

It is as always an honor and pleasure to brief the Helsinki Commission. I don't spend as much time in Washington as I would like these days; that is because we at Keston have chosen not to have a high-profile presence inside the Beltway but instead to concentrate our limited resources on places such as Uzbekistan. One of the changes at Keston since the last time I met with you is that we now have a full-time correspondent for Central Asia, one of the world's leading specialists on the Islamic peoples of the former Soviet Union. That person is Igor Rotar, and most of what I say will be based on his on-the-spot observations and insights. He and I recently spent some time together gathering information in Tashkent.

As you know, Keston is a British organization though its employees include both Russian citizens such as Igor and U.S. citizens such as myself. One of our British habits is understatement; we try to avoid sensationalism. My colleagues and I have repeatedly said that terms such as "religious persecution" should not be used lightly; we explicitly reject the use of that phrase to describe the situation in today's Russia, despite the continued problems of religious discrimination and repression in that country. In Uzbekistan, our considered judgment is that the word "persecution" is all too accurate.

Keston also tries to avoid utopianism. The real world is a world of trade-offs, and sometimes one has to balance competing goals such as human rights and national security. In the case of Uzbekistan, however, the danger is that the west will undermine the long-term stability of Central Asia, and thus our own security, not by placing too much emphasis on human rights but too little.

We also want to avoid romanticizing the Uzbek opposition. We think that President Karimov is right when he says that Uzbekistan faces a real threat from Islamic extremists. The U.S. government is right to classify the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan as an international terrorist organization. The Party of Liberation (Hizb-ut-Tahrir) is less extreme, but we have found that at least its rhetoric has taken a violently anti-western turn since September 11. It is now openly calling for a jihad against the United States and its allies.

Unfortunately, Mr. Karimov's policies are such as to inflame this threat rather than to quench it. Like most of the Soviet ruling class from which he came, he and his top advisers seem tone-deaf to religion. They are manifestly hostile to the concept of social institutions, religious or secular, that are independent of state control. They are using the extremist threat as an excuse to crack down on any display of Islamic religious life that is not directly under the thumb of the regime. They are not deliberately trying to drive pious Muslims into the arms of the extremists, but that is the practical effect of their policies.

Today's Uzbekistan is a country where a young man risks being hauled off for police questioning simply for wearing a beard, that traditional sign of Islamic piety. Women wearing

traditional Muslim head coverings also face discrimination. It is as if Roman Catholics in America were to fear displaying ashes on their faces on Ash Wednesday.

Uzbekistan has closed hundreds of mosques since the mid-1990s. The only Islamic institutions functioning above ground are those controlled by the Spiritual Directorate of Uzbekistan, which in effect is a state agency. Muslims who merely meet for private prayer meetings or who possess Islamic literature not authorized by the government have often been harassed, arrested, imprisoned and tortured. One recently released prisoner told us that he had suffered beatings in prison simply for saying his Muslim prayers. But at least he is still alive; others have died while in custody.

The authorities usually accuse such Muslims of advocating the violent overthrow of the existing government, but rarely produce convincing evidence. We have asked our sources whether there have been any cases of Muslim believers charged with such offenses but later found innocent. They could think of none.

Uzbekistan's laws on religion make those of Russia seem libertarian by comparison-though Russia's are now moving in Uzbekistan's direction. It is now a criminal-not just an administrative-offense to violate a vaguely worded ban on the use of religion to "undermine social harmony." A 1998 statute explicitly prohibits all religious activities of any kind except by organizations that have received formal accreditation by the Uzbek Ministry of Justice. As in the old Soviet practice, everything is forbidden except that which is specifically permitted.

I would like to emphasize that Keston has found a direct connection between the freedom of Muslims and that of other religious faiths in Uzbekistan. Keston met with a Baptist pastor who told us that he was unable to get official registration for his congregation because it would be politically awkward for the authorities to authorize more Christian churches after closing so many mosques. We have found strict limitations on imports of Bibles and other religious literature. In Uzbekistan as elsewhere, Christians should support religious freedom for Muslims not only because it is the right thing to do in principle, but also because it affects the freedom of the Christians themselves.

Yesterday I did a computer search on the U.S. State Department's last two reports on religious freedom in Uzbekistan-the latest issued just last week. The reports are excellent in their detailed accounts of individual abuses, but I was unable to find one instance in which they use the term "persecution" to describe the Uzbek government's policies on religion. Nor has State classified Uzbekistan as a "country of particular concern" under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act. I think this is unfortunate. Sound policy begins with facing and telling the truth.

The need to face the truth in this case has implications that go far beyond Uzbekistan. In the words of one human-rights activist in Tashkent, Mr. Karimov “is waging war not only on extremists but simply on all serious Muslim believers.” The less Washington does to push Tashkent toward respecting the religious freedom of its own citizens, the easier it will be for Islamic militants to argue that we are fighting not just terrorism but Islam as a whole. The more plausible that claim, the more likely the dark scenario of a global “clash of civilizations.”

I repeat, this is not a case of utopianism versus realism. The hardheaded reality is that Mr. Karimov’s current policies are taking him toward the same fate that befell the shah of Iran in the 1970s. He should radically rethink those policies not as a matter of idealistic sentimentality, but of regime survival.