

“The United States will only exacerbate the threat of terrorism in Central Asia if it continues to encourage the region’s leaders to combat radical Islamic groups with greater militancy rather than with increased economic opportunities and something other than rhetorical respect for human rights.”

The Middle Easternization of Central Asia

PAULINE JONES LUONG

The scenario is by now familiar: repressive authoritarian regimes propped up by US military might and economic aid; widespread unemployment and poverty spawned by severe economic crises and a lack of economic freedom; popular resentment against American foreign policy and US troops in the region escalating as domestic support for militant Islamists increases.

The Middle East today? No, it is Central Asia in the near future. How this future will arrive can be traced in part to misguided policies pursued by the United States toward the region since its independence from Soviet rule. New strategic partnerships established in the aftermath of 9-11 have only exacerbated the situation. Fortunately, it is not too late to turn back the clock and prevent Central Asia from becoming the next Middle East.

POST-INDEPENDENCE TRENDS

At the end of their first decade of independence, the five Central Asian states that emerged from the wreckage of the Soviet Union—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—exhibit three striking trends: a convergence toward authoritarian regimes and closed economies; the rise of radical political Islam; and increased militarism of both government and society. These trends are extremely worrisome.

First, the directions in which the region’s countries are moving do not represent a natural outgrowth of local culture, nor are they historically

determined: they are at least partly the result of US policies. In the initial years of their somewhat reluctant “liberation” from Soviet rule, the five Central Asian states embarked on divergent paths of political and economic development. Predictions that conflict based on long suppressed ethnic, tribal, and Islamic identities would erupt immediately after independence proved false. During this period the leaders of the new countries resolved their cross-border disputes through peaceful negotiations rather than military action, and they exercised only limited violence in the suppression of political opposition within their borders. Unfortunately, all this has changed since the mid-1990s because of both regional and international pressures—especially from the United States, which has formed strategic partnerships with key states in the region.

Second, the three troubling trends—authoritarianism, radical Islam, and militarism—are not coincidental, but are integrally related and mutually reinforcing. As in many other parts of the Muslim world, increased repression under authoritarian regimes and poverty resulting from a lack of economic opportunities have contributed directly to the rise of militant fundamentalism. Governments in turn have used the rise of politicized Islam and its putative threat to national security to justify their increasingly militaristic actions. And increased militarism has reinforced both the convergence toward authoritarian regimes and closed economies and the rise of radical Islam as governments have become increasingly detached from their societies.

All three trends must be addressed holistically if they are to be counteracted. Boosting one—militarism, for example—to address the others will only serve to exacerbate all three. This has important implications not just for US policy in Central Asia, but also for the ongoing global “war on terror.”

PAULINE JONES LUONG is an assistant professor of political science at Yale University. Her books include *Institutional Change and Political Continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Power, Perceptions, and Pacts* (Cambridge University Press, 2002) and an edited volume, *The Transformation of Central Asia: States and Societies from Soviet Rule to Independence* (Cornell University Press, 2003).

AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES, CLOSED ECONOMIES

The predominance of authoritarian regimes and closed economies across the five Central Asian states obscures the fact that a considerable degree of divergence marked their political and economic trajectories in the first half of the 1990s.

Tajikistan engaged in the boldest experiment with democracy. In 1990, a broad coalition of democratic forces consisting of Rastakhiz (Rebirth), the Islamic Renaissance Party, and the Democratic Party emerged to contest the preceding regime and to participate in the newly independent country's first presidential elections, which were held in November 1991. Rakhmon Nabiev, the former first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, officially won the elections but the democratic opposition refused to accept the outcome on the grounds that the electoral results were falsified. After several months of mass demonstrations, the two sides in April 1992 agreed to share power in a coalition government. The incumbent regime soon derailed this agreement, however, and the conflict degenerated into a bloody civil war that lasted until a peace accord was signed in 1997. Since then, the country has struggled to implement the terms of the accord, which granted amnesty to the remaining opposition forces (the United Tajik Opposition, or UTO), provided for their assimilation into a unified army, and established a coalition government guaranteeing 30 percent of all administrative positions to the UTO. Although the country held presidential elections in 1999 and parliamentary elections the following year, neither was considered "free and fair," according to international observers.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan initially also underwent a significant degree of political and economic liberalization. In both countries a relaxed political atmosphere fostered the emergence of multiple political parties and a relatively free press. Within such a climate, the newly elected presidents (Nursultan Nazarbaev in Kazakhstan and Askar Akaev in Kyrgyzstan) allowed competitive presidential and parliamentary elections. On the economic side, both introduced significant privatization of the industrial sector—at least on paper. Kyrgyzstan went even further, becoming the first former Soviet republic to join the World Trade Organization and to institute extensive land reform.

Contrasting the initial trajectories of Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan with the region's two laggards on political and economic reform—Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan—captures the extent of the political and economic divergence in Central Asia.

Uzbekistan embraced gradualism, a euphemism for its intention to preserve as much of the Soviet system as possible, while Turkmenistan remained unreformed and unrepentant.

Since the mid-1990s, the region has seen a great deal of political and economic convergence. But this convergence has been away from liberalization—that is, away from the path that Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and especially Kyrgyzstan had embarked on in the early 1990s—and toward the authoritarianism and closed economies that were the chosen path of the region's most repressive and autarkic states, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

The political convergence has manifested itself in the growing number of rigged national referendums to extend presidential rule as a substitute for freely contested elections. The infamous strongman of Turkmenistan, President Saparmurad Niyazov (or "Turkmenbashi," leader of the Turkmen) initiated this practice when he held a referendum in 1994 to extend his tenure in office for an additional five years. Not long after, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan similarly opted to hold referendums in the spring of 1995. This practice then continued in Uzbekistan, where incumbent Islam Karimov's presidency was extended for another two years in January 2002 (allowing him to remain in office until 2007). It quickly spread to neighboring Kyrgyzstan, where a constitutional referendum was held in February 2003 to extend President Akaev's term until December 2005; and to Tajikistan, where a constitutional referendum was adopted in June 2003, enabling the current president, Emomali Rakhmonov, who has held the office since 1994, to seek another seven years at the expiration of his term in 2006. Not to be outdone, the national parliament of Turkmenistan voted unanimously to name Niyazov "president for life" when his term expired at the end of 1999.

Perhaps more alarming is the widespread bullying of the political opposition. This now common practice began in Uzbekistan in 1992 and spread to Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. It consists of harassing, indicting, and jailing political opponents, journalists, and human rights advocates. It also includes extensive assaults on the media and freedom of the press. Not surprisingly, this behavior has coincided with a general turn away from competitive elections and multiparty politics in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Just within the past few years Kazakhstan has witnessed the formation of an official presidential party (the Republican Party "OTAN," or Fatherland) and the passage of a national law that

threatens the future of existing political parties and severely limits the emergence of new ones.

Economic convergence in the region has consisted primarily of decreased economic freedom and increased barriers to trade. In the Heritage Foundation's 2003 *Index of Economic Freedom*—which ranks countries according to 50 variables covering such areas as government intervention in the economy, capital flows and foreign investment, property rights, and black markets—all five Central Asian states find themselves near or at the bottom of the list.

Trade barriers in the region appear in both official and unofficial forms. Official trade barriers include high tariffs and excessive transport fees (for which Kazakhstan is the main culprit), as well as visa regimes, excessive documentation requirements, landmines, and electric fences (all of which Uzbekistan initiated). The most common informal trade barrier is corruption. Border guards often demand excess payments to permit legitimate goods to pass while expediting the transit of illegitimate goods such as drugs, weapons, and women. Although corruption is a widespread problem, it is most acute in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which are the two poorest countries in the region and also share a border with war-torn and destabilized Afghanistan.

What lies behind this convergence toward authoritarian regimes and closed economies? A combination of regional and international pressures has driven the Central Asian states toward this outcome. The source of the regional pressure is Uzbekistan. As the strongest military power, the largest economy, and the geographical center of Central Asia, Uzbekistan has acted as a centripetal force, deliberately pulling the other states toward its own preferred model of development. The sources of the international pressures are twofold: some are part of the general international climate since the end of the cold war; others are specific to US policy.

While the European Union has pulled the East-Central European states toward convergence with democracy and markets, the Central Asian states' interaction with the international community has pushed them in the opposite direction. Among the mechanisms driving the region toward authoritarianism and closed economies, none is perhaps more stark and ironic than the role of international companies and financial institutions, which are supposed to help states integrate into global markets. Instead, a host of international corporations has been implicated in promoting illicit business practices (a bribery scandal involving US-based Mobil Corporation in Kazakhstan); in actively supporting authoritarian leaders' monopoly on the media (investments in state television in Turkmenistan by the French company Bouygues); and in deliberately exploiting local farmers (the involvement of several Swiss companies in the sale of futures schemes to Tajikistan's cotton farmers).

International financial institutions have not fared much better in promoting constructive business practices in Central Asia. Their continued presence and in some cases reentry into countries that have refused to implement basic market reforms, such as Uzbekistan, have critically undercut pressure on these nations to make a genuine commitment to reform. In May 2003 the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development held its annual meeting in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, even though that country still has not complied with a letter of intent on economic reforms that it signed with the International Monetary Fund in January 2002.

Unfortunately, misguided US foreign policy also has been complicit in the region's steady descent into authoritarianism and autarky. Beginning with the Clinton administration, America's primary policy goal in the region has been to promote stability and independent statehood. But the factors motivating



these policy goals were threefold. First, there was a strong presumption that the region would become a breeding ground for Islamic fundamentalism unless it was ruled by secular elites with the capacity and the will to contain religious violence. The outbreak of the Tajik civil war—widely misinterpreted (among scholars and policymakers alike) as a battle between Islamic fundamentalists and the forces of secularism and stability—reinforced this presumption. Second, American policymakers were drawn to the region by its vast energy reserves, and thus its potential to supply the United States and its allies with an alternative source of oil and gas. American officials assumed that such an arrangement could be more favorably brokered by autocrats than by democrats. A third and related factor was the assumption by many policymakers that, left unchecked, Russian imperialists would lead the charge to (re)colonize the region in hopes of (re)subjugating its people and (re)appropriating its vast energy wealth.

The driving forces behind US policy were thus fear and distrust of Islam, a desire to secure oil supplies, and suspicion of Russia's intentions. All three of these factors are similar to those that shaped US policy in the Middle East for decades and that fostered US support for ruthless dictatorships throughout that region. Indeed, America's policy toward Central Asia to date has not looked much different from its policy toward the Middle East before the March 2003 invasion of Iraq. It has consisted, first and foremost, of not pushing for fundamental political or economic change on the grounds that the specter of radical Islam warrants strong-arm tactics toward any form of political opposition and because stability is necessary to attract, secure, and maintain foreign investment.

By propping up weakly institutionalized states, the United States has effectively shifted the balance of power toward dictatorial central governments, but it has also undermined the popular legitimacy of these regimes and increased their proclivity to resort to coercive tactics as a means of governance. Likewise, with the exception of troops guarding Tajikistan's porous border with Afghanistan, the United States has largely succeeded in keeping Russia out of the region, but in doing so it has inadvertently opened the door for other potentially less desirable regional actors (such as the Taliban, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and China) to move in and spread their influence. Whereas Russia acts as a bridge from Central Asia to the West, and hence to Western values, these other countries act as a bridge to the South and East, where governments are less open to Western values.

More recently, the direct involvement of Central Asia, particularly Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, in the US-led "war on terror" has solidified the position of the region's dictators. It also has been used to justify their heavy-handed tactics, including discretionary raids on suspected terrorists (often merely practicing Muslims) and draconian border controls, in the name of enhancing security.

Any doubts that the United States was committed to securing autocracy in the region were quickly dispelled in the several months immediately following Uzbekistan's cooperation in the Afghanistan campaign. In November 2001, for example, the United States signed an agreement to provide Uzbekistan with \$150 million in financial aid, ostensibly to propel economic reform forward, without any mention of Uzbekistan's heinous record on human rights. When Uzbekistan's president, Islam Karimov, held the rigged referendum in January 2002 to extend his rule for another two years and to augment presidential power in dealings with the already impotent national parliament, the United States responded by announcing (two days later) that it would triple the amount of its pledged financial aid to the country. Granted, in March 2002 the US government signed an "Agreement on Strategic Partnership" with President Karimov that committed Uzbekistan to making some progress toward respecting human rights and implementing democratic (as well as market) reforms. But, given its lackluster fulfillment to date, the agreement appears to have served a merely rhetorical function on both sides.

THE RISE OF RADICAL POLITICAL ISLAM

Radical political Islam made its first appearance in Central Asia during Tajikistan's five-year civil war that erupted in 1992. But militant fundamentalism was an unfortunate consequence of the war, not its cause. The civil war in neighboring Afghanistan not only provided opposition forces with weapons and greater access to a lucrative drug trade, it also Islamized the conflict in Tajikistan. As both Russia and Uzbekistan increasingly intervened on behalf of the incumbent (former communist) regime, the Tajik opposition was forced to seek funding from Islamic countries and from groups with more militant views. The rebels also had to flee to northern Afghanistan, where they developed close ties to and trained with the Afghanistan mujahedeen. With the assistance of several mujahedeen factions, the radicalized opposition began to fight the civil war from military bases in Afghanistan in 1993, while the more moderate elements sought refuge outside Tajikistan.

Not until Tajikistan's civil war ended in 1997 did radical Islam begin spreading throughout the Central Asia states. Less than two years later, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) allegedly orchestrated a series of bombings in Tashkent, Uzbekistan's capital. Founded by Uzbekistani exiles in Afghanistan in 1996 with military and financial assistance from the Taliban and Al Qaeda, the IMU advocates the establishment through violence of an Islamic state in Uzbekistan. With such backing, from mid-1999 to 2001 Islamic militants were able to make a series of armed incursions into southern Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan from their bases in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Popular support for radical Islamists, though still limited, has reportedly been growing since the late 1990s.

What makes the emergence of Islamic militancy in Central Asia all the more curious, and alarming, is that Islam was not a viable political force before the IMU entered the scene, despite widespread expectations to the contrary. Scholars and policy-makers predicted the rise of fundamentalist extremism both before and immediately following the Soviet Union's demise. But this did not occur, largely because of the lingering influence of the Soviet system, which effectively transformed Islam into a local cultural identity and discredited Islam as a political force by linking it directly to violence and instability.

What, then, explains the rise of politicized Islamic radicalism almost a decade after the Soviet Union's demise? It might be tempting to blame this outcome on the international context—most notably, the region's unfortunate proximity to war-torn Afghanistan. But attributing the rise of radical Islam to international factors alone would obscure the underlying domestic causes. Radicalism represents a direct response to the growing political repression and shrinking economic opportunities that have accompanied the convergence toward authoritarianism and autarky in the region. It also responds to the increased militarism with which authoritarian leaders have sought to maintain their

repressive regimes and closed economies.

As is well known, domestic political repression has served to politicize and radicalize Islam in many parts of the world, including the Middle East and South Asia. In Central Asia, the IMU's emergence provides the clearest example of this direct causal relationship. The IMU began as a small group of local imams, known as Adolat (Justice). They attempted to impose Islamic law to counter widespread corruption in Namangan, a city in the Fergana Valley, the most fertile, densely populated, and culturally traditional area of Uzbekistan. The IMU evolved into an extremist group with the primary intent of overthrowing the Uzbekistani government only after an official crackdown on "unofficial Islam" in the Fergana Valley. Government repression forced IMU members to flee to Tajikistan and Afghanistan, where they trained with the mujahedeen.

Since the mid-1990s, moreover, political repression has increased in Uzbekistan and the region generally. In 1997, President Karimov expanded his crackdown on Muslims to include those affiliated with "official" as well as "unofficial" mosques. Wearing traditional Islamic clothing, growing a beard, or

possessing Islamic literature became immediate grounds for arbitrary arrest, detention, and imprisonment. During this same year, Kyrgyzstan's government launched its own crackdown on suspected "Wahhabis," including the closure of an independent Islamic center and the expulsion of foreigners from Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan who were suspected of disseminating "Wahhabism."¹ Also at this time, the radical Islamic group Hizb-ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation), which advocates nonviolent regime change, gained a foothold in many parts of Central Asia. Hizb-ut-Tahrir is a transnational movement that originated in the Middle East in the 1950s and only emerged in Central Asia in the early 1990s. Like the IMU, it advocates the overthrow of the Karimov government in Uzbekistan and the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in Central Asia. Unlike the IMU, it also advocates a return to "pure" Islam and renounces the use of violence.

The next wave of crackdowns began in Uzbekistan following the February 1999 bombings in Tashkent. The government authorized police to harass not only practicing Muslims but also their close relatives, many of whom were arrested,

In the eyes of many Central Asian leaders as well as human rights activists . . . America's military presence has in effect sanctioned the increasing brutality of Central Asian dictators.

¹The term "Wahhabis" generally refers to the adherents of a single sect ("Wahhabism"), or the austere form of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia. But in Central Asia (and throughout the former Soviet Union, for that matter) it is used as a pejorative to describe any Muslim suspected of political activity.

beaten, and sent to detention camps based on guilt by association. Hizb-ut-Tahrir in addition to the IMU was targeted. The repression appears to have peaked in 2000, when Uzbekistan's available prison cells, as well as detention camps built specifically to house religious activists, overflowed with political prisoners. This was also the year when Uzbekistan's government began pressuring neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to intensify their own crackdowns on Islamists. In Kyrgyzstan's southern provinces, Uzbekistani forces even conducted unauthorized covert operations against suspected Islamic militants. The Kyrgyz government responded by retreating from its expressed policy of toleration toward Hizb-ut-Tahrir, which had become increasingly popular in the southern part of the country. The group's followers were arrested and imprisoned on charges of inciting religious and racial hatred.

Political repression alone does not cause radicalism. Another domestic factor equally salient in fomenting militant Islam throughout the Muslim world is economic despair. Central Asia is no exception. The convergence toward increased barriers, both to trade and to the mobility of average citizens across borders, has severely restricted the growth of small and medium enterprises and with them opportunities for expanding employment. This has exacerbated widespread poverty in the region and fostered popular support for Islamic militants as a way to escape this impoverishment. For many Muslims with limited prospects, the radicals offer an alternate social vision in which prosperity will be restored and, once restored, more equitably shared.

The extent of poverty in Central Asia can be illustrated by a few statistics from its two poorest states, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In Kyrgyzstan, between 50 percent and 60 percent of the population live below the poverty line. In Tajikistan, the vast majority lives below the poverty line; its unemployment rate is approximately 80 percent. This endemic poverty is, of course, partly a legacy of Soviet rule. Tajikistan was the poorest of the former Soviet republics and the Central Asian republics in general were highly dependent on budget transfers from Moscow. But the depth of poverty has more recent origins, most notably in the high barriers, formal and informal, to trade with other nations.

The countries of Central Asia are especially dependent on free trade for economic growth.

Because these economies are both small and integrally linked to multiple states in the region, the development of key industries and agriculture, as well as the growth of small and medium-size enterprises, depends on access to markets. Major roads and railways, necessary to provide access to markets, once tied the former republics together as part of the Soviet Union; now they cross international borders. In Uzbekistan, the main road from Tashkent to Samarkand cuts through Kazakhstan; the main road from Tashkent to Andijon goes through Tajikistan; and railroad tracks from Fergana to Surkhandarya pass through Tajikistan. Several cities in northern Tajikistan are connected to one another only through Uzbekistan. Border restrictions, as a result, impair the ability to export and to secure access to suppliers across a border. In addition, closed borders affect labor mobility, which is often the only relief for unemployment. A vital link for Tajik migrant laborers is severed whenever Kazakhstan decides to halt trains between Dushanbe and Astrakhan, which

it has done intermittently since 2000.

These impediments to economic growth have exacerbated the poverty that has become a

Central Asia looks more like the Middle East politically and economically today than it did when the states gained independence from the Soviet Union.

source of popular support for radical Islamist groups. Poverty not only fosters disgruntlement, it also opens the door for Islamists to operate extensive charity networks, ingratiating themselves with the population. They can provide food, shelter, medical care, and education in areas where the state does not or cannot provide social or economic relief. The Islamists position themselves as legitimate organizations that not only represent the people, but are committed to—and capable of—delivering vital services.

While the Islamists' role in providing charity remains limited in Central Asia, they also have benefited from economic decline and poverty in the form of a growing drug and weapons trade, on which they rely to finance their activities. Reliance on the drug trade in fact has increased since the remnants of the IMU were cut off from their alternative sources of finance: the Taliban and to some extent, Al Qaeda. Impoverished populations that face strong economic pressures to participate in the drug trade also often become drug consumers. As a result, the commerce in drugs has promoted widespread addiction and the spread of the AIDS virus in Central Asia, further exacerbating the region's social and economic problems. The drug

trade also has contributed to economic decline and unemployment by undermining legitimate cross-border trade. It has become far easier to traffic opium than to export other, less lucrative crops.

INCREASED MILITARISM

The trends toward authoritarian regimes and closed economies and the rise of politicized Islamic radicalism in Central Asia have been accompanied by increased militarism. Since the mid-1990s, the political leaders of all five states in the region have increasingly relied on coercion in both domestic governance and foreign policy.

Domestically, growing militarism has manifested itself in increasingly violent suppression of those deemed opponents to the incumbent regime. Although it signed the UN Convention Against Torture in 1995, Uzbekistan has in recent years used ever more barbaric forms of torture in its swelling detention camps to force confessions from detainees, the majority of whom are allegedly members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir. Human Rights Watch reported in April 2002 that “physical and psychological torture . . . in criminal investigations” has been “common and widespread” since 1999. In the economic sphere, Uzbekistan has resorted to police seizures of lucrative private businesses, often to transfer ownership to state elites or to eliminate sources of competition, and it has fired on traders attempting to circumvent border closures. Since 1999, governments in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan also have displayed a greater willingness to attack their political opponents with brute force, particularly those associated with Islamic groups. In 2001, Tajikistan sentenced former members of the UTO to death based on coerced confessions in a secret trial. The following year, police in southern Kyrgyzstan killed several people when they fired into a crowd of peaceful demonstrators. The government later blamed the protest on Hizb-ut-Tahrir, justifying the shootings as necessary for national security.

Equally deplorable are the international forms that increased militarism has taken. In addition to its aforementioned military incursions into Kyrgyzstan to apprehend suspected Islamists, Uzbekistan since 1999 has instituted a series of draconian border controls to bolster its own security and, even more significantly, to prevent its subsidized domestic goods from being sold abroad. These include mining its borders with both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, building an electric fence along the border between Andijon (in Uzbekistan) and Osh (in Kyrgyzstan), and destroying the only bridge linking

Uzbekistan with Kyrgyzstan. Underscoring the extent to which these border controls are not purely (or perhaps even primarily) motivated by security concerns, Uzbekistan in the past two years has also made incursions into Kyrgyzstan to shut down private businesses that are successfully competing with its own domestic producers. The only citizens so far who have been injured or killed while attempting to circumvent these border controls have been petty traders engaged in legitimate commerce.

Perhaps the most significant international form of increased militarism in Central Asia—certainly the most obvious—has been the installation of US military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The base at Manas International Airport, just 19 miles from Kyrgyzstan’s capital, Bishkek, will eventually house up to 3,000 US military personnel as well as almost two dozen coalition aircraft. In Uzbekistan, more than 2,000 US soldiers already are deployed at the Khanabad airfield, an old Soviet military base near the Afghan border. Although originally intended as a strategic position from which to launch the allied invasion of Afghanistan, these bases have since become part of a string of military installations across South and Central Asia that are pivotal to the US campaign to combat terrorism.

In the eyes of many Central Asian leaders as well as human rights activists, however, America’s military presence has in effect sanctioned the increasing brutality of Central Asian dictators. It also has fostered the desire of other states in the region—most notably Kazakhstan—to adopt similarly militarized international and domestic postures in order to win the favor of the United States in the form of military bases, thus securing the future of their authoritarian regimes.

Several factors have contributed to this increased militarism. The rise of radical Islam has been a principal cause as well as unfortunate consequence. State leaders throughout Central Asia have universally responded to militant Islamic groups, which are themselves primarily a response to domestic political repression, with increasingly violent forms of oppression. Moreover, the US-led global war on terror has galvanized their use of such tactics. The government of Tajikistan, for example, justified its recent crackdown on Islam in the northern part of the country—which included arbitrarily closing mosques and removing imams—on the grounds that three suspected terrorists held by the United States at Guantanamo Bay are from northern Tajikistan.

Not surprisingly, radical Islamists, whether or not they have resorted to violent strategies, have

benefited from the growing perception that Central Asian governments are cruel and unjust. As the recent electoral success of the Party of Justice and Development in Turkey clearly demonstrated, Islamic groups can effectively represent themselves as pure and just in contrast to a morally bankrupt government. This is one of the key reasons why popular support is growing for Hizb-ut-Tahrir in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

Increased militarism can also be linked to state weakness. The governments of Central Asia often are mischaracterized as strong because of the erroneous equation of authoritarianism with state strength—particularly, the strength of the president and central government. In terms of their administrative capacity and political legitimacy, these states are quite weak. Central governments in all five Central Asian states constantly battle with regional governments over resources and policymaking authority. In Uzbekistan, the central government has been forced to rely on the military to collect cotton quotas from local leaders. Recent polls in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan conducted by the US Agency for International Development and the World Bank indicate that satisfaction with governments has declined sharply—hence, the need for “reelection” by rigged national referenda—while distrust of public officials has grown exponentially. In the face of provincial recalcitrance and popular resentment, the region’s dictators have grown increasingly reliant on coercion to maintain their rule. As these states have become more militarized, they also have become more detached from their own societies. This, too, has engendered popular support for Islamic groups that maintain a localized presence and that use existing social networks to spread their message.

And then there is Central Asia’s role in the international struggle against terrorism. It has brought closer ties with America, but at the cost of encouraging both militarism and foreign rivalry. Once the United States acquired a foothold in the region, it was only a matter of time before China, Russia, Turkey, and even India would seek to establish (or in the case of Russia, expand) a commensurate presence, either by providing weapons and military training or by building their own military bases. Increased militarism—and, in particular, the idea that security is achieved primarily through military strength—has helped to consolidate authoritarian

regimes and maintain closed borders. It also has raised the cost of conflict in the region.

A BREEDING GROUND FOR TERRORISTS?

Although international attention has focused on the rise of radical Islam in Central Asia, it is clear that this is only one of three trends that threaten the region’s security. As a result of these trends—politicized Islam, but also increased authoritarianism and militarism—Central Asia looks more like the Middle East politically and economically today than it did when the states gained independence from the Soviet Union.

These trends have also made Central Asia a potential breeding ground for international terrorist networks. Three conditions have facilitated the development of these networks in other parts of the world: porous borders, the availability of guns or drugs, and disgruntled Muslims. Central Asia clearly exhibits all of these conditions.

What should the United States do to ameliorate this crisis? It should base its policies toward Central Asia on explicit recognition that the convergence toward authoritarian regimes and closed economies, the rise of radical politicized Islam, and the increased militarism are integrally related and mutually reinforcing trends. This requires giving higher priority to political and economic reform and making further aid contingent upon real, substantive progress. It also requires a long-term commitment to regional security—not in the form of US military bases from which to launch attacks on Islamists, but in the form of genuine border security to make the region safe for trade.

The United States will only exacerbate the threat of terrorism in Central Asia if it continues to encourage the region’s leaders to combat radical Islamic groups with greater militancy rather than with increased economic opportunities and something other than rhetorical respect for human rights. As with the rest of the Muslim world, the threat of militant Islam will remain as long as the United States continues to adopt a military response to terrorism. It is at best ironic, at worst prophetic, that, as America seeks to dismantle the old Middle East as a way to combat terrorism, beginning with Iraq, the United States is building a new Middle East in its place, along with a new terrorist threat. ■