia has warned of large-scale retaliation if Baku launches military action. Abiyev said that Armenia must end what he called its "occupation policy" in Karabakh, where ethnic Armenian separatists backed by Yerevan seized control from Azerbaijan in a war in the early 1990s that left an estimated 30,000 dead. "Only in this context is a peaceful settlement of the conflict possible," the defence minister said. The separatist

Karabakh defence ministry responded to Abiyev's comments with a declaration that Armenian troops were training constantly to repel any attempt by Azerbaijan to seize the region back. Karabakh Armenian forces were ready "if necessary, to ensure that any encroachment by the enemy meets with adequate retaliation," a separatist defence ministry spokesman said in comments reported by Interfax. The Azerbaijani defence minister was speaking to peace mediators from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, whose efforts to find a negotiated solution to the Karabakh dispute have continued for more than a decade. Abiyev said that Azerbaijan had not yet given up hope that the mediators' efforts could succeed, despite the lack of progress so far. A leading think tank warned this week that increased spending on weapons, escalating frontline clashes, warlike rhetoric and a virtual breakdown in peace talks were increasing the chances of renewed military action over Karabakh. The Brussels-based International Crisis Group said that exchanges of fire across the ceasefire line could spiral out of control, threatening regional stability and Western energy interests in the region. (AFP)

BAKU WON'T HAVE JUST ONE GAS CUSTOMER

11 February

It's unlikely that Azerbaijan would send all of its natural gas reserves to a single consumer, a foreign relations expert said from Baku. Azerbaijan is moving to the front of Russian and European strategies to expand their energy options. Azerbaijan is trying to draw as many energy customers as possible, notes Marcel Vietor, a policy analyst at the German Council on Foreign Relations. "Diversifying energy resources is safer and wiser than selling the entire volume to a single buyer and Azerbaijan is aware of this," he was quoted by the Trend news agency as saying. "I assume that the diversification of some part of Azerbaijani gas through its sale to Europe and Turkey is in the interests of the country." Russian energy company Gazprom is courting Azerbaijan for access to its natural gas while Europe is banking on Baku to fill the reserve capacity of its planned Nabucco natural gas pipeline. Vietor said Azerbaijan doesn't have enough gas on hand to meet the entire requirements of any one customer. "Azerbaijan does not have enough gas that is necessary to fill the Nabucco pipeline fully," he said.

"Even it had, Baku likely won't send all of its gas to one direction by the Nabucco pipeline." (UPI)

KAZAKHSTAN OPPOSITION TO BOYCOTT PRESIDENTIAL POLLS

12 February

Kazakhstan's main opposition party Azat said Saturday it would boycott presidential polls to be held in April, which President Nursultan Nazarbayev is expected to win comfortably. The Central Asian republic's Azat (Freedom) Social Democratic Party said it would boycott the polls because the president had breached the constitution by calling snap elections. "We announce our intention not to take part in the early presidential elections," the party said in a statement sent to AFP. "We demand that the elections be held within the time period set by the constitution."

Earlier Saturday, the party had unanimously voted for co-chairman Bulat Abilov to stand as its presidential candidate. The Kazakh parliament is made up entirely of Nazarbayev supporters and critics have complained that opposition activists are silenced by what is seen as an increasingly authoritarian regime. Few doubt that the president will secure an overwhelming victory in the polls and analysts say the opposition, which was caught off guard by the announcement, would simply not have enough time to prepare for the vote. The long-serving leader on February 4 issued a decree to hold early polls on April 3, bringing elections forward from 2012. Election campaigning is to start on March 3 and end on April 1. The surprise call to the polls came after the president unexpectedly rejected a proposal to hold a referendum on extending his term to 2020, scrapping two elections.

The rubber-stamp parliament backed the idea last month, even though it fell foul of the country's constitution and was slammed by the United States as a "setback for democracy." A petition calling for the referendum gathered more than four million signatures, representing more than half the electorate. A new five-year term at the helm of the Central Asian former Soviet republic would extend the 70-year-old leader's rule to a third decade. Along with Uzbek President Islam Karimov, who rose to power at the same time, Nazarbayev is the longest-serving leader in the former Soviet states. (AFP)

SAAKASHVILI SPEAKS OF 'UNITED CAUCASUS' IN TALKS WITH TURKISH FM

12 February

President Saakashvili spoke about "the idea of creating united Caucasus" at a meeting with Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, in Tbilisi on February 12, the Georgian President's administration said.

It said that Saakashvili noted importance of "opened borders" in the region. "Existence of the united Caucasus is my desire," Saakashvili said. "We have shared this opinion with our Azerbaijani and Armenian friends."

"There is still a long road ahead before materialization of this idea, but this a positive step forward," Saakashvili added, referring to a decision to simplify border crossing between Turkey and Georgia. The Georgian President's administration said that during the meeting with the Turkish Foreign Minister it was agreed to simplify border crossing starting from this May. Earlier on February 12, the Turkish Foreign Minister said at a news conference after meeting with his Georgian counterpart, Grigol Vashadze, that one-stop procedures would apply while crossing the border. Before meeting with the Georgian leadership in Tbilisi on Saturday, the Turkish Foreign Minister spent first day of his official visit to Georgia on Friday in Batumi, main town of Adjara Autonomous Republic, which borders with Turkey. President Saakashvili told Ahmet Davutoğlu, that Batumi had turned into "an economic center not only for Georgia, but for the entire Black Sea." "Georgia should turn into a major economic link for the Central Asia and Caspian region and for Turkey," Saakashvili said. "Turkey is not only economically fast developing country, it has also turned into a standard of innovations... The fact that we are opening borders is a positive example for other countries of the region." A potential deal between Tbilisi and Ankara on restoration of sites of cultural heritage was among the issues raised during the meeting between the Turkish and Georgian Foreign Ministers. The deal, if signed, will pave the way for reconstruction of four Georgian medieval monasteries, now located in north-east Turkey, in exchange of rebuilding one mosque in Batumi and restoring of several others. The issue has turned into a source of controversy in Georgia as the influential Georgian Orthodox Church spoke out against the potential agreement. Speaking at a joint news conference with his

Turkish counterpart, the Georgian Foreign Minister expressed regret that the agreement was not yet signed. "I want to say that we have been late; we should have completed talks earlier and in this case the cultural heritage, which simultaneously belongs to Georgia and Turkey, would have been in better condition," Grigol Vashadze said. The similar agreement was close to finalizing three years ago, but at the time Georgian government yielded to opposition from the Georgian Orthodox Church and the deal was not signed. Ahmet Davutoğlu also said that it was an important issue, "since we have common history." He said that the Georgian historical monuments located on the territory of Turkey also were part of Turkey's historic heritage and vice versa. "Cultural monuments existing in Georgia are joint cultural heritage. It especially applies to Adjara and Batumi, where Muslim population is residing. It is a good example of good neighborly relations and it should be assessed and discussed positively," he said. (Civil Georgia)

TAJIK LEADER ORDERS MOSQUE CRACKDOWN

14 February

Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon instructed his security services on Friday to tighten control over religious education and mosques, which he said were often used to foment religious radicalism in the Central Asian state.

Rakhmon was speaking two days after the main opposition Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan censured the secular government of the majority Muslim state, accusing it of corruption and trampling on religious and political rights. Rakhmon, whose ruling People's Democratic Party has rejected these charges, said the unchecked proliferation of mosques and religious schools posed a major threat to stability in the country of 7.5 million. "Under the guise of teaching the basics of Islam, criminals recruit teenagers and young people to their ranks and then send them to extremist religious schools in Islamic states," Rakhmon told a meeting of Tajikistan's Security Council.

"Some mosques are giving the floor to those who propagate extremist ideology and are turning into places for recruiting youths to the ranks of extremists," he said. Tajikistan, the poorest of five former Soviet republics in Central Asia, fought a civil war between 1992 and 1997 in which tens of thousands were killed. The Islamic Revival Party formed the core of the alliance that fought

against the government. The opposition's unprecedented strong statement and Rakhmon's riposte, in which he said militant Islamists were gaining a foothold in rural areas, underscore the fragile peace in a nation where the average monthly wage is \$80. Critics of the government say crackdowns on believers and abject poverty drive many young people to radical Islam. Others say an Egypt-style revolt is unlikely because many young men — the key population group for protest — can find jobs in Russia and Kazakhstan, and memories of the civil war are fresh. Rakhmon said the number of mosques in Tajikistan exceeded the number of secondary schools and included 1,250 "illegal" mosques that had not officially been registered. He said the State National Security Committee, successor to the KGB, was not doing enough to control the spread of militant Islam and called on it "to purge its ranks of random people who discredit the honor of their service." Authorities in Tajikistan jailed more than 100 members of banned groups last year, while Rakhmon also criticized what he sees as a growing trend among women to wear religious clothing. For the last several months, government troops have been fighting a group of insurgents in the country's east. Officials say the rebels, who claimed responsibility for a September ambush on a military convoy, are linked to al-Qaida. The Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan, which has more than 40,000 members, wants religion to play a bigger role in public life, but has not made demands for an Islamic state. Some party members have identified Malaysia as a model they would like to emulate. (The Moscow Times)

WIVES OF UZBEK ASYLUM SEEKERS URGE KAZAKH PARTIES TO HELP

14 February

The wives of 29 Uzbek asylum seekers currently held in detention in Almaty have appealed to opposition parties and the presidential Nur-Otan party for help for their husbands, RFE/RL's Kazakh Service reports. The Uzbek men have been held at a pretrial detention center of the Committee for National Security (KNB) in Almaty since June. Uzbek authorities have requested their extradition, but the men and their wives are demanding they be granted refugee status in Kazakhstan or elsewhere because they say they will face jail and torture if they return to Uzbekistan. One of the women, Umida Azimova, told RFE/RL that she and other wives attended the congress of the Kazakh

opposition Azat Social Democratic Party on February 12 and again asked for help. She said the wives also appealed to Azat leaders Bolat Abilov and Zharmakhan Tuyaqbai in January. Azimova said a member of Azat's Political Council, Marzhan Aspadniyarova, told her the party is not able to provide the Uzbek asylum-seekers and their wives with financial or legal support, but will continue to raise their issue. But Azimova said she and the other Uzbek families need tangible assistance. On January 29, the Uzbek women asked the leaders of the Algha (Forward) opposition party for help. They say Algha leader Vladimir Kozlov found money to hire lawyers, but no attorney has thus far agreed to take their case and represent them. Some of the Uzbek wives told RFE/RL that as soon as a lawyer becomes acquainted with the case they refuse to take it because they believe the KNB's involvement precludes any chance of success. Earlier this month, the Uzbek women tried to seek assistance from the ruling Nur-Otan party, but were not admitted into party headquarters. The fate of the 29 Uzbek refugees -- all of whom are devout practicing Muslims but reject claims they are violent Islamists -- has not yet been decided. (RFE/RL)

US ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE TRAVELS TO TURKMENISTAN AND UZBEKISTAN

14 February

United States Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Robert Blake, will lead interagency delegations to Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan during February 14-19 to engage in bilateral consultations, State Department press-release says. In Ashgabat on February 16, he will conduct a mid-year review of the Annual Bilateral Consultations and will meet with government officials, business leaders, and civil society representatives.

On February 17-18, he will lead the U.S. side in Tashkent at the second Annual Bilateral Consultations. A business delegation composed of representatives from leading U.S. firms will accompany him and hold an Uzbekistan-U.S. Business Forum on February 18. The Assistant Secretary will also meet with government officials and civil society representatives. The United States launched the Annual Bilateral Consultations in 2009 with Central Asian countries in order to discuss the full spectrum of their bilateral relationships, including strategic cooperation, human rights, economic issues and regional challenges. (Trend)

CENTRAL ELECTION COMMITTEE REGISTERED 11 CANDIDATES TO RUN FOR PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

15 February

The Central Election Committee of Kazakhstan has registered 11 candidates for president's post, Kazakhstan Today reports. According to the Central Election Committee press service, three applicants had been registered earlier and two more applicants were registered today. In particular, a pensioner Saule Masina, 1947, temporarily unemployed Sovetskazy Nursila, 1955, a security guard of a security agency Tolybay Baymurzin, 1962, and a director of a travel company Kanat Turageldiev, 1962, will run for presidential election. The Central Election Committee has also registered a candidate from the Communist People's Party of Kazakhstan Zhambyl Ahmetbekov, 1961. The Central Election Committee has registered 11 candidates, 9 of whom are self-nominated applicants. One of the candidates - Ualihan Kaysarov - dropped out of pre-election campaign as he had not passed the state language proficiency examination. (Kazakhstan Today)

AFGHANISTAN DEFENDS TAKEOVER OF WOMEN'S SHELTERS

15 February

Afghanistan Tuesday defended a government plan to take over running of shelters for abused women, saying many women were tricked into leaving home without good reason and warning the refugees are rife with corruption. The plan triggered alarm among rights group, who warn it will undo important progress made on women's rights since the 2001 overthrow of the Taliban, by placing victims of abuse at the mercy of a state lacking resources and often subject to the influence of misogynist powerbrokers. It follows accusations in the Afghan media that such shelters, run by foreign-funded non-governmental organizations, encourage immorality, prostitution and drug abuse.

Afghanistan's caretaker Minister for Women's Affairs Dr Husn Banu Ghazanfar, said the government had found numerous "violations" in the running of shelters. She suggested they were grossly over-funded and that it was unclear where the money had gone. Though conceding many women faced "problems" at home, Ghazanfar said some were "deceived" into leaving. "Some of them haven't had any problems in their homes and later they apologize to their families and to us," she said. Ghazanfar said she personally had no evidence of

prostitution or drug abuse, but said such rumors had to be stopped. "We won't let anyone do whatever they want under the name of a safe-house," Ghazanfar told a news conference. "We are able to defend the rights of our daughters and women." The issue reflects suspicion in some segments of Afghanistan's conservative society about the influence of Westerners who poured into the country after 2001. The new regulation, which needs cabinet approval, would see victims of domestic abuse subjected to compulsory forensic examination, barred from leaving without ministry approval and registered with the police. They can be evicted if they are "accepted" back by relatives, or upon marriage, which for many Afghan women is forced. Some run to shelters to escape unwanted husbands. Women suspected or accused of crimes would not be admitted. But running away from home is considered a "moral crime" in Afghanistan, like adultery, that women can be prosecuted for. Some women jailed for adultery say they were raped. New York-based Human Rights Watch said the plan reflected the growing strength of conservatives within President Hamid Karzai's government and was an overture to Taliban insurgents waging an escalating war against NATO and Afghan forces. Some of the 14 shelters in Afghanistan faced closure if taken over by a government lacking the money and resources to run them, the group said. (Reuters)

CHINESE FOREIGN MINISTER TO VISIT ARMENIA WEDNESDAY

16 February

Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi begins on Wednesday his first official visit to Armenia, the Armenian Foreign Ministry said. China's top diplomat is paying his two-day visit to Armenia upon an invitation from his Armenian counterpart Eduard Nalbandyan. "The visit of China's foreign minister will be the first visit of such high-ranking Chinese official to our country since Armenia declared independence," the ministry said in a statement. "The Issues of strengthening and developing Armenian and Chinese relations as well as a variety of regional and international issues will be discussed." During the visit the Chinese foreign minister is scheduled to meet with Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan, Catholicos of all Armenians Garegin II, Prime Minister Tigran Sarkisyan, Foreign Minister Eduard Nalbandyan and other officials. (RIA Novosti)

AFGHANISTAN MUST CLEAN UP BANKS BEFORE AID

16 February

The IMF said Afghanistan needs to clean up its banking system, including restructuring the scandal-marred Kabul Bank, before it will launch an aid program for the country. The International Monetary Fund said late Tuesday that Afghanistan needs "several immediate measures to ensure the stability and future development of the financial system," including setting a clear plan to deal with Kabul Bank, which nearly collapsed following a corruption scandal last year. Authorities should prosecute "any illegal behavior or fraud" tied to Kabul Bank's problems and to place it under receivership, "the most appropriate mechanism for successful resolution of the bank," the IMF said in a report following a fact-finding visit. "This will be followed by a process where the bank will be rapidly sold or wound down and the central bank is recapitalized with government resources as needed," it said. When the authorities and the Washington-based global lender reach an understanding on the bank's resolution plan and on greater transparency and accountability in the banking system, the IMF will decide on a proposed loan to the country, it said in a statement. In July the IMF announced a \$125 million loan to the war-torn country to support a three-year economic development program. But the scandal at Kabul Bank, the country's largest and partly owned by President Hamid Karzai's brother, came in the way of the program. The banking crisis was triggered over allegations last September that former executives of the bank had granted themselves huge off-the-book loans. According to reports at the time, the Afghan central bank chief had ordered Kabul Bank's chairman to hand over 160 million dollars' worth of luxury property purchased in Dubai for himself and for cronies. The news led to a bank run that took the bank to the edge of collapse before injections of public cash and government assurances restored stability. The IMF said in the statement that authorities have strengthened overall bank supervision "and are expected to enforce key banking regulations and impose sanctions on any noncompliant bank." It said discussions with the government covered measures needed to improve supervision, including to "prevent insider lending, and provisions for early intervention and resolution of 'problem' banks." (IMF)