

Testimony of

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Chairman Poe, Chairman Rohrabacher, members of the two subcommittees, thank you for the opportunity to speak today on the Islamist Militant Threat to Eurasia.

I have to emphasize up front that my views are my own and they do not represent, nor reflect, the official position of any other organization that I work with.

Also, I would like to start by clearly stating my agreement with other experts that there are Islamist Militant groups that threaten governments in Central Asia; I also agree that this is an important regional security issue and that the United States should be concerned. Therefore, I would desire that my testimony here today not be misconstrued as an argument to do less. We categorically should not reduce the level of security cooperation we have with our partner nations in the region.

However, I would recommend being judicious in assessing whether we ought to be alarmed and, since we are not operating in an environment of unconstrained resources, we should also carefully calculate whether we need to do more than what we are already doing.

Firstly, Afghanistan will not automatically transition into a safe haven for Islamist militants after the withdrawal of International Security and Assistance Forces by the end of 2014. Within months of ISAF's withdrawal, the militant organizations are likely to face strategic choices on whether they will shift or continue to fight in Afghanistan. Even if they do attempt to shift to Central Asia, it is unlikely that entire organizations would be committed to that fight. Central Asian militants are much more likely to be focused on assisting their militant allies in attempting to garner tactical successes locally, than to be devoting efforts to attack planning in Central Asia. We are likely to have time to consider whether Central Asia requires, or desires, increased assistance from us, especially since there is an open question on how much international counterterrorist effort will still be dedicated to Afghanistan post-2014.

Which brings me to my second point, the security forces in Central Asia have demonstrated effectiveness in preventing and responding to militants inside their countries. Indeed, it can be argued that without much outside assistance, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan forcibly ejected the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan out of Central Asia and into "retirement" or Afghanistan in the late 90's and prior to the events of 9/11. Since then, these three countries and Kazakhstan have acknowledged several counterterrorist successes or mitigated the consequences of the sporadic attacks that have occurred. We should not ignore nor undervalue their own successes.

An important sub-point must be made as well – the United States has had occasion to question the methods our Central Asian partners have used in the past decade to respond to perceived threats. Specifically, in regards to Uzbekistan, the difference in perspectives about Andijon in May 2005 resulted in a breach in the bilateral relationship that has not been completely reconstructed. United States interests in these countries, as senior officials have repeatedly emphasized, are addressed on a broad range of policy priorities. These facts underscore my firm assertion that we should not do less, but I also think it should be taken into close consideration in determining if, and how, we provide more security assistance in the region.

Central Asia has been recognized and appreciated by many American and European leaders over the past decade for allowing passage for logistical support to international forces in Afghanistan. However, could Central Asia have done more? I think it would be beneficial to hear from these countries whether or not, and how much, they believe they have benefited from past security cooperation with us, before we undertook to adjust our security assistance programs in the region.

There are other reasonable considerations to inform our decisionmaking and those must take into account the assessments of our military services, unified commanders, and intelligence organizations. How much capacity do our Central Asian partners have for expanded cooperation? Do specific militant groups even have the ability to operate within, or project into, Central Asia at a level that exceeds our partners' existing capabilities?

Finally, there is a growing body of academic literature assessing that militant Islamist beliefs do not resonate with Muslims in Central Asia. Central Asia is not populated by Muslims who are just yearning and dying to fight for living in a Caliphate. The nature of political and economic conditions in Central Asia do indeed serve as a recruiting ground for militants; but I want to reiterate that this effect is driven by political and economic reasons and not strictly for religious motivations. In the future, if Central Asian governments do not effectively implement reforms, the political and economic conditions will present those governments with greater security and stability challenges. Whether these challenges prompt the existing leaders to maintain more draconian grips on power or their security organizations naturally assess and prepare for these threats, there is likely to be a gradual increase in the repressive tactics that are a two-edged sword for these nations. On the one edge, these governments can argue that their security forces have successfully handled threats; but on the other sharper edge, as many experts in Western countries believe, these security practices may actually further facilitate recruitment and stir popular support for the anti-regime objectives of the militant groups, if not the militants' Islamist views.

In conclusion, it is reasonable to look at Central Asia as one place where Islamist militants may turn after Afghanistan and Pakistan, if they are in fact able to turn elsewhere. The desire in Central Asia for U.S. assistance in countering Islamist militants is not the same as a "need" or "requirement" for U.S. assistance. There is little argument against sustaining the security assistance and cooperative relationships we have in Central Asia. However, looking forward, the ability of these governments to address the militant threat does not appear to require more U.S. assistance and we should leverage this fact in focusing on our other policy priorities in the region.