



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Hon. Benjamin L. Cardin

Ranking Member - Helsinki Commission

Mr. Chairman, thank you for calling this hearing. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today on the ongoing crisis in Uzbekistan.

Whether you believe President Islam Karimov or almost everyone else about how many people died in Andijon last month, it was a turning point in the growing confrontation between state and society in Uzbekistan. President Karimov has blamed local Islamic radicals and outside agitators for instigating the disturbances, in the hope of fostering destabilization and creating an Islamic state. The charge is familiar – we have been hearing such claims from President Karimov for years now, whenever people try to protest or engage in opposition political activity.

Let us acknowledge that Uzbekistan really does face threats from Islamic radicals. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which the U.S. Government has designated a terrorist organization, has well-documented ties to al-Qaeda and has carried out terrorist actions in Uzbekistan. Moreover, Hizb-ut-Tahrir, whether you support or decry the government's ban, is gaining influence in the country. The group, which arose in the Middle East, pursues an anti-American, anti-Semitic agenda. Even if its claims to be non-violent are true, its values and goals -- which feature the reestablishment of the Caliphate -- stand at cross purposes with those of a secular, tolerant society.

The United States should be cooperating with Uzbekistan against international terrorism and we need not be ashamed of doing so. Nevertheless, many observers are convinced that President Karimov's policies are aiding and abetting terrorism, not fighting it. He views his own people with the most profound distrust, stubbornly insisting on total control of the political arena. Stifling all dissent, Islam Karimov appears to reject the notion that political opposition or any manifestation of discontent might not be subversive or could have motivations other than religious extremism.

Yet in Andijon, according to eyewitnesses -- some of whom are present in the room today -- there was no sign of Islamic fervor. Demonstrators were protesting economic deprivation, injustice and the lack of hope. They were calling for freedom, not shouting "Allahu Akbar." I suspect that what happened in Andijon has bolstered the radical Islamic cause, providing recruits and engendering an implacable desire for revenge.

Finally, I note that Uzbekistan has been identified as a country "in danger" on the *Failed States Index* just compiled by Foreign Policy Magazine and the Fund for Peace. That designation is all the more reason for us to make every effort to prevent disaster in that very important country.