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# National Security and Uzbekistan: Discourse and Policy

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### **Author Background**

Michael Rose graduated from Oklahoma State University with a BA in Political Science and Russian Language & Literature. In 2011 he taught English with Teach and Learn with Georgia in the Republic of Georgia. He is currently an MA candidate with the Center for Russian and Eastern European Studies (CREES) at the University of Kansas and plans to graduate in 2015. For the 2013-2014 academic year Michael received the Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO)-CREES Graduate Research Assistantship (GRA). Michael investigated reports pertaining to illegal migration, political opposition, and other security-related developments in Central Asia.

### **Introduction by Matthew Stein, FMSO**

Since it became independent in 1991 the government of Uzbekistan has dealt with several issues that have shaped its perception of security in the region. The Civil War in Tajikistan from 1992-1997, incursions by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in 1999 and 2000, various violent incidents across Uzbekistan in 1999 and 2004-2005, and the end of the combat mission of the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) in Afghanistan in 2014 have all had an impact on how the government views threats and the policies it takes to deal with them. In this study, CREES-FMSO research analyst Michael Rose breaks down statements and policies implemented by the government of Uzbekistan in response to threats and some of the contentious issues that have resulted from this.



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Since 1991 the government of the Republic of Uzbekistan has grappled with an array of national security threats. In the 1990s violence perpetrated by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a transnational jihadist group, threatened the government.<sup>1</sup> President Islam Karimov, his administration, and security apparatus often reveal their concerns and plans to approach these threats through their rhetoric and general press releases. When there are no statements made, the legislation and direct action taken reveal these concerns.

## Objectives

The purpose of this paper is to identify the most current national security concerns of the government of Uzbekistan. In order to better understand the intent behind actions taken by the government, it is necessary to consider the context in which they occur. This will be done by noting the following:

- Discourse of Karimov and the government of Uzbekistan
- The scope of recent security-related legislation
- Recent action taken by Uzbek security forces
- Challenges presented by opposition groups

### ***“Discourse of Danger”***

Since the mid to late 1990s Karimov has utilized what many scholars call the “discourse of danger” in his public addresses.<sup>2</sup> In essence, this means that the executive office makes it a point to tell citizens that there is an imminent threat to the security of the nation at any given time. While the validity of the discourse is debated by many, legitimate threats to Uzbekistan’s security and cohesion exist nevertheless.

In 2014, in celebration of the 22<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the formation of Uzbekistan’s security forces, Karimov praised the accomplishments made in strengthening and improving the combat readiness of the armed forces.<sup>3</sup> In the same address, he warned of threats to the security of the Republic, expressed concern over stability in Afghanistan after the expected withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and warned that armed extremist and terrorist groups are likely to incite instability and provoke violence along Uzbekistan’s border areas. In order to effectively defend against these suspected threats, Karimov stated that the intelligence and military capacities of Uzbekistan’s armed forces will continue to be reformed and improved.<sup>4</sup>

In particular, Karimov stressed the importance of the Ministry of Defense continuing to coordinate joint exercises with helicopter units and special forces. Karimov also stated that additional vehicle repair and training facilities must be constructed and emphasized that the number and training of noncommissioned officers (NCO) and junior commanders should be increased, as well as social protection and benefits for servicemen, veterans, and their families. Finally, he stressed that the media should actively promote a positive image of the military to the citizenry in order to cultivate a sense of patriotism for the motherland.<sup>5</sup>

Judging by this rhetoric, Karimov is appealing to the military and citizenry of Uzbekistan in order to ensure stability and cooperation through the upcoming years. To a great extent, the call reflects the recent and current security dilemmas facing Uzbekistan. The 2014 withdrawal of ISAF forces from Afghanistan has been a priority of the Uzbek and neighboring security forces

for some time.<sup>6</sup> Uzbek security officials report that IMU fighters have returned to Afghanistan's Northern Badakhshan region and are receiving funding and training from sources in Pakistan.<sup>7</sup> Officials say they intend to continue monitoring migration, recruitment by militant organizations, and distribution of related literature and other media.<sup>8</sup>

In January 2013 Kyrgyz border guard forces clashed with civilians in the Batken province of Kyrgyzstan near the Tajik-majority village of Hoshiyar within Uzbekistan's Sokh enclave. According to Kyrgyz sources, engineers installing electrical power lines in the area were allegedly attacked by residents of Hoshiyar, who reportedly kidnapped about 15 Kyrgyz citizens (the number varies among accounts) and held them



*Kyrgyz border guards in Batken.*

*Source: [http://www.azattyk.org/content/kyrgyzstan\\_border\\_security\\_region\\_batken/24878695.html](http://www.azattyk.org/content/kyrgyzstan_border_security_region_batken/24878695.html)*

hostage.<sup>9</sup> Riots erupted in Hoshiyar and elsewhere in Sokh, with many Sokh residents displaced and granted shelter in the Fergana Valley area of Uzbekistan.<sup>10</sup> Sokh residents were allowed to return to their homes in the enclave in February 2013, after Kyrgyz and Uzbek officials reached an agreement. Sokh will remain an important matter of security for Uzbekistan because many Uzbek citizens travel from Sokh to Uzbekistan and northward for work.<sup>11</sup>

Uzbekistan's borders with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan are areas prone to ethnic conflict and violence stemming from illegal border crossings. These conflicts are likely why Karimov delivered his address to the military and security forces in the manner that he did. Uzbek security forces are expected to increase in responsive capacity and training activity, likely as a response to questions of security throughout the country's enclaves and the border with Afghanistan.

### *Legislation and National Security Measures*

In order to counter the influence and mobilization of religious and opposition movements within the borders of Uzbekistan, Uzbekistan's parliament passed measures in 2014 to codify the regulation of production of religious material.<sup>12</sup> The legislation calls for the Committee on Religious Affairs to form a bureau to regulate the production and distribution of religiously themed material in the country. Authors will be required to obtain approval from the bureau before distributing



*Uzbek customs officials*

Source: <http://news.mail.ru/incident/14428270/>

material. The legislation states that the format of any material includes printed literature, CDs, DVDs, tapes, and internet publications, and also authorizes state customs and security officials to seize unauthorized materials from individuals either entering or already within the country who are found to possess them. Authors of said materials will be required to provide their names, addresses, and intended quantity of circulation. Provision 18 of the legislation bans a wide variety of themes, including calls for violent change of the constitutional order of the Republic and change in religion, and appeals to citizens to disobey constitutional orders.<sup>13</sup> The broad scope of these provisions suggests that media arriving to and produced within Uzbekistan will be subject to intense scrutiny from the state apparatus. Essentially, the bureau itself will determine what is found to be anti-state or otherwise unacceptable.

In order to address threats associated with illegal migration, the government of Uzbekistan is also expanding its implementation of a new micro-chipped biometric passport system.<sup>14</sup> Migrants often travel without proper work visas and passports from Uzbekistan to Kazakhstan and Russia in hopes of finding advantageous employment arrangements. Not only do many of

these migrants become susceptible to human traffickers, they are also prone to recruitment from Russian-speaking Salafi recruiters for participation in extremist and terrorist activity in the Middle East.<sup>15</sup>

The exact number of Uzbeks who have travelled by such means to Iraq and Syria are unknown. However, the danger that these individuals pose to the stability of the government and safety in Uzbekistan is a real concern. The government of Uzbekistan is evidently aware of this potential, as indicated by its recent changes in border regime and passport control. Uzbek citizens living abroad must submit their passports in exchange for the new biometric passports or they will be denied re-entry into Uzbekistan. Also, citizens wishing to travel abroad must first apply for and receive the new passport.<sup>16</sup> It is most likely that Uzbeks fighting in Iraq and Syria left Uzbekistan before the accelerated implementation of the new biometric passports; they will now be unable to legally return to the country without the new biometric passport.

These changes suggest that the government intends to regulate on a case-by-case basis the return of Uzbek citizens who have been abroad for a period of time. Some claim that these changes will affect Uzbek citizens who have been working abroad, effectively leaving them as “stateless” persons.<sup>17</sup> The new regulation could effectively serve as an institutional dragnet, blocking the return of individuals allegedly involved in transnational violent criminal activity; however, the return of nonviolent migrants will also undoubtedly be affected by the policy. The timing of the legislation could reflect the government’s desire to heighten migration security in light of recent instability abroad.

In March 2014 Karimov made an executive order that requires certain government officials who wish to travel abroad to personally gain permission from the president.<sup>18</sup> Business trips by members of the legislature and senate will also be regulated according to a list of state officials compiled by Cabinet ministers and approved by Karimov. Those state officials seeking to make such a trip must provide a detailed itinerary and explanation of the purpose of their trip.<sup>19</sup> It is curious that the president has placed these restrictions on so many officials, making their exit

from the country on any sort of foreign business dependent upon his approval. The decree also applies to state officials who have knowledge of sensitive intelligence or state secrets.<sup>20</sup> While Karimov personally maintains the list, it is difficult for a state official to embark on an unregistered trip.

### *Action and Voices of Opposition*

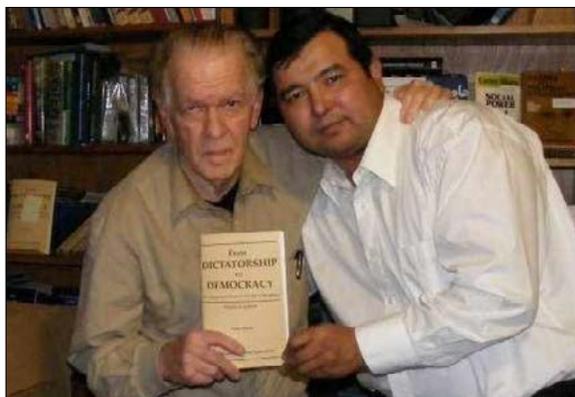
The Uzbek government also employs the “discourse of danger” language when referring to religious and political opposition groups. In February 1999 Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), a religious political opposition movement, was blamed for an assassination and bombing attempt on Karimov.<sup>21</sup> Mass arrests of HT members and independent followers and teachers of Islam have since followed.<sup>22</sup> HT has been levying accusations of illegal detention and torture against the government of Uzbekistan and Karimov.<sup>23</sup> In a video published in January 2014, it lists a number of “martyrs” arrested by police in 1999. These individuals are reported to have received multiple extended sentences since their detention, suffering torture during their confinement. The video prays to Allah for an expedient defeat of Karimov and the government of Uzbekistan.<sup>24</sup> Uzbekistan’s secret services are also reported to be engaging in torture and enhanced interrogation of suspected Islamists detained in prisons in Russia.<sup>25</sup>



*Erk and People’s Movement of Uzbekistan leader Mohammad Solih seeking police protection in Turkey. Source: <http://rus.azattyq.org/content/mukhammed-salih/25087550.html>*

Members of Uzbekistan’s less religious political opposition have also been accused of being associated with violent extremist organizations or immoral criminals. In its official discourse the government and security apparatus appear to frequently attribute violent and criminal tendencies to otherwise nonviolent political organizations and figures. The early national political opposition movements *Erk* (“Will”) and *Birlik* (“Unity”) were outlawed as political parties in

the early 1990s. These opposition movements appear to lack cohesion and cooperation between their leaders. In February 2014 *Erk* leader Mohammad Solih issued a call to citizens of Uzbekistan to take up arms against Karimov and the government, fearing that the president intends to hold on to power for life.<sup>26</sup> Solih is now the leader of the People’s Movement of Uzbekistan (PMU), an umbrella opposition group which *Erk* joined. He denies authoring the call to arms, and pro-Solih writers accuse the opposition groups *Birlik*, *Birdamlik*, and many Uzbek media outlets such as *Uznews.net* of being puppets of the regime.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, *Uznews.net* condemns Solih’s alleged call to arms as inciting violence and shameful.<sup>28</sup> This discourse reveals internal fracturing among Uzbekistan’s political opposition, many of whom are banned by the government from participating in elections.



*Birdamlik* opposition leader Bahodir Choriev  
Source: <http://www.uznews.net/uz/world/27512-diktaturadan-demokratijaga-endi-ozbek-tilida>

The security apparatus of Uzbekistan appears to continue its targeted coercion of *Birdamlik* as well. In 2013 Hasan Choriyev, father of the group’s leader Bahodir Choriyev, was arrested and accused of raping a 17-year-old girl.<sup>29</sup> Prior to his arrest he had allegedly been threatened with imprisonment unless his son withdrew from political activity.<sup>30</sup> Bahodir Choriyev, with *Birdamlik*, has made efforts to launch what he calls a “color revolution” similar to what was seen in Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Georgia.<sup>31</sup> *Birdamlik* members are reported to have been denied exit from Uzbekistan while attempting to attend an opposition congress held in April 2014 in St. Louis, Missouri.<sup>32</sup> It is ap-



Participants at the St. Louis Kurultai (congress) of Uzbeks in St. Louis, MO April 2014.  
Source: <http://www.uznews.net/ru/politics/26074-birdamlik-kogda-my-bridem-k-vlasti>

parent that the government of Uzbekistan is suspicious of *Birdamlik's* organization, viewing it as a threat to the rule of the government.

### ***Outlook on the Future***

The 2014 withdrawal of ISAF troops from Afghanistan will likely remain a particular area of concern for the government of Uzbekistan. If instability and violence follow the withdrawal, President Karimov can be expected to continue strengthening the military capacities of the state and reinforcing its border guards. With upcoming parliamentary elections in 2014 and presidential elections in 2015, monitoring and coercion of opposition groups will likely continue. As seen above, Karimov is pursuing tight control over media publications, political demonstration, and the movement of civilians and government officials. Recent developments indicate that attitudes of anxiety and distrust dominate the discourse and policies pertaining to national security in the Republic of Uzbekistan. Perhaps it is appropriate to refer to Karimov's security policies and rhetoric as belonging to the "discourse of danger." However, as seen with the border clashes, calls to arms and violence, it is clear that there indeed are clear threats to the stability of the regime and security in the country. The higher challenge facing the government of Uzbekistan is thus to find an equitable implementation of security and military policy that will simultaneously provide a safeguard against legitimate threats while upholding the human rights of its citizens.

## END NOTES

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