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**Testimony provided by Gulambek S. Umarov to the United States
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe.**

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the future of democracy in my homeland. Also, I'd like to take this opportunity to personally thank the members and staff of the Commission for their assistance and support in securing the release of my father, Sanjar Umarov, from an Uzbekistan prison in 2009.

In thinking about the impact that the "Arab spring" may have on the Central Asian republics, one needs to remember the recent history of our region. My country, Uzbekistan, was founded on the ruins of the Soviet Union. As a result, we have never had a tradition of democracy, individual rights, freedom of assembly or freedom of speech. We have always been ruled from the top with no opportunity for average people to impact our government. Sure, people are tired of permanent rulers and tyranny, but there is no tradition of free speech and there is certainly no room for any expression of dissent.

It is also important to remember that the vast majority of Uzbekistan's citizens are very, very poor. Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria on a relative scale, possess much more wealth than the people of Uzbekistan. Their citizens, therefore, have a closer connection to the modern world and greater expectations for the future. Moreover, because of the terrible poverty in Uzbekistan, young people leave the country for work in Russia and other far away places. Those that are left behind, especially in the countryside, are the elderly and women. This does not mean that people are happy with the existing regime. It means their livelihood is submissive to this regime. Discontent grows widespread, but almost everyone is too preoccupied, trying to put food on the table, to think of anything else.

We also need to remember some of the specific characteristics of the Uzbek regime. Time and time again, entire extended families are destroyed because a son, a nephew or cousin has offended even the most junior of bureaucrats in a local administration. The use of violence, terror and torture are so common that they have ceased to shock society and are, in a very sad way, accepted as the regular order of things. It is no surprise that people stay off the streets, fearful that the events that took place 6 years ago in May 2005 will repeat.

Nonetheless, there is a growing expectation of change in Uzbekistan that is based not on a democratic movement, but on demographics. The current leadership is old, and a behind-the-scenes struggle for power has begun. Evidence of this power struggle can be seen in the often irrational actions of the government. While 2011 was supposed to be the year of support of small and medium Business, at the same time, the government began to destroy all of the major markets – bazaars – in major cities including capital city of Tashkent. This policy was adopted in the name of city beautification and ultimately destroyed thousands of jobs and raised the cost of living for everyone. Why? One can only deduce that the destruction will enrich one faction of the

governing elite at the expense of another.

As change in the government is inevitable, it will be useful to think about ways in which the United States can further engage with the government as it evolves. From my experience in the field of human rights, we took cases to the UN, engaged in extensive advocacy in the United States, and pursued international legal remedies, but of course it would be better if you could achieve the same aims through open dialog with the authorities. The imposition of "sanctions", or even the threat of sanctions, has proven to be, counterproductive.

As a result, the United States should consider a series of incentives that could be implemented, provided that Uzbekistan accepts responsibility for its actions. A primary importance is the continued assistance reducing threat posed by religious extremism. Let there be no mistake, there is an active and increasingly assertive extremist threat in Uzbekistan. In order to address this threat, the United States needs to focus not only on police and military action, but also on the underlying causes of religious extremism in Uzbekistan. Among these are a wide spread sense of injustice caused by the absence of functioning civil institutions, monopolies in virtually all spheres of business and the destruction of Uzbekistan's most important asset, agriculture. Three specific initiatives that might begin to address these issues are:

- A concerted effort to support the authority and operation of the Parliament. If Uzbekistan can make a real transition towards democracy, a truly functioning Parliament is essential.
- De-monopolization. Over the past three years, the US has invested tens of millions of dollars in the development of the Northern Distribution Network to support operations in Afghanistan. Almost all of the economic benefits accruing from the operation of the NDN benefit a very small group of insiders. The US should use its investment in the NDN to encourage the growth of competition in Uzbekistan.
- Finally, as has been noted by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the mismanagement of water resources in Central Asia and Uzbekistan is causing great damage to agriculture, which accounts for 2/3s of the population's livelihood. The U.S. should greatly increase its support for the development of local, national, and international water management schemes in the region.

In conclusion, just as Egypt has been considered the lynch pin of the Arab world, so Uzbekistan is considered the lynch pin of Central Asia. All good citizens of my homeland fervently pray that we can avoid a situation where the people utterly give up hope and take to the streets. Should this happen, it would be a disaster not only for Uzbekistan but the region as a whole.

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