

Kazakhstan Is Safe From Islamist Revolution

By [Dana Abizaid](#)

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U.S. President Barack Obama's speech on June 22 outlining plans for U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan has raised a number of questions from the international media and public. Much of the focus has been on U.S. goals and objectives in Afghanistan, the danger of a radicalizing Pakistan and the drain the war has had on the U.S. economy.

But events last month in Kazakhstan, a stable U.S. partner and major oil and gas producer to Afghanistan's north, raise further questions about what U.S. withdrawal and Taliban resurgence will mean for the former Soviet republics of Central Asia. Given the region's battle with Islamist militants tied to the Taliban and al-Qaida in the late 1990s, a resurgent Taliban in northern Afghanistan could again foster instability in the resource-rich region.

The ground for a re-emergence of militant activity in Central Asia is fertile. Last September, 28 Tajik troops were killed in a shootout with militants and the country's second-largest city was rocked by a suicide blast that killed three policemen. One year ago, Kyrgyzstan witnessed

ferocious interethnic violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbek citizens in the Ferghana Valley, a region known as a hotbed of extremist activity. In addition, the fallout from the massacre of Uzbek civilians by government troops in Andijan in 2005 lingers ominously in Uzbekistan.

Amid these threats, Central Asian governments continue to repress any overt signs of Islamic organization as potential centers of anti-government activity. In the past, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Hizb ut-Tahrir — both banned in Central Asia — have attracted a number of recruits fed up with their countries' weak economies, repressive leaders and hopeless futures.

But recent news out of Kazakhstan, reputedly the most stable country in the region and a major oil and natural gas supplier for the United States, Russia and China, is potentially the most concerning. On May 17, the western Kazakh city of Aktobe experienced what local media called its first-ever suicide bombing — an attack that was followed a week later by a car bombing outside a building belonging to the security services in Kazakhstan's capital, Astana.

Since Kazakhstan has been relatively immune to the religious and ethnic conflicts that have plagued its neighbors in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the bombings highlight the danger that is implicit for Central Asia in cross-border violence emanating from a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, Wendell Schwab, an expert on Islam in Kazakhstan from Indiana University, said although the number of conservative Kazakh Muslims has increased over the last few years, he does not believe Kazakhstan's stability will be compromised.

"There is not much, if any, violence done in the name of Islam in Kazakhstan," Schwab said.

But with an Islamist insurgency in the North Caucasus raging across the Caspian Sea from Kazakhstan's western provinces, some believe Kazakhstan could be ripe for the type of extremist-inspired instability its long-serving president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, has thus far been able to contain.

In April, Sabatai Amanov, a Kazakh resident reportedly trained in Pakistan as a bomb manufacturer, was gunned down by Dagestan security forces. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reports that over the past two years, seven Kazakh citizens have been killed fighting for the Islamist insurgency in Dagestan.

To investigate the reasons that Kazakh citizens are taking up arms in Dagestan, Russian news agency Regnum recently conducted a number of interviews with security experts familiar with the insurgency. They concluded that large numbers of Dagestanis working in western Kazakhstan's oil fields combined with great discrepancies in income among the local population and access to jihadist literature and web sites have attracted some Kazakhs to religious extremism.

"Jihadi ideology is an alternative to other socio-economic ideologies," Schwab said. "If people are satisfied with their current lives and government, as most Kazakhs are, there is little possibility for a massive increase in the number of jihadis."

Schwab said conditions in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are more likely to spawn

support for extremist ideas.

Such extremism reached its height in Central Asia in the late 1990s. At that time, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, or IMU, was operating out of bases in Tajikistan and Afghanistan. The movement made incursions into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan that severely tested undertrained and ill-equipped government forces. Many IMU militants were battle-tested soldiers from the Soviet war in Afghanistan and the Chechen wars. The IMU funded their activities through the drug trade, using routes in Central Asia that tapped into the Russian and European markets. Presently, a breakdown of stability in northern Afghanistan and a continuation of the Dagestani insurgency in Russia's southwest promise a return to this type of narco-terrorism in the region.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty recently reported on the resurgence of the IMU in northern Afghanistan, saying, "If left unchecked, observers warn, alliances between the al-Qaida-linked IMU and the Taliban could not only destabilize northern Afghanistan but establish it as a launching pad for attacks across Central Asia and beyond."

This may be true for the regions of Central Asia directly bordering Afghanistan. But it is unlikely to spread to Kazakhstan, where the per capita gross domestic product — at \$12,600 based on purchasing power parity — is about four times higher than in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and twice as high as in Turkmenistan.

Moreover, the likelihood that the standard of living of Kazakhs will increase even higher in the next decade or so remains relatively high.

Kazakh officials maintain that the May attacks were criminal acts, not terrorism. It remains to be seen whether this is wishful thinking from a government that has thus far escaped the scourge of sectarian violence that has afflicted its neighbors, or is the beginning of a dangerous trend arching out of Afghanistan, through Central Asia, and into the North Caucasus.

Once the U.S. military pulls out of Afghanistan, time will certainly tell.

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