

## Introduction

Turkmenistan is one of the most isolated countries in Central Asia – and the world. It is ruled by President Niyazov who calls himself “Turkmenbashi” or Head of the Turkmen. The international community pays little attention to Turkmenistan, a country that has the fifth largest reserves of natural gas in the world. Niyazov’s official policy of neutrality has served him well: He has managed to isolate his country from the rest of the world. This situation could have major consequences not only for Turkmenistan, but also for the entire Central Asian region as well as for U.S. strategic interests in that area.

In my presentation, I will touch on several key issues that provide some useful background on the situation inside Turkmenistan:

1. U.S. and Regional countries Security Interests
2. Regional Cooperation
3. The Domestic Situation
4. Future Prospects

### 1. U.S. and Regional Security Interests

Turkmenistan’s security policies do not reflect solidarity with the interests of the United States or with the countries of Central Asia. Except for the minor concession of providing overflight rights for the US and NATO air forces during the operation in Afghanistan, Turkmenistan does not take part in any regional organizations and ignores the international coalition on the war against terrorism and the struggle against drug trafficking.

#### a) Taliban

Until the very last moment, Turkmenistan was the only Central Asian country that maintained close contacts with the Taliban. Numerous reports and publications allege that after September 11 elements of the Taliban found shelter in, and transited, the territory of Turkmenistan.

Until September 11, Turkmenistan maintained active trade relations – mainly sales of gasoline -- with Afghanistan, or, to be more precise, with the Taliban, in violation of UN sanctions. There are also grounds to believe that Turkmen territory is used for drug-trafficking. After September 11, Turkmen government structures possibly connected to narco-business have undergone major shake-ups.

The post-September 11 situation has not moved towards more transparency and cooperation in the war against terrorism, extremism and drug-trafficking. Turkmenistan still does not participate in any meetings on a regional level in the anti-terrorist struggle and until the present has not taken part in any efforts directed against narco-business. From 2000 until now, Turkmenistan has not provided information to international organizations on drug confiscations and chemicals used to refine drugs.

According to the most recent information from the Turkmen government and UN statistics, at least 20 to 25 percent of the narcotics originating in Afghanistan transits

the territory of Turkmenistan. Other countries in the region, particularly Uzbekistan, have expressed concern that Turkmenistan, with its long common border with Afghanistan, refuses to cooperate on questions relating to narco-business.

## 2. Regional Cooperation and Security

Turkmenistan ignores regional cooperation, resulting in the impossibility of resolving many regional problems: water and energy resources, the regional transportation system, trade and ecology. "Turkmenbashi" cooperates only in the energy sphere, since gas revenues provide the financial base for his regime.

Turkmenistan's economy heavily depends on a gas distribution system in which Russia plays a decisive role. Russia also has a strong economic interest in exploiting the lucrative Turkmen gas market to meet its domestic and international needs. Russian access to the Turkmen gas market also allows it to maintain tacit control over the entire regional energy market and to prevent the development of alternative gas pipelines from Central Asia. Russia tries to increase its political influence in Central Asia by manipulating the energy market. After the murky attempted November 2002 coup in Turkmenistan, it seems evident that Russian purchases of Turkmen gas are linked to its support for "Turkmenbashi's" regime since Russia benefits from the status quo. If Russia gains more influence in Turkmenistan, it will only strengthen the current regime and cannot lead to reform.

A Turkmenistan-Afghanistan gas pipeline is not an economic necessity. It would also provide international funding that would allow the Turkmen regime to further enrich itself and finance more of "Turkmenbashi's" new projects.

## 3. The Domestic Situation

The political and economic system of Turkmenistan is totally controlled by one man: "Turkmenbashi."

### a) Isolation.

The regime's central policy is to isolate Turkmenistan from the rest of the world. This policy includes a burdensome visa regime and restrictions on movements inside the country. It is also quite difficult for foreigners to get visas to visit Turkmenistan. And if a foreigner wants to marry a Turkmen citizen, "Turkmenbashi" ruled that he or she must pay \$50,000! I must add, however, that I have never heard of that provision being put into effect.

### b) The Political System

There is no political opposition in Turkmenistan, since the political system is destroyed and members of the political opposition are in exile or in prison. The constant firing of officials at various levels of the government and in the law enforcement agencies rule out the possibility of opposition from within the elite. Despite "Turkmenbashi's" policy of neutrality, in recent years he has begun to buy weapons for his army.

### c) Economy

It is difficult to assess Turkmenistan's domestic situation. Official statistics are inflated two-three times to glorify Niyazov's regime. The economy is totally based on redistribution. The population receives the minimal wage possible and then "Turkmenbashi" distributes free gas and electricity. In this way, a tiny portion of the wealth stolen from the people is returned to them. Unemployment and drug addiction have become normal.

Under the current irrational and corrupt political system, Turkmenistan's rich energy resources are more a curse than a blessing. Turkmenistan's high income from its gas exports permits its government to remain aloof from international organizations, to completely ignore the need for reforms and to isolate the country from the rest of the world. "Turkmenbashi's" decisions never make sense from an economic point of view: Billions are wasted on palaces and other projects. All of this is being done at the expense of the current and future generations of Turkmenistan.

### d) Education

Education has been lowered to nine years and classes in math, physics and most foreign languages have been dropped or shortened. Two books by "Turkmenbashi," the "Rukhnama" and his new work, "The Source of Wisdom" are now important "educational" high school textbooks. Due to the low level of education, anyone who has graduated from schools like these will have no chance to enter universities outside Turkmenistan. Niyazov's 2003 decision that diplomas of foreign institutes of higher education will not be recognized as valid may become law on June 1, 2004. This would represent another step in the country's isolation and will probably lead to a further brain-drain from Turkmenistan.

### e) Health Care

The country's health care system is in a lamentable state, but most people lack access even to this poor medical system. "Turkmenbashi's" decision in early April 2004 to fire 15,000 nurses and to replace them with soldiers has led to a dramatic decrease in the already poor level of medical service. This step allows the government to lower spending on the health sector. Soldiers are also being used on a wide scale in government enterprises, such as in construction and factories, to work essentially as slave labor.

### f) Information

The population is isolated from almost all sources of information from outside the country. Local newspapers and television strongly distort all events inside the country. Turkmen media claims that the entire world approves of "Turkmenbashi's" policies, particularly its policy of neutrality. In this way, the domestic media tries to convince the Turkmen population that the country is on the right path. "Turkmenbashi" is extremely sensitive to any criticism from outside Turkmenistan and that is why the country is totally isolated from the external world.

#### g) Ideology and Religion

“Turkmenbashi’s” ideology is dangerous since it proclaims the unique nature of the Turkmen people and essentially promotes a chauvinist ideology. Russians, Uzbeks, Azerbaijanis, and members of other ethnic minorities are routinely discriminated against in employment and other areas.

“Turkmenbashi” thinks he is a Prophet. “Turkmenbashi’s” cult of personality has reached such a point that the “Rukhnama” has been elevated to the level of the Koran. Mosques are supposed to engrave quotes from the “Rukhnama.” on their walls. All of this is deeply offensive to devout Muslims not only in Turkmenistan. All other religions except the Russian Orthodox Church are under strong pressure and basically are illegal.

#### 4. Future Prospects

If these negative trends continue and if world opinion continues to close its eyes to events inside Turkmenistan, the country will face a very difficult and unstable future after Niyazov has left the scene. The country will have a destroyed economy, an uneducated and undernourished population, a huge army of unemployed people and major problems with drug addiction. Therefore, Turkmenistan as well as the long-term U.S. commitments in Central Asia will pay a heavy price for ignoring the tragic situation in that country.

In the last two months, there have been some minor positive steps undertaken by the Turkmen government. For example, the Turkmen authorities have started to cooperate with the U.N. on narco-trafficking. A simplified exit procedure for leaving the country is now in effect. Niyazov announced a decree to simplify the re-registration of religious organizations. And the World Bank and IMF have sent missions to Turkmenistan. In late March the UN Human Rights Commission sent a mission to discuss possible future cooperative projects with the Turkmen government.

One must note, however, that many of these potentially positive steps occurred just before the UN Human Rights Commission met to consider the adoption of a resolution critical of Turkmenistan. The question remains: do these recent positive moves represent a genuine change in policy or are they merely political theater frequent in Central Asia? And will these positive changes ever be enacted in reality? Unless the international community undertakes significant new policies with regard to this isolated country, it is very doubtful that Turkmenistan will move in a positive direction.

I hope that the U.S. government, international organizations and non-governmental organizations will not forget the people of Turkmenistan. I hope the international community will include the Turkmen people in educational and cultural exchanges, public health programs and improve access to information. I also hope that Western officials will speak out publicly against human rights and other abuses by the Turkmen government. Such measures can help bring about a more positive future for the people of Turkmenistan, the Central Asian region and for U.S. interests in the world.