

**Testimony: Dr. Eric M. McGlinchey**  
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Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

My understanding of the Andijan events is informed by discussions with Uzbek colleagues both within and outside of President Islam Karimov's government. These confidants have, at considerable risk to themselves and their families, confirmed the Karimov government applied disproportionate force in suppressing the largely peaceful protest in Andijan in May 13, 2005. If we are to believe this account, rather than the alternative militant Islamist narrative the Karimov regime offers, the question for us is: can the international community influence the Uzbek government to refrain from future political violence? Three recent developments—all profound structural changes in the geopolitics of Central Asia—offer a political opening through which the international community broadly and the United States in particular can encourage the Karimov regime toward political liberalization :

1. NATO operations in Afghanistan have not been adversely effected by Uzbekistan's rescinding of access to the Karshi-Khanabad Airbase
2. The political legacies of two Islam Karimov contemporaries, former Kyrgyz President Askar Akaev and deceased Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov are actively—and literally—being dismantled
3. Changes in commodity markets, namely Uzbek cotton exports and basic food imports, are weakening the already brittle economic foundations of the Karimov government.

Critically though, the sense of vulnerability these three developments may engender in the Karimov government can equally lead to autocratic retrenchment and political repression. This paradox of political openings makes it all the more important that the United States continues to stress Uzbek political reform and deemphasize military cooperation.

### **Authoritarianism and the Karshi-Khanabad Airbase**

Analysts such as Galima Bukharbaeva and Alexander Cooley find that NATO bases in Uzbekistan encouraged the Karimov government's autocratic leanings. By allowing western powers access to airstrips close to the Afghan border, President Karimov was able to cultivate at home and abroad a credible image as a partner in fighting transnational terrorism. Critically though, whereas NATO engaged real terrorist groups like the Taliban and Al Qaeda, Karimov fought imagined terrorists—political oppositionists, human rights defenders, and businessmen—whom the Uzbek president portrayed as homegrown Islamist militants. Calling Karimov on this charade cost the United States access to the Karshi-Khanabad airbase, but rebuking Karimov did not cost the United States and NATO any noticeable decreased military capacity in Afghanistan.

In his March 5, 2008 Congressional Testimony, Admiral William Fallon, now former Commander of Central Command, noted that the US "reinstated a security relationship with Uzbekistan after a hiatus of about three years." Our past security relationship with Uzbekistan,

albeit short-lived, suggests that maintaining the opposite strategy, that is deemphasizing military relations with the Karimov government, may prove more fruitful to Uzbek political reform while, concomitantly, presenting no limitation to US strategic interests in the region. This relationship between military bases and Uzbek autocracy is a question Congress might address as it considers confirmation of the next Commander of US Central Command.

### **Fading Political Legacies**

The Class of 1991—the cohort of five Central Asian leaders who became presidents of independent states following the Soviet collapse—has only two members still in power. Since the 2005 Andijan bloodshed, Uzbek President Karimov has watched the legacies of his Kyrgyz and Turkmen counterparts, Presidents Akaev and Niyazov, fade as successor governments build new legitimacy by rejecting old leaders. At the same time, Karimov has witnessed the comparative success of Yeltsin and Putin’s well-choreographed leadership successions. Should the Uzbek president now be considering his own legacy, he likely is more attentive today to potential exit strategies than he was three years earlier.

Robust US political engagement with Uzbekistan at a time when President Karimov is casting a questioning eye toward political (im)mortality can positively influence the nature of potential successor regimes. Even carefully picked successors strike out on new paths. And just as we can imagine Russia’s new president, Dmitry Medvedev, pursuing warmer relations with Washington while still celebrating his mentor, so too might Uzbekistan’s next president reach out to the west while publicly honoring Karimov’s legacy.

### **Challenging Commodity Markets**

The Uzbek government, similar to governments in other developing countries, is vulnerable to the global trend of rising commodity prices. The Andijan protests themselves were motivated in part by public frustration over mounting food and energy costs. Price inflation is not the only commodity challenge the Uzbek government must confront. The Karimov regime’s most reliable hard currency source—cotton exports—is also encountering challenges on the global market. Uzbekistan is the world’s second largest exporter of cotton. Problematically for this one-billion-dollar-a-year state-controlled export, though, recent media reports exposing the widespread use of child labor in the Uzbek cotton industry have sparked a growing boycott of Uzbek cotton. Retailers and clothing manufactures that have pledged not to source Uzbek cotton include: H&M, Gap, Tesco, Marks and Spencer, Debenhams, Marimekko and Krenholm. This duel challenge of more expensive food imports and less secure cotton exports suggests that the Karimov government cannot remain a political island while embedded in the global economy.

Challenging commodity markets, insecure political legacies and new geopolitical realities are all structural reasons why the United States might find increasing influence with the Karimov regime. These structural changes, however, do not guarantee greater US influence. Perceptions of vulnerability can just as easily spark renewed repression as they can political reform in autocratic states. Since Andijan several of Uzbekistan’s brightest and bravest political reformers have been silenced. In May 2007 Umida Niyazova, a prominent journalist and human rights

activist, was sentenced to a suspended three year jail term, this after western governments protested the original court sentence of seven years incarceration. Other activists have fared worse. In October 2007, Alisher Saipov, an ethnic Uzbek journalist and political activist was murdered in Osh, Kyrgyzstan. In the weeks prior to his murder, Saipov warned his Central Asian and western colleagues that Uzbek security personnel were monitoring his activities. Speaking through intermediaries, Kyrgyz security officers confirmed Saipov's suspicions and have suggested direct Uzbek government involvement in Saipov's death.

Regime vulnerability, dissident repression and political reform paradoxically often share similar causalities. Ultimately, the outcome that emerges in Uzbekistan will depend on complex interactions among the structural changes outlined above and unforeseen structural changes in the months to come. Critically though, these structural changes have produced a political opening in Uzbekistan, an opening that Washington can positively influence through measured engagement with Tashkent.