

BRIEFING ON PROSPECTS FOR POLITICAL CHANGE IN UZBEKISTAN

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Comments by

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today.

It is always a privilege to appear before the Commission, whether at a hearing or at a briefing. It is a particular honor today, as I am sharing the platform with a number of individuals, who have made great personal sacrifices in the cause of building democracy in Uzbekistan.

As each of the preceding speakers has through their own life stories clearly attested, the challenge of building democracy in Uzbekistan is a daunting and frustrating one. Democracy activists operating inside the country put themselves, and their families, at great risk, and the risk continues for those who leave their Uzbek homeland to work for this cause abroad. While those in U.S. and other western funded NGOs working toward the goal of a democratic Uzbekistan find, at best, a frustrating situation when they try and set up work inside the country, and increasingly they are finding it effectively impossible to do so.

The situation that U.S. legislators concerned with this region confront is a very challenging one, as do all other U.S. policy-makers and concerned citizens. For ways must be found to

- Keep the aspirations of Uzbekistan's citizens for democracy alive,
- Increase the capacity of Uzbek elites and citizens alike to make a smooth transition to democracy, when circumstances make such a transition more supportable.
- Develop U.S. funded programs that are able to make the domestic Uzbek environment more supportive of internal political change, programs which if not supported by the Uzbek government are able to safely exist without its support.

- To not sacrifice, U.S. short, medium and long-term interests in the region and more generally, in the process.

These are very ambitious goals, and would be difficult to achieve even under the best of circumstances, when there were far more financial resources available to U.S. policy-makers to deploy in this region than is currently the case. Regardless, we will improve the effectiveness of our policies if we are better aware of the circumstances on the ground in Uzbekistan, as well as of the potential undesired but in some cases easily predictable outcomes of our policies.

I would like to make a few general points about the situation on the ground in Uzbekistan, what it means for the U.S. and then conclude with some policy recommendations that I think are politically and financially viable in the current circumstances.

Again, although I am not native to the region, I have traveled there regularly for over thirty years, and have been to many of the more distant corners of Uzbekistan.

#### Uzbek Political Opposition within and outside Uzbekistan:

- As we have heard in today's hearing, the opposition in political exile is not united. But I do not believe that this will play a major role in their success or failure.
- The Uzbeks are not going to import a political revolution. A successful revolution, of the "color" type must be made by forces almost entirely based within the country, with strong internal elite support, as well as a population willing to go out of the street.

- Even before Andijian, elite support for change was largely a “parlor” phenomenon, with the growing number of mid and even senior level administrators and policy-makers who lamented Karimov’s “wrong turns” of 1997-1998, and 2003-2004, doing so in private. Now, post-Andijian and the dismissals and arrests of a few politically prominent individuals, the closet reformers have dug down deeper into anonymity, venting their displeasure in ever smaller circles.
- Uzbekistan does have a small, armed opposition, most in some ways connected to the remnants of a mutated Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and though numerically insignificant in a weak state like Uzbekistan they can be destructive, especially if they enjoy even the support of a few individuals from the security ministries.

#### The Nature of the Islamic Threat

- While I do believe that Islamic radicalism is attractive to only a narrow band of Uzbek believers, and that the majority of believers, and the overwhelming majority of the older generation of believers are supportive of traditional Hanafi Islamic teachings, there is also a process of “globalization” going on among Uzbekistan’s believers, which is working to the advantage of those advocating more radical forms of Islam such radical forms include Hizb’ut Tahrir but also more important religious forces that enjoy greater public credibility such as ‘salafists’ (of the Muslim brethren type) and revisionist-Hanafists who advocates abandoning traditional Hanafi teachings in favor of

teachings more akin to those of state-sponsored seminaries in the number of Gulf States. This last group operates within the officially recognized Uzbek Clerical structure.

- There is nothing inherently dangerous in this, but it is important to note that there is more dynamism in Uzbekistan's religious establishment, than in their secular political and educational establishment. And the population, who hopefully openly courted by advocates of secular democratic ideals after a Karimov transition, will be fundamentally different than the community that Erk and Birlik worked with in their founding days.
- Part of the younger generation of Uzbeks, the under 25s are far more globally savvy than was ever envisioned 15 years ago, while the degradation of education, healthcare and general living standards in many densely populated urban and rural areas goes far beyond what was anticipated, by the government in particular, means that a growing percentage of Uzbek youth are experiencing upbringing that isolates them from the values of a more privileged minority.

#### The Security of the Karimov Regime

- Karimov has done a much better job in rebuilding the support structure for his power than most believed popular a year ago.
- He has carried out a purge of his "power ministries" leaving the SNB with clear domination over the MVD, and with the Ministry of Defense reoriented toward Russia, and its SCO partners.

- While the economic picture is opaque, the situation in some regions, and in some sectors of society have improved somewhat. High energy prices and high gold prices clearly benefit the Karimov regime's ability to mute at least temporarily economic displeasure of at least some groups of the population.
- Improved relations with Russia and Kazakhstan provide greater opportunity for trickle down and new medium and large-scale investment, as do improved trade relations with China

#### International Relations of Uzbekistan

- Karimov has managed to break out of the diplomatic isolation that Europe and to a lesser extent the U.S. sought to impose.
- While Russia and China never provided Karimov with the broad security guarantees he sought, they have taken smaller steps to help Karimov improve his security situation; both in terms of loans for military upgrades, greater intelligence sharing, and opening up the prospect of shared military operations.
- Led by the Germans, some Europeans are rethinking their ostracism of the Uzbeks.
- But Karimov is more focused in his anger toward the U.S. than ever before, making the conditions of for the U.S. embassy, as well of course, of U.S. funded NGOs difficult to impossible.
- He is effectively behaving like "a lover scorned," angry at what he sees as one false promises of one post 9/11 strategic partnership and Karimov seems to

believe that some elements in the U.S. administration would be eager to throw the weight of the U.S. (in some non-military form) in favor of his ouster.

#### The Current Relationship with Uzbekistan Has Costs to the U.S.

- The loss of Karsi-Khanabad has made the U.S. more dependent upon a weak and at best incompetent regime in Kyrgyzstan
- The U.S. regional economic initiatives are made more difficult to successfully execute without Uzbek participation. At minimum this will severely slow Tajik economic development, as well as Afghan economic recovery, and could imperil state survival in each country, as those alternative transports routes that bypass Russia, also bypass Uzbekistan must go over much more inhospitable high mountain terrain in Tajikistan and Afghanistan both.
- It is also strengthening Chinese economic influence (as transport options through Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan to China are increasing) vis a vis that of India, which is still substantially disadvantaged by current transport schemes, and less committed to trade with either Afghanistan or Central Asia than is China.
- It has become harder for the U.S. to directly engage with the next generation of Uzbeks, as it is much more difficult for them to get travel and study opportunities in the U.S.
- While an oftentimes embarrassing ally on the struggle against international terrorism, Karimov was an occasionally useful ally, especially, in the early years of improved U.S.-Uzbek relations, on questions relating to Israel. As the

situation in the Middle East grows more complicated, it will become more important for the U.S. to find independent channels to the various post-Soviet states that are not wholly shaped by Russia, a role which Uzbekistan not infrequently played.

### Conclusion

Obviously, none of this is argument for the U.S. to reverse the thrust of post-Andijan policy towards Uzbekistan, a policy which already had strong support in Congress due to Uzbekistan's highly dubious human rights record even before that event.

But Karimov has found ways to minimize the damage to him personally, to his family, and to his regime that resulted from U.S. and European efforts at isolation. He has even found new investors, largely from Russia and China, eager to invest in the larger energy projects that western investors were never able to conclude to their satisfaction.

Eventually Karimov will leave office, even if he runs in 2007, old-age and ill-health will eventually overtake him. But the U.S. faces an enormous challenge in Uzbekistan until he does----and there is a political situation on the ground that creates the opportunity for greater political openness---which Karimov's handoff of power to a hand-picked successor need not necessarily produce.

The U.S. must find ways to engage the Uzbek population, through a variety of educational and media-based outreaches. Much of the media work can be done without reengagement with the Uzbek government. And maybe some of the education work

can be done through non-U.S. partners. But unless someone works with the Uzbeks to get improvements in basic primary and secondary education, science and math in curriculum, teachers salaries, and physical plant, especially in rural areas, the U.S. may succeed in helping to develop a narrow band of secular western-trained potential elites, largely trained abroad, but they will be wholly alien from the society they seek to govern.