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**The Threat of Islamism in Central Asia and the
North Caucasus**

**Testimony before the
Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats; and the Terrorism, Nonproliferation,
and Trade Subcommittees**

House Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. Congress

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The Threat of Islamism in Central Asia and the North Caucasus

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Esteemed Chairmen, Ranking Members, and Members of the Committees. My name is Ariel Cohen. I am a Senior Research Fellow in Russian and Eurasian Studies and International Energy Policy at The Heritage Foundation. I testify here in my private capacity, and it is an honor to appear before your subcommittees.

In the global struggle against violent Islamism, Russia and Eurasia represent an important front. No less a figure than Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's successor, proclaimed this, and over the last two decades Al Qaeda and its funders and affiliates have committed considerable resources to foster terrorism and instability from the Black Sea to the Fergana Valley and the Pamir Mountains. They do so as they sense a strategic opportunity to reach out and radicalize Muslims who in many cases have little to no access to moderate but credible Islam. Terrorists and extremists, mostly of the Salafi/Wahhabi creed, and their organizations with global reach, are making inroads into these areas, where the societies suffer from government corruption, brutality and abuse by law enforcement, a lack of trust for abusive local and central governments, interethnic hatreds and racism, and poor economic opportunities.

It is in the interests of the United States to localize, minimize, manage and eradicate the threat of Islamist terrorism in the North Caucasus and Central Asia, primarily in the Fergana Valley. In doing so, the Administration needs to reach out to the governments and societies which oppose this existential threat, while recognizing the limits of our power and resources.

Let me address the challenges geographically.

North Caucasus

The Russian Northern Caucasus, an area north of the Caucasus Ridge between the Black and the Caspian Seas, is turning into one of the most volatile, lawless regions in the world, as well as a hotbed of international terrorist activity. This despite decades of Russian military operations and repeated assurances from the Russian government that peace has been achieved. As Russian control of the region becomes increasingly weak, it is turning into a significant base

for Islamist terrorist organizations and organized crime that can and may ignite an even greater terrorist campaign inside Russia and beyond.

Islamist terrorists from the self-proclaimed Caucasus Emirate have already attacked the energy infrastructure, trains, planes, theaters, and hospitals. They are increasingly spreading beyond the region and are involved in terrorist activities in Western Europe and Central Asia, including Afghanistan. The North Caucasus Islamist insurgency is part of the global radical Islamist movement, which is deeply and implacably inimical to the West and the United States.

Russian Response Lacking

Russia deals with these issues every day, but after 20 years of warfare, the problem has not disappeared, nor is it likely to vanish any time soon. Suffice it to say, that Russia fought an insurgency in the North Caucasus in the 19th century for close to 60 years, and often with extreme brutality, which include massive civilian casualties and ethnic cleansing of hundreds of thousands. Later on, numerous rounds of warfare played out between the central government and the local, often Islamic-inspired rebels. Today, insurgents in the North Caucasus attack police, security forces and civilians openly.

While Russia has a strong interest in combating Islamists and cooperating with the U.S., the current Russian government is not being cooperative. Moreover, Moscow has often accused “U.S. allies”, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, of financing the rebels, assuming Washington’s (and London’s) control of and blessings upon such activities.

Furthermore, significant U.S. counter-terrorism involvement in Eurasia beyond Afghanistan, which would be beneficial to the interests of all parties, is viewed by many in Moscow as Western meddling aimed at weakening Russia. At the same time, Russia did cooperate with the U.S. in building and operating the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), which has been crucial for the supply and now, the evacuation, of the [International Security Assistance Force](#) for Afghanistan (ISAF). Overall, however, intelligence and counter-terrorism cooperation with Moscow so far has been limited.

As relations between Moscow and Washington are deteriorating, including on such issues as Syria, Iran, missile defense, and human rights, this may negatively affect whatever is left of counter-terrorism cooperation in the region. Thus, it would serve U.S. interests to boost anti-terrorism cooperation with our NATO allies, including Turkey and the former Soviet states, and to let Russia come to us for anti-terrorism, intelligence and security cooperation in this area, if it so desires.

To alleviate the hostilities, in the past decade, the Russian government has crushed the Chechen insurgency, and implemented many economic and developmental programs, in the North Caucasus. The central government in Moscow and the local governments in the autonomous republics have invested billions of dollars in aid to curb the appeal of radical Islam,

especially among the youth, but the area's overall economic and social prospects remain grim. The lack of economic prospects, combined with well-funded religious indoctrination and radicalization campaigns in the region are leading to armed struggle against local and federal governments and religious establishments. The crisis is exacerbated by heavy-handed security policy and the pervasive corruption and mismanagement by the central Russian and local autonomous republic governments, and continues to plague the area. The new generations, which grew up during the warfare, are utterly alienated from the Russian state.

Islamists in Caucasus present dangers to U.S. interests because:

- Ungoverned spaces that provide safe havens for terrorist organizations, in which they can train and communicate with other groups to plan attacks.
- Chechen and other North Caucasus fighters that have travelled to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria to take part in the global "jihad"; and
- Instability in the North Caucasus which affects U.S. allies in the region and international commerce.

Thus, as the North Caucasus devolves into an ungovernable haven for Islamist terrorism and criminality, prevention of an international terrorist safe haven in the North Caucasus, and ensuring the free flow of energy resources are high priorities for the U.S. in this volatile region, such a threat should not be allowed to develop.

The interests of the United States and its allies could suffer from Russia's policy failure to respond appropriately to Islamist extremism, which will increasingly affect energy-rich Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia. Terrorists may threaten main energy export pipelines and railroads. The Administration needs to develop a strategy to respond to potential "spillover" from the Islamist insurgency in the North Caucasus. The U.S. and its allies also need to monitor the region for early signs of danger. A modest investment in intelligence, diplomacy, and capacity-building with U.S. friends and allies could help to mitigate the rising Islamist threat.

Despite Russia's having reestablished control of Chechnya, terrorist activity in the Russian hinterland has increased significantly. According to the Global Terrorism database, Russia ranked seventh in the world in the number of suicide attacks between 1991 and 2008. More than 1,100 terrorist attacks resulted in more than 3,100 deaths and 5,100 injuries.

Chechen Islamist militant Doku Umarov now leads the "Caucasus Emirate", ratcheting up attacks against Russia. These attacks have included bombings of the Nevsky Express (Moscow–St. Petersburg) trains in 2007 and 2009, the Moscow Metro double suicide bombing in 2010, and the suicide bombing at Domodedovo Airport in January 2011.

In 2012, extremists attacked the mufti and the deputy mufti of Tatarstan, deep in the Russian heartland. The mufti was severely wounded, and his deputy died. Both were known as promoters of the traditional moderate Tatar Islam. This terror attack is a watershed, as it signifies

a spillover of violent radicalism beyond the initial North Caucasus heartland of insurgency. Well-funded Salafis are now operating throughout Russia, with traditional Muslim clergy having little to offer in opposition, whether spiritually, or in terms of scholarship. The ongoing radicalization of the 20 million-strong Russian Muslim community is a real threat.

One ominous development has been that al-Qaeda and other foreign extremist organizations in the Middle East and Central and South Asia have increased their financial and moral support of the radical Islamist movement in the Caucasus and in Eurasia. The North Caucasus has been on al-Qaeda's radar screen for a decade and a half. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current leader of al-Qaeda, visited the area in the mid-1990s and was even temporarily in Russian custody. Al-Zawahiri has referred to the Caucasus as one of three primary fronts in the war against the West.

Recently, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the most active and dangerous al-Qaeda affiliate, has been expanding its global reach. For example, AQAP has been translating al-Qaeda's online journal, *Inspire*, into Russian to attract extremists in Russia and Eurasia.

Furthermore, Doku Umarov made clear that the Caucasus is an integral part of the global jihad: "after expelling the *kuffar* [non-believers], we must reconquer all historical lands of Muslims, and these borders are beyond the boundaries of the Caucasus," and "Everyone who attacked Muslims, wherever [they] are our enemies, common enemies."

Thus, the Caucasus "jihad" is a two way street. Terrorists who were trained in the North Caucasus have joined al-Qaeda and other operations in Waziristan in Pakistan. Islamists from the Caucasus are also now fighting side by side with their brethren around the world in Syria. According to the recent reports, a commander from Chechnya known as Abu Omar al Checheni is a key leader in the Mujahireen Brigade, a jihadist group that is fighting alongside the Al Nusrat Front for the People of the Levant against the regime of President Bashar al Assad. The Mujahireen Brigade, whose members include experienced fighters from the "Islamic Caucasus Emirate", has played a vital role in overrunning several major Syrian military installations over the past year.

Chechen jihadists have the means and motivation to take part in a global jihad.. If the North Caucasus transforms itself into the Caucasus Emirate, as its indigenous Islamist groups hope, Caucasian terrorism will only spread further in Eurasia as NATO forces prepare to leave Afghanistan.

Central Asia: Beyond the 2014 U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan may have a severe destabilizing influence on Central Asia – the heart of Eurasia. Central Asian states, specifically Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan

and possibly Tajikistan, are facing unpredictable transitions after long-serving leaders leave the scene.

However, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are the largest and most viable states in the region, and both should be US policy priorities for cooperation against international terrorism. While often heavy handed in their dealings with the local opposition, and leaving little civic space for legitimate political activities, they remain the key to U.S. strategy in the region. It should be stressed, however, that while Kazakhstan is committed to the Moscow-directed Eurasian Union and Commonwealth Security Treaty Organization – the mini-Warsaw Pact, -- Tashkent has clearly distanced itself from Russia’s influence-grabbing projects in what it calls its “near abroad” or “zone of privileged interests”. Both states have developed militaries and security services, fear Islamists, and recognize the value of diversifying their diplomatic and political-military ties beyond Moscow and Beijing. Thus, U.S. cooperation with Astana and Tashkent, both in terms of securing bridgeheads in the region to fight terrorists and in terms of political-military cooperation, is vital.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, on the other hand, are weak – and some say, failing – states, plagued by drug trafficking, corruption, and failures of law enforcement. With that, the current regimes are relatively secular compared with the radical, anti-Western Taliban-style regime of militant Islamists with links to Al-Qaeda that have challenged them in the past. These Islamists, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Islamic Jihad of Uzbekistan (IJU), as well as Hizbut-Tahrir, the Muslim Brotherhood, *et al.*, are likely to return and challenge these governments after the ISAF leaves Afghanistan. Additionally, Central Asia is becoming an area of rivalry between Russia and China, with India and Pakistan, as well as Turkey and Iran also jockeying for influence.

China plays an increasing role in Central Asia, mostly in the economic realm. It is happy to “outsource” security to its Shanghai Cooperation Organization partner Russia, while Beijing is watching the U.S. presence in the heart of Eurasia like a hawk.

For the West to augment security in Central Asia will not be easy. After September 11, 2001, Russian President Vladimir Putin sanctioned a U.S. and coalition presence there to support operations in Afghanistan, but no longer. Russia now urges that the United States’ ouster from its transit base in Kyrgyzstan and opposes a Western presence even to address narcotics and terrorism threats.

Today, as Ambassadors John Herbst and William Courtney suggest, U.S. policy is based on the assumption that the 350,000-strong Afghan security forces, with assistance from U.S. advisers, will be able to keep the Taliban in check. However, it is likely that after 2014, barring a political agreement, the Taliban will control most Pashtun areas. Importantly, as long as the Taliban remains a viable entity in Afghanistan, it poses a danger beyond its borders, and especially in Central Asia, as some of its affiliates are radicalized ethnic Uzbeks.

It is possible that the Afghan Army will not be able to keep Taliban in check, and that the Taliban may overrun Kabul, as it did in the 1990s. In such a case, if fighting spreads northward, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – which host Russian military bases – as well as Uzbekistan, might seek protection from Moscow. Tashkent may also ask Beijing for help.

The fall of the pro-Western government in Kabul would endanger the Central Asian countries. They want Western support to forestall IMU and IJU subversion, counter narcotics smuggling, and in particular maintain a balance vis-à-vis Russian and Chinese power. Central Asia's unique position makes it vital to U.S. interests beyond 2014. The Northern Distribution Network is essential to the NATO mission in Afghanistan and will only become more important as American troops begin to come home. Development of the Northern Distribution Network, or NDN, into a New Silk Road, to include railroads, highways, pipelines, fiber-optic cables, and airports, will require regional and international cooperation, including that of the International Financial Institutions (IFIs). If successful, it may be a great development lever for the region. The Islamist organizations in Central Asia are regional but remain a threat. They actively try to attack NATO forces in Afghanistan and pose a danger to energy logistics in Central Asia and the Northern Distribution Network.

Policy Recommendations

To counter the North Caucasus Islamist insurgency, the Administration should:

- **Engage** European states in bilateral anti-terrorism cooperation, expand NATO-based cooperation, and continue negotiations with the EU members on counterterrorism and intelligence cooperation.
- **Cooperate** with and train local intelligence and law enforcement forces. Building on the experience of training Georgian counterterrorism forces for operations in the Pankisi Gorge, the U.S. should expand anti-terrorism programs with Azerbaijan and Georgia and forge closer ties with the local counterterrorism and intelligence forces.
- **Pressure** Middle Eastern states to stop their nationals from funding and training terrorists. The U.S. needs to put significant pressure on the states—especially Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE—whose nationals are involved in funding or training insurgents in the North Caucasus to stop the flow of cash to terrorist groups, bankrupt the North Caucasian insurgency, and prevent its integration into the worldwide Islamic extremist movement.
- **Obtain** Turkey's cooperation in fighting North Caucasus terrorism. The U.S. should emphasize Turkey's obligations as a NATO member and ask Turkey to provide information on North Caucasus extremists and their supporters.

- **Help** Georgia and Azerbaijan to strengthen border controls. The porous borders between Russia and Georgia and Azerbaijan are major security concerns. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security should assist Georgia and Azerbaijan in making their border security effective and transparent; protecting energy sources and pipelines; and restricting the passage of arms, drugs, terrorists, and related goods and information.
- **Be prepared** to expand anti-terrorism cooperation with Russia when the overall state of bilateral relations improves.

To improve Central Asian security post-2014, the Administration should:

- **Integrate** Central Asia into the Afghanistan–Pakistan strategy, including the New Silk Road Strategy. The war in Afghanistan is the Administration’s top foreign policy priority. Central Asian security should be addressed not just through the lens of U.S. logistics, but also by sharing counterterrorism know-how, strengthening civil societies, improving governance, and boosting the rule of law. However, any U.S. non-military technical support should be conditioned on improvements in good governance.
- **Expand and improve U.S. intelligence in the region.** The U.S. intelligence community should improve intelligence sharing with reliable Central Asian partners to identify and counter emerging radical Islamist organizations. This should target the financial sector, as terrorists use money laundering and the black market to raise funds. The U.S. must also work more closely with local authorities to track militants’ movements and neutralize their deployments early. However, the recent upheavals in the Middle East demonstrate that one cannot rely exclusively on local intelligence services. U.S. analysts and operatives should develop greater linguistic, political, and cultural skills and spend more time in the field recruiting assets.
- **Strengthen border controls.** The porous borders throughout Central Asia pose major security challenges. The U.S. should prioritize the strengthening of border controls through the State Department’s Central Asian Regional Strategic Initiative (RSI). The RSI assists partner countries in building capacity to combat terrorism, and it should emphasize the links between drug trafficking, terrorism, and border security. However, U.S. assistance must be careful not to strengthen the repressive law enforcement and security services components that the regimes deploy against political opposition.

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