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Islamist Militant Threats in Eurasia

Good afternoon everyone and thank you very much, Chairman Rohrabacher and Chairman Poe, and thanks as well to the ranking members and other members of the subcommittees for inviting me here today.

I'm pleased to testify today as we enter an especially critical and dynamic phase of our relationship with Central Asia. Despite the real gains in stability in Afghanistan, our drawdown has raised anxiety levels among our Central Asian partners about the increased potential for instability and extremism, especially beyond 2014.

Specifically, many of the Central Asian states share a common concern that the drawdown of ISAF combat troops in Afghanistan will give extremist groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan more freedom to operate and focus their attention once again on the Central Asian states.

There is also some fear across the region that cooperation with the Northern Distribution Network – increasingly important for our retrograde shipments out of Afghanistan – could invite terrorist backlash and trans-regional extremism. I am confident, however, that the approach we have taken with Central Asia helps proactively strengthen the region's capacity to combat terrorism and counter extremism, while encouraging democratic reform and respect for human rights. There is much work to do, but our continued commitment to Central Asia is crucial to stability in Central Asia as well as Afghanistan.

Let me now briefly summarize the Islamist militant threats in Central Asia, the steps the Central Asian countries are taking to counter these threats, and the

assistance and diplomatic efforts the United States has underway in each country and with organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or OSCE, to help these countries address those threats.

Islamist Militant Threats in Central Asia

Before I discuss our engagement with Central Asian states on these issues, let me outline our assessment of the threat from Islamist militants in the region. Groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, or IMU, have spent much of the last decade operating inside northern Afghanistan, just beyond the reach of the Central Asian states and where Afghan and Coalition forces offer an enticing target. The IMU is likely to continue to devote major resources to northern Afghanistan, while looking for opportunities to expand their currently limited presence in Central Asia and prepare for eventual attacks in the region as part of a long-term strategy to broaden their influence.

Counterterrorism, or CT, capabilities are uneven across the region. However, these capabilities have generally been sufficient to prevent groups from establishing secure operational bases. Although the threat has been kept at bay, as our forces withdraw from the region we must continue our efforts to help prevent terrorist recruitment and strengthen the Central Asian countries' CT capacities, so they can defend themselves in a responsible and measured fashion.

Country Terrorism Overviews

I would like to briefly touch on recent counterterrorism efforts and trends within the five Central Asian countries.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstani officials continue to express considerable concern about the threat of violent extremism. Starting in summer 2011 and continuing throughout 2012, there were numerous security incidents, which the government attributed to terrorists or violent extremists, generally involving small explosive devices or small arms ambushes, primarily targeting government infrastructure or armed policemen. In two separate trials in April 2012, 47 defendants were found guilty of organizing bombing attacks on government buildings in the city of Atyrau in western Kazakhstan on October 31, 2011. The violent extremist group Jund al-Khalifah (Soldiers of the Caliphate) claimed responsibility for that attack.

In several cases, explosions with no reported civilian casualties were attributed to accidental detonations of explosive devices by extremist groups. Security forces periodically reported shootouts with people they described as terrorists; in such cases, security forces often killed all of the members of the alleged terrorist cells. These incidents have kept the host government on high alert, but terrorist groups have yet to manage a successful, large-scale attack in Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan has welcomed intensified dialogue on CT issues, which we intend to pursue.

Kyrgyzstan

2012 was a year of relative stability in Kyrgyzstan following the inauguration of President Almazbek Atambayev in December 2011, which marked the first democratic turnover of presidential power in the nation's history. The government was politically stable, notwithstanding periodic protests organized by opposition politicians. There were no reported terrorist attacks in Kyrgyzstan and no large-scale inter-ethnic clashes. Kyrgyzstani security forces, however, conducted continual special operations against individuals allegedly affiliated with terrorist organizations throughout the year. The government remained attuned to the potential for terrorism and participated in numerous international cooperative counterterrorism efforts. Kyrgyzstan's porous borders, particularly in the south, make it a potential safe haven for terrorists. The potential for inter-ethnic violence in the south remains a matter of concern.

Tajikistan

Tajikistan has a 1,300-kilometer border with Afghanistan and remains vulnerable to attacks from terrorists based in Afghanistan or Pakistan. It continues to address weaknesses in its counterterrorism strategy and has demonstrated an improved capacity to conduct counterterrorism operations. Tajikistan increasingly circumscribes the role of Islamist groups in Tajik society and in some cases has also imposed restrictions on religious freedom.

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan continues efforts to improve the capacity of law enforcement agencies to counter terrorism, ensure border security, and detect terrorist financing. In 2012, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) released Turkmenistan from its global Anti-Money Laundering/Counterterrorist Finance

(AML/CTF) compliance monitoring process in recognition of significant progress in improving its AML/CTF regime. In 2012, Turkmenistan significantly improved the professionalism of its border security service and built several new frontier garrisons on its borders with Iran and Afghanistan. It also brought online four radiation portal monitors along those borders, donated by the Department of Energy through its Second Line of Defense program.

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan continues to rank countering terrorism within its borders as one of its top three security priorities, together with counternarcotics and countering what it perceives as political and religious extremism. Uzbekistan shares many U.S. counterterrorism goals and objectives in the region, but it has in some cases employed methods inconsistent with respect for the fundamental rights of citizens and the rule of law. The government continues to express concern about the potential for a “spillover effect” of terror attacks across its shared border with Afghanistan, especially post-2014. The government remains confident it can control its border with Afghanistan but is less sure about its neighbors’ ability to do so. Uzbekistan is particularly concerned about infiltration of extremists through its long, rugged border with Tajikistan.

U.S. Efforts

The United States has an enduring interest in promoting a secure and prosperous Central Asia. Given the importance of the Northern Distribution Network and our interest in maximizing the region’s economic potential, our foreign assistance programs build the capacity of Central Asian countries to address transnational threats, such as those posed by Islamist militant groups, while promoting regional economic integration and development.

Our approach for all five Central Asian countries is to build their capacity to address cross-border challenges in counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics, law enforcement, and non-proliferation, while at the same time tackling issues related to human rights, rule of law, and corruption. To achieve these objectives, we use a combination of diplomatic engagement and bilateral and multilateral assistance.

On the diplomatic front, the United States holds annual bilateral consultations with each of the five Central Asian countries. These consultations, which I chair with the Foreign Ministers or Deputy Foreign Ministers of each country, form the cornerstone of our bilateral relationships and provide us a venue to openly discuss

every aspect of the relationship, including human rights; security cooperation; economic cooperation; humanitarian and development assistance; and cultural and scientific cooperation. We convey a consistent message that democratic reform, greater media freedom, and an active civil society all contribute to stability. We use our diplomatic efforts, public diplomacy resources, and assistance programs to make a strong case for respect for human rights, religious freedom, and the rule of law.

Our bilateral security assistance is helping build the Central Asian states' capacity to counter a broad range of threats, including terrorism. In 2012, the United States provided approximately \$215 million of security assistance to the countries of Central Asia through a combination of Department of State, Department of Defense, and Department of Energy programs. This funding level represents a \$60 million increase over 2011 levels. The bulk of this assistance is focused on building capacity of the law enforcement agencies to address transnational threats, including terrorism and narcotics trafficking.

Through the Central Asia Regional Strategic Initiative (RSI), our assistance is enabling the FBI to provide tools such as the Automated Fingerprint Information System to Uzbekistan. RSI is also supporting a community policing project in Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic to encourage greater counterterrorism cooperation in the border areas of those two countries. By building trust between law enforcement and local communities, the project aims to prevent terrorist movement while encouraging policing methods consistent with respect for human rights and the rule of law.

The Antiterrorism Assistance program (ATA) is active in four of the five Central Asian countries and emphasize border controls, investigation capabilities, and strengthening the security of the region as a whole. We are engaged in talks with the fifth country, Uzbekistan, aimed at re-launching that program, which was suspended because of human rights issues.

While these efforts help address transnational challenges, we know that in many cases the drivers of violent extremism are often political and social rather than religious in nature. These include the denial of political rights and civil liberties, human rights violations, and widespread corruption, and to varying degrees they are all problems in the Central Asian states. That is why our diplomatic engagement and bilateral assistance also aim to improve compliance with international human rights standards and principles of government accountability and transparency.

For example, in Kyrgyzstan, we are supporting comprehensive security sector reform, which, along with assistance efforts in the judicial sector, is helping bring about a fairer and more transparent system of justice. In Tajikistan, we have a very successful community policing program that is working at the grassroots level – building trust between police, local government, civil society, and the community – to address local problems related to crime safety, security, and quality of life. At the same time, we are working with the central government to encourage institutionalization of the community policing methods into the foundation of national police reform. Such programs also help stabilize communities and vulnerable areas that have experienced conflict with the government forces, like Rasht Valley and Khorugh.

We are also exploring with our embassies how to tailor Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) projects in the region to meet the needs of local communities that are most at risk. These programs have proven effective in other parts of the world and are designed to reduce the vulnerability of targeted or at-risk segments of the population to the appeal of violent extremism. We see this as a promising avenue for helping our Central Asian partners strengthen their defenses against the threat of terrorism and violent extremism, while at the same time encouraging a respect for fundamental rights of citizens that is essential to the long-term stability of the region.

We also recognize that our interest in combating terrorism and other cross-border threats are shared by others, so we are engaging with other countries that are active in Central Asia in a cooperative approach to regional security and stability. I have made it a personal priority to expand significantly our consultations with Russia and China on Central Asia. Since 2006, over 2000 counternarcotics officers from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and all five Central Asian states have received training through a NATO-Russia joint project called the NATO-Russia Council Counternarcotics Training Project. In Dushanbe, the United States and Russia both play leading roles in managing the OSCE Border Management Staff College, which provides specialized training for senior management of border security agencies from across Central Asia, the wider OSCE region, and Afghanistan. I just visited the College last week and came away impressed with its contributions to strengthening border security across the region.

The OSCE, funded in part by the United States, is a good example of the important work of multilateral and regional organizations in addressing regional challenges. Through the OSCE, we have funded the NGO, Sisters Against Violent Extremism

(SAVE), to host workshops and build community-based support networks for vulnerable youth and families at risk of radicalization in Tajikistan. We have supported OSCE Travel Document Security (TDS) projects underway in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to promote increased participation in the International Civil Aviation Organization's (ICAO) Public Key Directory (PKD) system, a multilateral mechanism to assure the authenticity of biographic and biometric data stored on electronic documents.

We also support the OSCE in developing a multi-step awareness-raising and capacity-building program focusing on preventing terrorism in OSCE participating States. A particular focus will be placed on capacity building assistance for national criminal justice officials related to investigating, prosecuting, and adjudicating terrorism-related crimes. The OSCE also has an ongoing prison reform and rehabilitation project in Kyrgyzstan. The OSCE conducted several training sessions in 2012, where Kyrgyzstan's corrections and other security officials studied Turkish and Kazakhstani experiences in working with extremists in prisons.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by noting that we do not assess that there is an imminent Islamist militant threat to Central Asian states. Our efforts and assistance commitments are part of a comprehensive and proactive approach to strengthening the capacity of Central Asian states to address a range of transnational threats. The limited threat currently posed by Islamist militants to Central Asia, however, is no reason for complacency or retreat. The Central Asian states face a broad range of challenges that, as in many other societies, could fuel radicalism in the long run and threaten the security and interests of the United States and our allies. Addressing those challenges demands our continued vigilance and engagement in this region.