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1775 Massachusetts Avenue, NW Washington, DC 20036-2188  
Tel: 202-797-6000 Fax: 202-797-6004  
www.brookings.edu

**Fiona Hill**  
Senior Fellow, The Brookings Institution

**“Central Asia: Terrorism, Religious Extremism, and Regional Stability”**

*Testimony before the House Committee on International Relations  
Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia*

**Wednesday, July 23, 2003**

For my testimony today, I would like to underscore the fact that although there is certainly a link between terrorism and religious extremism in Central Asia, much of the extremism that we see is fueled by the radicalization of politics in the region rather than by political Islam, as governments have steadily squeezed the space for legitimate political opposition and broad-based public participation in politics. I would suggest that harsh government repression of dissent is as much, if not more of, a threat to Central Asian stability today and in the immediate future as the radical Islamic movements that have developed indigenously or moved into the region. This contention is underscored by the fact that in spite of faltering political and economic reforms, mounting social problems, and constraints on opposition forces in *all* the Central Asian states, the most fertile ground for radical groups has been Uzbekistan where government repression has been more acute and targeted than elsewhere. Radical groups have also flourished in northern Tajikistan and southern Kyrgyzstan among heavily Uzbek populations who feel disenfranchised and excluded from the political mainstream in both of these countries on the basis of ethnicity.

Having just returned from two extended research trips to the region (to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan in May and June, 2003), I would also urge Committee members and others concerned with developments in Central Asia to pay particular attention to reports drawn from on the ground research and interviews rather than to conclusions based on second-hand sources or on face value analyses of the literature of extremist movements. The picture that one draws from a distance and the realities close-up are strikingly different. I sometimes wonder if the Central Asian countries and people that I read about in commentary in the United States and the countries and people that I visit are entirely different entities. These may be states united by a common geography, poverty, and the challenges of post-Soviet transition, but they also have complex internal political and economic dynamics and striking regional differences. All the states are moving in quite different directions. The only way to understand the complexities of Central Asia is to visit the region and to meet with as wide a range of people from Central Asia as possible. I hope that Committee members will consider a fact-finding visit in the near future.

## ***Terrorism, Religious Extremism, and the IMU in Central Asia***

Radical Islamic opposition movements have a long history in Central Asia dating back to the Tsarist era. During World War I, for example, Islamic militants took up arms to oppose the Russian government's attempts to mobilize Muslims to work in the rear of the front. Again, in the 1920s, Muslim partisans in the so-called *Basmachi* movement opposed the Bolshevik takeover and the advance of Soviet power into Central Asia. And, the most recent resurgence of Islamic opposition was spurred by the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. This tied Central Asia's and Afghanistan's fates together in many respects. Central Asian Muslims sent to fight in Afghanistan gained a new appreciation for their history and religion and drew inspiration from the *mujaheddin* fighters that opposed the invasion. After the 1989 Soviet withdrawal and the subsequent collapse of the USSR, the creation of international Muslim brigades to fight the occupying Soviet forces in Afghanistan set the tone and provided manpower for Islamist insurgents in Central Asia.

In 1992-1997, during the Tajikistan civil war, Tajik Islamic opposition forces found a safe haven and staging ground across the border in Afghanistan. At the end of 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 Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The IMU was a self-proclaimed radical Islamic and political group, which was formed around 1997 by two ethnic Uzbeks from the Ferghana Valley with the express goal of overthrowing the government of President Islam Karimov and establishing an Islamic state in Uzbekistan. Having been expelled from Uzbekistan in the early 1990s, the two founders of the IMU (Juma Namangani, the group's military leader and a former Afghan veteran, and Tahir Yuldash, its political leader) followed the pattern of other Islamic militant leaders. They traveled variously and separately in Muslim countries including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates—as well as to Chechnya—and established contacts with Islamic movements, financial sources, and intelligence services. After the 1996 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the IMU founders established close relations with Taliban leaders and were reported to have secured the support and financial backing of Osama bin Laden in their creation of the IMU.

From 1997-2001, using the remote mountainous regions of Tajikistan as its base, the IMU carried out kidnappings, assassinations and other atrocities, including a series of armed raids deep into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan that also targeted foreign visitors and tourists. Eventually, the IMU relocated its base of operations permanently to Afghanistan, extended its mandate to overthrow all regional governments—changing its name to the Islamic Party of Turkestan (IPT)—and threw in its lot with the Taliban. President Bush named the IMU as one of the terrorist movements linked to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network in his speech to Congress on September 20, 2001. At this juncture, reports from the region and Western intelligence sources put the numbers of IMU militants at between 3,000-5,000. Even in the lower projected numbers the IMU threatened to overwhelm the capabilities of poorly-trained and equipped Central Asian militaries, and IMU activities seemed ready to turn Central Asia into an extension of the turmoil in Afghanistan, with potentially disastrous consequences.

It was only the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan that curtailed IMU activities in Central Asia. The IMU's military commander was killed in action with the Taliban near Mazar-e Sharif in Afghanistan in November 2001, and its political leader went into hiding. The U.S. overthrow of the Taliban and the demise of the IMU had the single greatest effect on Central Asian security since the collapse of

the USSR. It removed, or at the very least diminished, a threat that had hung over the region since the 1990s. Although there have been recent reports in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan of remnants of the IMU regrouping—and the introduction of U.S. bases and an increased international presence in Central Asia in 2002-2003 offers a new range of potential targets for regional militant groups—the regional terrorist threat is not as acute as in the past.

### ***Hizb-ut-Tahrir in Central Asia***

While the IMU's status and its capacity for future action as the Islamic Party of Turkestan remains unclear, attention in Central Asia has since shifted to *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* (HT). This London-based Islamic movement, which steadily increased its influence in the region in the 1990s, is now seen as a potential source of threat. Like the IMU, HT in Central Asia, espouses the creation of a region-wide Islamic form of governance (based on the model of the Ottoman-era caliphate). But unlike the IMU, HT seeks to secure its goal through grassroots activism and purportedly peaceful means. After bomb explosions in Tashkent and IMU raids in 1999, HT drew an explicit distinction in its outreach and recruitment between its peaceful activities and the violence of the IMU.\*

One important issue to bear in mind in looking at Central Asia is that, although *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* is an international movement notable for its often virulently anti-Western, anti-American, and anti-Semitic literature and rhetoric, a distinction has to be made between HT's global agenda and activity and its local action. Those who have studied HT's activity in London and elsewhere in the West closely, and then compared it carefully with activity on the ground have concluded that HT's platform in Central Asia is a specifically regional one. While many of the pamphlets circulated there are generic HT screeds translated into the local languages, HT has gained popular support in Central Asia not by denouncing the United States or Israel, but by distributing leaflets and holding meetings to address the range of post-Soviet social grievances in the region—including poverty, official corruption, the spread of drug addiction, prostitution and HIV/AIDS—and to criticize the governments' failures to pursue reform. Although observers like the International Crisis Group have noted that rhetoric in local pamphlets and in discussions with Central Asian HT leaders has increasingly begun to mirror the anti-U.S. and anti-Semitic pronouncements of international HT leaders and activists since the outbreak of war in Iraq, the focus still remains on Central Asian issues. Indeed, denunciation of the United States in local HT pamphlets has led to increased criticism of the Uzbek government for joining forces with the U.S. in the war on terrorism and for “doing America's bidding.” Similarly, the United States, for its part, is heavily criticized for embracing the corrupt Uzbek government as an ally and for giving personal support to Uzbekistan's President, Islam Karimov.

Although HT's recruitment has encompassed most regional ethnic groups including Tajiks, Kyrgyz, and Kazakhs, the movement's largest base of support in Central Asia has been among ethnic

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\* The Brookings Institution has recently published an analysis paper on the development of HT—“Countering the Call: The U.S., Hizb-ut-Tahrir, and Religious Extremism in Central Asia” (Saban Center for Middle East Policy at The Brookings Institution: Analysis Paper, Number 4, July 2003)—by Kyrgyz journalist and ethnic Uzbek, Alisher Khamidov, who conducted extensive interviews with HT activists and local officials in the city of Osh in the Fergana Valley in 2002. I would also commend the International Crisis Group's June 30, 2003 report on Hizb-ut-Tahrir—“Radical Islam in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb-ut-Tahrir”—for a thorough and detailed discussion of the group's methodology, recruitment techniques, appeal, and impact in Central Asia. This report is also written on the basis of extensive interviews and research carried out on the ground in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan in 2002-2003.

Uzbeks. This is both within Uzbekistan itself, where the movement has recruited among the underground opposition to the government, and in the southern regions of Kyrgyzstan and the northern regions of Tajikistan (in the once integrated and densely populated Ferghana Valley of Central Asia that is now split among Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan). In these regions, the substantial Uzbek minority feels its interests are inadequately promoted and protected by the local, as well as central, Kyrgyz and Tajik governments. HT is now viewed as the champion of social justice for many Uzbeks in these regions. In addition, HT recruits not only from the poorest strata of society but among Uzbek college students, small businessmen and traders, NGO activists, and professionals.

What has attracted people to HT? In many respects HT is rapidly becoming an alternative political movement for regional populations rather simply a religious movement (albeit a radical one). Observers on the ground in Central Asia have noted that while some recruits may have come to HT initially in search of information on Islam—given the lack of access to basic instruction (in ‘Sunday School’ equivalents) and advanced religious education, in Uzbekistan in particular but also in other Central Asian states\*—many have sought out HT as a means of pushing for a faster pace of reform. Most recruits are not necessarily in favor of the creation of an Islamic state, but are instead frustrated by their lack of opportunity and poor prospects for advancement under prevailing political and economic conditions. They are disgusted by wide-spread corruption in local and central government. With interest-based political parties throughout Central Asia variously marginalized or outlawed, or dominated by a handful of individuals, or controlled by powerful elite or business groups, there is little scope for the average politically-aware Central Asian to express these grievances and press governments for change. In the absence of effective interest-based parties, political Islam and groups like *Hizb-ut-Tabrir* have filled the void. HT’s organizational structure based on a tight hierarchy of small cells with no horizontal linkages—reminiscent of the basic structure of Lenin’s Bolsheviks as well as of al-Qaeda—and its low-tech and low cost approach to activism (focused on the publishing and distribution of pamphlets and small meetings) mean that it has been able to operate beneath government’s radar screens in ways conventional parties cannot. Although some of HT’s financing clearly comes from outside, including reportedly from Saudi Arabia, most of its funding is generated locally, including from tithing among its membership. The government has not been able to cut off HT’s revenue streams.

In sum, HT has been able to satisfy the curiosity of those eager to learn more about Islam but unable to access official channels for information, and to provide an outlet for those who want to play a more active political role. Rapidly growing frustration with government at the popular level now raises the immediate question of whether or not HT is poised to become Central Asia’s next IMU. Although HT leaders continue to eschew violence in public statements and private interviews, many regional observers fear that some of these same leaders could be provoked into breaking-away from HT and launching a violent IMU-style campaign to overthrow governments as anger at the lack of reform mounts and as government repression continues. Reports from Uzbekistan and

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\* There is an excellent discussion of the difficulties Muslims encounter in seeking basic information about Islam or in practicing their religion in the face of government control throughout Central Asia in the International Crisis Group’s July 10, 2003 report, “Central Asia: Islam and the State,” again produced on the basis of extensive on-the-ground research and interviews. The International Crisis Group describes the general animosity toward religion in official circles after 70 years of state-sanctioned atheism, the poor educational opportunities for even the official clergy, and the systematic stifling of charismatic Central Asian clergy who might be able to counter the appeal of international Islamic groups.

Kyrgyzstan already suggest that HT has spawned a number of small splinter groups with more radical aims. Mass arrests of HT members have also increased public sympathy for the group and directly led to public protests in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. (Government repression in Uzbekistan after the IMU raids of 1999 had a similar effect in increasing support for the IMU, whose numbers rapidly increased in the subsequent period.) At this stage, Central Asian governments have requested that the U.S. declare *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* a terrorist group (HT has already been outlawed in Germany), which would certainly contribute to increased radicalization and open the door for even more aggressive state action against members and sympathizers.

### ***Countering the Pull of Hizb-ut-Tahrir and Extremism***

In looking ahead, it is extremely important that the United States distinguish between different groups operating in Central Asia and encourage Central Asian governments to do the same. The United States should not be pulled by regional governments into designating *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* in Central Asia a terrorist group and putting it into the same category as the IMU—no matter what decisions have been made by other states about HT at the international level. Such a designation will become a self-fulfilling prophesy and only increase tensions in the region.

Regional governments and their institutions have limited financial and personnel resources and thus limited capacity for collecting, processing, and acting on intelligence related to terrorism.\* States like Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan have compensated for these deficiencies with an often brutal and blanket approach to clamping down on terrorist suspects. Terrorism is frequently equated with ordinary political dissent and protest, with no real attempt to distinguish among observant Muslims or political moderates and those with more radical views or affiliations. Mass arrests in the thousands (often of people doing nothing more than handing out HT leaflets), harsh punishments, including the torture of suspected IMU and HT members and the active persecution of their families, have all been well-documented by international groups like Human Rights Watch. Although there has been some improvement over the last couple of years in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, corruption in law enforcement also remains rampant. Police forces are in general poorly paid and trained, and while there has been much progress in narcotics interdiction training (especially in Tajikistan) there has been little effort at more sophisticated training in counter-terrorism in spite of the links between militants and the drug trade. Individuals and their families are consistently targeted by police in anti-terror sweeps to obtain bribes.

If HT is designated as a terrorist group there will be more of the same and worse. And although repression and persecution have proven effective in Uzbekistan in suppressing militant activities to date (this fact is stressed repeatedly in interviews with government officials in Uzbekistan, as well as in other Central Asian states) I would argue that they are *not* sustainable long-term strategies. Repression and persecution exacerbate existing social and political problems, discredit regional governments domestically and internationally, and increase suspicion of official institutions among the general population. As already noted, government activities have also swelled support for more radical and violent approaches to political confrontation. This is already evident in Kyrgyzstan,

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\* The best intelligence reports on developments in the region are produced by privately-funded entities like the International Crisis Group, which has established an extensive network of regional offices, with supplementary reporting by other NGOs and journalist networks like the Open Society Institute's *Eurasianet*, the Institute of War and Peace Reporting in London, and the Central Asia-Caucasus *Analyst* produced by Johns Hopkins's University's Central Asia-Caucasus Institute.

where the government is weaker than in Uzbekistan and there is less willingness and even less capacity to clamp down. A heavy-handed approach to public protests in 2002, for example, generated more, larger-scale demonstrations and forged coalitions among disparate opposition groups, some advocating extreme measures to overthrow the now beleaguered government of President Askar Akayev.

Instead of facilitating an even more aggressive campaign of repression against HT and its members in Central Asia, by designating the group as a terrorist organization, the U.S. should be encouraging programs that seek to expand political participation. These may help to bring groups like HT out of the shadows and into the political mainstream as well as to force them to participate in tackling social issues directly. Likewise, initiatives that encourage religious education in mainstream settings and foster the open public debate of social issues to remove them from the domain of radical interpretation should also be emphasized in U.S. assistance policy. This was one of the approaches pioneered in Tajikistan as part of the international intervention in the civil war by the United Nations, the United States, Russia and a variety of NGOs. Public dialogue, sponsored and coordinated by outside parties, helped to take the edge off radicalism in the 1990s.\*

Recognition of the need for nuance and more open political systems in Central Asia is already evident in U.S. policy in the region—including in many of the efforts funded by U.S. assistance. Coordination and emphasis of these efforts, however, remains a basic problem. Unfortunately, we currently fund a disparate catalogue of initiatives aimed at promoting broad-based economic and political reform and development in addition to tackling regional security threats. Overlapping mandates, duplicative programs—both within the U.S. government and assistance community, and internationally—and unintended consequences are the norm rather than the exception. For example, counter-narcotics trafficking and counter-terrorism initiatives that aim to harden border regimes and detection and interdiction capabilities have run counter to broader political and economic development goals.\* They have often opened up more opportunities for corruption among customs officials and made the small-scale cross-border trade that populations in the Ferghana Valley depend on extremely difficult—exacerbating economic and social problems. This is especially the case in Uzbekistan, where antipersonnel mines planted on borders with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to block the transit of the IMU killed and injured numerous civilians in 2001-2002; and on the Kyrgyz/Tajik border where the introduction of new border posts and controls (along a non-demarcated and still-disputed section of the border) sparked riots in January 2003. A basic lack of coordination is the primary obstacle to enhancing local capacity and formulating and building effective counter-terrorism strategies and programs for Central Asia.

### ***Negative Fall-Out From the War on Terrorism***

In assessing the impact of the war on terrorism in Central Asia at this juncture, it has to be concluded that it has given an added impetus to government repression. The war on terrorism, and America's embrace of states like Uzbekistan as allies in this effort, have provided further justification for eliminating political dissent and social protest, and for clamping down on unsanctioned forms of

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\* There is an excellent account of this process produced in 2001 as part of the "Accord" series of the London-based Coalition Resources NGO.

\* A 2002 report financed by the Open Society Institution on "Narcotics Interdiction in Afghanistan and Central Asia: Challenges for International Assistance," outlines some of the problems associated with these efforts.

religious expression and observance. This is extremely unfortunate. In 2002, after the success of the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan, the mitigation of the Taliban and IMU threat was seen as paving the way for a new phase of political and economic reform in Central Asia. With the advent of the war on terrorism, there was great hope (if not expectation) among regional observers like myself that the new spotlight on the region—combined with increased foreign policy attention and financial assistance from the United States—would open up Central Asia. We saw a change in the position of the Uzbek government as especially critical in this regard.

Uzbekistan is the linchpin state for Central Asia. It is the most strategically located state, bordering all the other four Central Asian countries, as well as Afghanistan (although it has no direct border with either Russia or China). It has the largest population, and the most significant military capabilities and resources. In the Soviet period, Uzbekistan's capital, Tashkent, was the principal administrative, communications, and intellectual center for the whole of Central Asia. What happens in Uzbekistan has a direct impact on all of its neighbors. But in the 1990s, Uzbekistan became a source of regional tension and the logjam for regional economic development. At home, the Uzbek government became increasingly authoritarian and succeeded in enshrining economic stagnation as the *status quo*. The government muddled along without significant reforms thanks to a mixture of currency and exchange rate controls, state orders for its two main export commodities (cotton and wheat), and the good fortune of having substantial energy and gold resources. Abroad, the Uzbek government engaged in water, energy, and border disputes with its neighbors. It threatened military intervention in response to IMU raids from Tajik and Kyrgyz territory, ruptured communication routes with Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan and blocked regional trade with high tariffs and customs regimes. In doing so, Uzbekistan succeeded in constraining the abilities of other Central Asian states to interact with each other as well as with the outside world.

Although the war on terrorism has brought more cooperation between individual Central Asian states and the United States, it has not increased cooperation among the states themselves. Nor has it yet brought political and economic reform to Uzbekistan. This is in spite of some small cosmetic changes, including the long-awaited registration of an independent Uzbek human rights organization, a decrease in the arrests of religious activists, and some initial efforts to work with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in crafting a new market reform in 2002. Indeed, throughout 2002-2003 there were many well-documented reports by regional and international human rights groups, like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, of political prisoners being rearrested after early releases from prison, as well as of deaths in police custody. Independent Uzbek journalists were openly persecuted and arrested for pursuing stories on corruption and religion.

In 2002-2003, Uzbekistan's government was pressed by international organizations to end torture as a systematic feature of its law enforcement. It failed to cooperate fully with the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on torture during a visit in December 2002 and to address the Rapporteur's subsequent recommendations. During the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development's (EBRD) Annual Meeting in Tashkent in May 2003, which I attended, an anticipated statement by President Karimov condemning torture was not forthcoming. This led to sharp public rebukes from EBRD President Jean Lemierre and Chairman, British Development Minister Clair Short, during a live telecast of the event. Rather than outlining the possibilities for political and economic reform in Uzbekistan, Karimov's speech at the EBRD meeting also emphasized the persistence of threats to Central Asia from terrorism and instability in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan's strategic alliance with the United States in the war on terrorism, and Uzbekistan's support for the U.S.-led war against Iraq.

Karimov's message was clear—an alliance with the United States in the war on terrorism means a “pass” on reform, even on such a fundamental issue as torture. As I personally observed, Karimov blatantly removed his translation headset as Lemierre began his speech at the meeting, and continued to look down at the table and doodle and shift papers for the rest of presentations.

In addition, to this flagrant disregard for international sentiment, by May 2003, the Uzbek government had failed to meet the benchmarks laid down by the IMF and had imposed new restrictions on imports, exports and small business activity. And some of the small cosmetic changes on human rights and the development of civil society in 2002 are now dissipating. In June, the Institute of War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), one of the foremost international organizations in promoting the development of an independent media in existing and potential conflict zones like Central Asia, which has received substantial funding from the U.S. State Department for its activities in the region, was denied its long-awaited registration in Uzbekistan. This registration was pending before the EBRD meeting and was notably denied after the international spotlight had moved away from Tashkent. One IWPR-affiliated journalist in Uzbekistan, a social activist from the Ferghana Valley who was particularly outspoken at the EBRD conference, is one of the Uzbek journalists who is routinely arrested and accused of being a member of HT or the IMU by local authorities in response to her stories on corruption and social discontent.

Uzbekistan has set a tone for political backsliding elsewhere in Central Asia. In Kazakhstan, opposition leaders have been jailed on charges of corruption and abuse of power charges following a power struggle between political factions with links to the presidential administration. More ominously, harassment of independent journalists has increased. Publications have been suspended by the authorities, arson attacks carried out on newspaper offices, and journalists have received death threats. In one well-publicized case a decapitated dog was hung outside a journalist's office and the dog's head deposited at her home. Finally, a prominent critic of the Kazakh government was arrested and imprisoned on rape-charges on the eve of a trip to the United States this spring to discuss government corruption and abuses of energy revenues. Similarly, journalists and other activists in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have found themselves under increasing pressure, leading the U.S. government to conclude in its annual human rights report for 2002-2003 that “human rights observance remains poor in all five countries.” Although none of the other Central Asian states have been quite as blatant as Uzbekistan in trying to justify their actions by the exigencies of the war on terrorism, it is clear that the anti-terror campaign has neither provided the basis nor the encouragement for a new phase of reform in Central Asia.

Turkmenistan, which I have not mentioned specifically so far, remains another source of instability in Central Asia that the Committee should pay attention to. The threat to the region from Turkmenistan is not clearly identified inside Central Asia and is only dimly perceived outside. Under the increasingly despotic and quixotic regime of Saparmurat Niyazov, Turkmenistan has isolated itself to a far greater extent even than Uzbekistan—rejecting participation in regional as well as international organizations on the spurious grounds of neutrality. It is increasingly following a path blazed by regimes like the Taliban and North Korea, in introducing an all-encompassing personality cult, stifling dissent and public discussion, destroying the education system, picking fights with its neighbors, brazenly expelling ethnic Russians and other non-ethnic Turkmen from the country, and generally operating beyond the scrutiny of the international community. Opposition manifested itself in a recent assassination attempt against Niyazov, with all indications pointing to a possible eventual bloody overthrow of the regime and a failed state scenario. The fact that prior to the U.S.



campaign in Afghanistan, Turkmenistan had forged relatively close relations with the Taliban—including the involvement of high-level Turkmen officials in the Afghan drug trade—suggests that Turkmenistan could be well on the way to becoming the next regional base for militant groups. Indeed, credible reports from regional analysts in 2002-2003 indicated that many Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters escaped from the early fighting in Afghanistan across Turkmenistan's barely guarded border and found refuge in the country. For now, given Turkmenistan's location on the edge of the region (albeit bordering Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Iran), the particular and peculiar quirks of the Niyazov regime have not thwarted broader Central Asian developments to the degree that Uzbekistan's policies have. But Turkmenistan's regime is a menace to its own population and an increasing menace to the whole region.

### ***Conclusions and Recommendations***

The U.S. government and analysts of Central Asia are well aware of the fact that success in the war on terrorism in the region is contingent on linking strategies to counter extremist and militant groups with political reform and improving social conditions. Central Asian governments and state institutions remain weak. Economic collapse, isolation from global markets, high birthrates and high unemployment, the absence of social safety nets, inadequate education and increasing illiteracy, heroin trafficking and intravenous drug use, public health crises, the erosion of traditional social institutions, and the infiltration of radical ideologies, challenge each of the states to a greater or lesser degree. Broader regional development issues like water resource management, energy development, and trade can also not be tackled without the concerted effort of all states.

Given the interaction between political repression, mounting social problems and the infiltration of outside radical groups, the United States needs to establish a balance between its military goals—in continuing to stamp out the remnants of the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan—and encouraging economic and political development in countries like Uzbekistan. As I have outlined in this written statement, extremist Islamic groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and *Hizb-ut-Tabrir* have found fertile ground for their development in Central Asia precisely because regional governments like Uzbekistan's have drastically reduced the space for civic activism, leaving the population with few outlets for political expression and no organized alternative political structures.

Many U.S.-based and international organizations are involved in civil society development and human rights protection in Central Asia, as well as trying to offer populations reliable sources of information and contacts with the outside world. These efforts already have some U.S. government and international support, but they could have more. They could also be specifically emphasized in U.S. funding as the central element in both development-focused *and* security policies in the region. Furthermore, without political change in Uzbekistan and real progress on reform in this pivotal state, including on reversing the trend of human rights abuses, there can be no real progress elsewhere in Central Asia. There can be no hope of fostering inter-state cooperation on the range of trans-national threats to public health and safety—such as environmental degradation, water quality and supply, drug-trafficking and intravenous drug use, and the growing menace of infectious diseases like HIV/AIDs and SARS—that also put the region's future in jeopardy. We must keep up the pressure on the government of Uzbekistan to reform and not give President Karimov a pass on serious, basic human rights issues like condemning torture.

Finally, there are three very specific areas where members of this Committee could play an important role in enhancing our current policy in Central Asia:

**First:** in encouraging the creation of a central coordinating mechanism for all U.S. government agencies and related entities operating in Central Asia—beyond the information clearing house that already exists in the form of the Assistance Coordinators office (which was set up under the provisions of the 1993 Freedom Support Act). Central Asia has been given priority in U.S. policy and yet it has also been lost in the mix of government structures, where it is subsumed into Europe and Eurasia and other regional bureaus. Although key people in State, the National Security Council, and the Department of Defense (DoD) have been assigned to deal with region, it is, again, usually part of much larger portfolios. As a result of the campaign in Afghanistan, DoD initially took the lead in U.S. strategic thinking about Central Asia, but as the Pentagon focus has shifted to Iraq, inter-agency responsibility for the region must now be adequately assumed in the State Department, or elsewhere, and given sufficient resources and high-level attention to maintain a focus on the region—especially as the military and counter-terrorism campaign and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan are still underway.

**Second:** in sponsoring a comprehensive inventory and analysis of who is doing what in the U.S. government or with U.S. government funding in Central Asia. Such an inventory is, in part, contained in the annual Assistance Coordinator's report, but there has yet to be a thorough, detailed analysis and assessment of individual activities and how they fit together to further U.S. goals or to tackle identified regional problems. Frankly, we don't really know where we are spending our money and applying the bulk of our energies and to what effect.

**Third:** in promoting a similar inventory of international and privately-funded programs operating in Central Asia. This was identified as a major priority at a meeting of all the large international donors—including the U.S. in Berlin in March 2002—but no funding or personnel was specifically set aside to undertake this effort. There are many instances where U.S. assistance efforts and other international initiatives are at cross-purposes even at a time when foreign aid budgets for Central Asia are increasingly constrained and limited by competing demands (including Afghanistan and Iraq).

An objective and thoughtful analysis of the roots of religious extremism, a long-term commitment to assistance, and careful assessment, coordination, and contingency planning are the only solutions to dealing with the challenges of Central Asia and to achieving success in the war on terrorism in the region.