

## **CENTRAL ASIA: BETWEEN MYTHS AND REALITIES, THE STATE OF THE ISLAMIST THREAT**

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All during 2009, American strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, better known by the abbreviation *Af-Pak*, dominated geopolitical discussion. Now it appears that notwithstanding the emergence of new and especially hot points like Yemen, Somalia and North Africa, *Af-Pak* will continue to occupy centre stage in 2010. The backdrop is possible collateral damage to the stability of Central Asia.

Ever since the collapse of the Soviet empire, the Central Asian republics have each dealt with the attempts to destabilise them made by Islamist movements. They each acted in their own way, for better or worse and with more or less restraint. Recent military developments in the *Af-Pak* area – the generalised offensive initiated by coalition forces and Afghan forces against the Taliban (Operation ‘Moshtarak – Together’ in Helmand province) and large scale operations by the Pakistani Army against Islamists in the tribal areas all suggest there is reason to fear that there will be a massive return of extremist activists to the Central Asian countries from which most of them came.

Meanwhile, the growing indirect support of certain Central Asian republics – namely, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan – for the military operations of the coalition in Afghanistan could serve as a pretext for a renewal of subversive activities of the clandestine movements. They will threaten the fragile political equilibrium as they seek to overthrow the regimes which emerged from the fall of the USSR and to establish a *Caliphate*.<sup>1</sup>

### **1. High-risk logistical redeployment**

Ever since the beginning of military operations in Afghanistan, the coalition’s air forces have made use of facilities on the territories of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Until the end of 2005, the United States had at its disposal the air base of Karshi-Khanabad in Uzbekistan. After being ousted from this base following criticism it made of President Islam Karimov for his ‘*management of the crisis*’ of Andijan,<sup>2</sup> they nonetheless made a

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<sup>1</sup> [http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hizb\\_ut-Tahrir](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hizb_ut-Tahrir)

<sup>2</sup> The events of Andijan began on 13 May 2005 when at around one o’clock in the morning a well armed Islamist group attacked a police station and barracks. The true loss of life will probably never be known. The authorities officially acknowledge 169 deaths. For their part, independent observers and NGOs present on the spot estimate the loss of life at more than 800, of whom nearly 200 died in the small city on the border with Kyrgyzstan, Pakhtaobod. For more on this subject, see <http://www.esisc.org/documents/pdf/fr/ouzbekistan-oublier-andijan-393.pdf>

return to the country in May 2009 on terms of an agreement negotiated between South Korea and the Uzbek authorities,<sup>3</sup> now using the base at Navoi, to the northwest of Bukhara. Since 2001, they also have been using an air base in Kyrgyzstan at Manas-Bishkek. Since 2002, the French Air Force has been established at the base of Dushanbe in Tajikistan. Meanwhile, the German ground forces have the use of a base at Termez, in Uzbekistan, at the border with Afghanistan.

Up to now, this presence has never been the object of the slightest threat or attempted attack by Islamic movements. However, it appears that the decision of these three Central Asian republics to allow the use of their territory for transit of freight being sent to the coalition considerably alters the geopolitical situation. It could constitute the point of departure of new agitation.

It will soon be nine years that the logistics of American forces and of the NATO troops in Afghanistan is built upon ground logistical flows coming from the Pakistani port of Karachi and entering Afghanistan via the Khyber Pass. In order to offset the resurgence of Taliban attacks on these routes, the coalition has revised its logistics strategy and set up a supplemental road and rail solution which passes from Russia to Afghanistan, passing through Central Asia.

This new logistics network, called the *Northern Distribution Network* (NDN), consists of three branches. The Northern branch starts from the Latvian port of Riga and ends up in Kazakhstan after having crossed Russian territory. A Southern branch starts in Poti, a Georgian port on the Black Sea, and crosses Georgia, then Azerbaijan and then cuts across the Caspian Sea. The Northern and Southern branches meet in Kazakhstan to form the Central Asian branch which traverses successively Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan before entering Afghanistan.

Though this 'participation' in the coalition's war effort only amounts to authorising the transit of non-lethal equipment, it now places these three countries in the midst of a conflict which we fear could spread well beyond Afghanistan. Three factors seem capable of contributing to this possible spread. Firstly, there are the traditional Central Asian Islamic movements. Secondly, but a lesser factor, there is Al-Qaida. Finally, there is the attitude of the Central Asian political leaders themselves, whose excessive use of repression can explain the radicalisation of the religious movements.

## **2. The various Central Asian Islamic movements**

The growing involvement of Islamic movements was revealed in September 2009 when we saw a resurgence of activities in the Afghan province of Kunduz. This northern province on the border with Tajikistan and under the control of German troops has remained relatively calm. According to local authorities, the last Taliban attacks in this province were the widely reported storming of two fuel depots in the month of September 2009 which involved Islamic fighters of Central Asian origin. Some attacks on German military vehicles also took place in the region and the Taliban went on to send major reinforcements to the northern provinces. These reinforcements were mostly comprised of activists belonging to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).

### **a) The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)**

During the 1990s, members of this movement were active in Uzbekistan as well as in other Central Asian countries. They for a time withdrew into Afghanistan before taking refuge in the tribal areas of Pakistan beginning in 2001, during the start of the American offensive in

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav051109a.shtml>

Afghanistan. They numbered around 5,000 fighters and they took part in combat against the Pakistani Armed Forces alongside the *Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP) or *Movement of the Pakistani Taliban*. They also participated in most of the attacks committed in Pakistan in 2009 (on average, seven attacks per day causing more than 3,000 deaths and 7,334 wounded).

One of the most radical branches of the MIO, the *Islamic Jihad Union*, is known for its ties with Turkish and Afghan émigrés in Germany. This is the branch which the German federal police suspect of having planned attacks against airports, restaurants, cafés and an American base, as well as against the Uzbekistan embassy in Berlin. The intended objective was to set off a wave of protests which would lead the German population to demand the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and from the base at Termez, on the Uzbek-Afghan border.

Since the second half of 2009, we have witnessed a clear resumption of MIO activities both in Afghanistan and on the territory of the former Soviet republics of Central Asia. At the end of June 2009, Kyrgyz forces announced that they had killed eight MIO militants, <sup>4</sup> five of them near Jalal-Abad and three in the region of Osh, two cities near the eastern border of Uzbekistan. On 19 October, Kyrgyz border guards announced the surrender of a handful of armed militants in the Tajik enclave of Vorukh, in the heart of the province of Batken in Kyrgyzstan. On the eve, the Tajik police forces had killed four MIO fighters during an exchange of gunfire in the city of Isfara, a city in the Ferghana Valley near the Kyrgyz and Uzbek borders. These four fighters were believed to have taken part in the murder of an inspector from the Ministry of the Interior which took place in this same city of Isfara<sup>5</sup> in September 2009.

Local Afghan authorities say that the 15 fighters captured by the American forces on 11 October 2009 in the province of Kunduz belonged to the MIO.<sup>6</sup> The Afghan Ministry of Defence estimates the number of foreign mercenaries linked to this movement operating in the northern provinces of Afghanistan to be slightly more than 4,000.

This resumption of MIO activities comes in the middle of important changes at the head of the movement. According to certain experts, the death in August 2009, of its leader, Tokhir Yuldashev, who was eliminated by a missile fired from an American drone, has created a vacuum in which the ‘*supposed*’ new leader of this movement, Abdur Rahman, has been swallowed up. In the view of Bill Roggio, the author of a blog on the war in Afghanistan, the *Long War Journal*<sup>7</sup>, ‘*Tokhir Yuldashev was pleased to be the armed wing of the Taliban in Pakistan and, in doing so, lost sight of the initial objectives of the MIO, namely the overthrow of the Uzbek authorities and the establishment of the Caliphate.*’ Paul Quinn-Judge, director of the Central Asia programme of the International Crisis Group (ICG), thinks that ‘*the disappearance of this leader known for his dogmatism and his lack of charisma*’<sup>8</sup> has opened the way for a new race of more extremist leaders.

It is symptomatic that in the two months which followed the death of Tokhir Yuldashev, the return of violent actions by MIO fighters in the northern provinces of Afghanistan and in the direction of Tajikistan seem to indicate that much more audacious and aggressive chiefs have taken over from the old guard. If it is confirmed that it is Abdur Rahman, of Tartar origin, who has taken over the reins of the movement, then this would signify that the MIO is at the point of transforming itself into a transnational movement, at the other extreme from the original Uzbek Jihadist movement. Meanwhile, Paul Quinn-Judge believes that many Chechen and Dagestani fighters are on the way to joining its ranks.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.rferl.org/content/Kyrgyzstan\\_Kills\\_Suspected\\_Islamist\\_Militants/1764490.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Kyrgyzstan_Kills_Suspected_Islamist_Militants/1764490.html)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav102009b.shtml>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.longwarjournal.org/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav102009b.shtml>

Andrei Grozin, director of the Central Asia Department of the CIS Institute in Moscow said in an interview with Eurasianet on 19 October 2009 that ‘ *the conditions have come together for a return in force of the MIO to Central Asia and the deterioration of socio-economic conditions is a powerful lever that the leaders of the MIO will not fail to use to influence the local populations.*’

### **b) The Hizb ut-Tahrir al-islami (HTI) – Islamic Party of Liberation**

With a capability of causing harm which is sometimes compared to that of Al-Qaida, the *Hizb ut-Tahrir al-islami* (HTI) movement is a Sunni pan-Islamist movement which has as its principal strategic objective the creation of a worldwide *Caliphate* called upon to replace all the national governments by unifying all the Muslim peoples. The HTI rejects all other forms of regime and of society. It envisions the implementation of the *Shari’a* only in the context of the Caliphate. Also called the *Islamic Party of Liberation*, the HTI advocates non-violence.

However, since the end of 2007 this movement has shown itself to be much more active on the level of militancy. It is well established in Central Asia and in certain regions of Europe – in particular in the United Kingdom.<sup>9</sup> This movement boasts of being actively present in some forty countries. It says it has between 5,000 and 10,000 members and claims to enjoy support from many hundreds of thousands of followers around the world.<sup>10</sup> It is reputed to hold some serious strong points in the Ferghana Valley, an especially rebellious and agitated area which is shared by Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. According to Vitaly Ponomarev, an expert on Central Asia for Memorial, the Russian human rights group, ‘ *out of all the Islamic movements formerly banned in the USSR, the HTI is the only one which has tens of thousands of members and which is categorised as a mass movement.*’<sup>11</sup>

Founded in 1953 by Taqiuddin an-Nabhani in East Jerusalem, which was at the time administered by Jordan, this movement focused on political action after some unhappy incidents at the end of the 1960’s – when it was involved in preparations for failed coups d’état in Syria, Jordan and Egypt. It considers the whole world as its area of operations and it envisages conquering the imperialist states and the fall of the despots who govern in the Muslim countries. This goal was clearly expressed in books such as: *The Islamic Regime, Democracy is a System of the Infidels, Islamic Politics, Islamic Society*, as well as in an entire series of books translated from Arabic and distributed in the spoken languages of the Central Asian region.

In Central Asia, the HTI is essentially active in Uzbekistan, a profoundly secular country which intends to maintain a strict separation between the executive power and the religious power and where 80% of the population is Sunni. The repressive character of the government of Islam Karimov, the deplorable living conditions, an economy rotting from corruption and the commonplace use of torture as well as the almost nonexistent freedom of expression constitute especially fertile grounds for Islamism in this country and explain the recent revival of popularity experienced by both the HTI and the MIO.

According to one dissident from the HTI, Saidakbar Oppokhodjayev, the political doctrine of the HTI is focused exclusively on Uzbekistan and is directed against its President Islam Karimov<sup>12</sup>. This prompts many observers to consider the HTI more as a militant organisation

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<sup>9</sup> Following the attacks in London on 7 July 2005, Blair’s government for a time considered banning this movement, which, with its nearly 8,500 announced activists, has rapidly become one of the most active Islamic organisations in the United Kingdom. Cf. on this subject ‘The Moderate Muslim Brotherhood,’ *Foreign Affairs Journal*, p.120, vol. 86 no. 2, march / April 2007 by Robert S. Leiken and Steven Brooke

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.newstatesman.com/200409130018>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.agentura.ru/experts/ponomarev/>

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=365](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=365)

which aims at the overthrow of Karimov than as a peaceful organisation which is seeking to unite Muslims.

In Kyrgyzstan, the authorities previously had an attitude which was relatively more permissive. The Islamist movements were tolerated on condition that they remained calm and did not cause any problems for the authorities. But ever since the Tulip Revolution of March 2005, President Kurmanbek Bakiev has adopted a much more rigid attitude. The HTI was established in the south of the country, and it was involved, along with the MIO, in attacks on the police force. Many people fear that the Kyrgyz authorities will adopt the same drastic measures as in Uzbekistan and numerous observers worry that by assuming the additional role of his Uzbek counterpart Karimov, President Bakiev may propel his country into the centre of a vicious circle of 'provocation-repression' which could only benefit the Islamists.

In Tajikistan, where the *Islamic Revival Party* (IRP) is presently the only authorised Islamic political party, the HTI has been prohibited since 2004 and some forty of its activists have been tried since then. Many arms caches have been discovered and clandestine printing presses have been dismantled. The HTI is practically inactive in Kazakhstan and in Turkmenistan.

Although in the countries where it is most active many campaigns and operations have been conducted against its activists, the HTI is relatively resilient and has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to recruit new activists rapidly. The Central Asian authorities have appeared lately to score many points against the HTI. Consequently, by reducing this movement's capacity for action, they seem to diminish the threat which weighs on them. Paradoxically, the way that they have acted – by arbitrary arrests and imprisonment, as well as useless violence – could radicalise the Islamist movements.

### **3. The Al-Qaida factor**

The ability of Osama Bin Laden to distinguish between what is essential and what is auxiliary constitutes one of the main characteristics of his personality. Due to this constant factor, the main objectives of the other Islamic movements – to eliminate Israel from the map and to overthrow the '*corrupt*' regimes of Central Asia – do not figure in the front ranks of his concerns.

However, Bin Laden's relative indifference must not be taken to be an expression of a lack of genuine interest; rather, it is a translation of his reflections on the reality of things. Central Asia, which Al-Qaida defines as the area extending from West to East, from Chechnya to the Chinese province of Xinjiang, has always aroused the interest of Bin Laden. But due to the recurrent activism of the Wahhabites and the Salafists, he never deemed it necessary to devote enormous resources to the struggle against the powers that be.

#### **a) Birth of Islamic activism in Central Asia**

The Russian invasion and occupation of Afghanistan in 1979 constitute the point of departure of Islamic activism in Central Asia. Instead of strengthening the Soviet grip on Afghanistan and creating a buffer zone between the USSR of that time and Arab radicals, the Afghan misadventure of the Red Army contributed to the radicalisation of the Afghan and Pakistani Islamists. It also permitted the Afghan insurgents to spread their religious message in Central Asia.

The *Jamiat-e-Islami - Bloc Islamique* movement of Commander Ahmed Shah Massud, the '*Lion of Panshir*,' and, to a lesser extent, the movement of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, *Hezb-i-Islami – Party of Islam*, figure along with the Pakistani secret services of then President Zia-

ul-Haq among the most active groups responsible for spreading this ideology. Certain Muslims of Central Asia acquired both training and military experience during the Jihad against Soviet forces when they served in the forces of Commander Massud. At that time, between 1979 and 1989, the role of Bin Laden in Central Asia was miniscule, except for his sending advisers to Massud and financing his operations.

Three major events led to the acceleration of Islamisation in Central Asia: the withdrawal of Russian troops from Afghanistan in 1989, the collapse of the Soviet empire two years later, in 1991 (with, as its corollary, the accession to power in the new Central Asian republics of corrupt dictators) and the disappearance of the Afghan Communist regime in 1992. For many Near Eastern Islamists, these events gave them reason to think that the conditions had come together for the creation of Islamist states on the Central Asian ruins of the Soviet empire. The commitment of Saudi and Emirates authorities to backing the Afghan Mujahideen was aimed not only at supporting the defeat of the Soviets. Riyadh and the capitals of the Gulf saw in Afghanistan an ideal base for expanding Wahhabism and Salafism, Central Asian versions of their own Sunni beliefs, and an ideal bastion against the expansionist designs of the Shiite Iranians.

Under the benevolent leadership of Riyadh, many NGOs from the Arab states of the Gulf were established, more or less openly, in Central Asia, offering their usual 'kits' of services: medical care, training, religious education and indoctrination. The descendants of the many Central Asian Muslims who, in the 1920s and 1930s, had fled the arrival of the Bolsheviks and repression and who, since then had made their fortune in the petroleum Eldorados of the Gulf, contributed financially to the Islamic rebirth of their distant homelands.

#### **b) The gradual but discreet involvement of Al-Qaida**

The period from 1988 to 1995 gave Osama Bin Laden the opportunity to get more involved with the Central Asian Muslims. During the civil war in Tajikistan we saw Al-Qaida elements appear for the first time, in particular one of his closest collaborators, Wali Khan Amin Shah (who was later arrested in Malaysia in 1995) and Ibn-ul-Khattab, who later would serve as commander of the foreign Mujahideen in the Caucasus. Even after his departure for Sudan, Bin Laden continued to direct training camps in Afghanistan where many Tajiks, Uzbeks, Uighurs and Chechens received their military training.

However, there are two reasons why Osama Bin Laden limited the role of Al-Qaida in Central Asia to simply maintaining contact and military assistance which is more symbolic than real. To begin with, at the time there was no target in Central Asia of sufficient importance for its destruction to form part of the general objective of undermining American authority. Secondly, the importance of Central Asia with regard to Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), whether chemical, biological or nuclear, forced Bin Laden to keep a low profile.

Beginning in 1992, Al-Qaida set up a cell consisting of scientists, engineers and technicians who were assigned the mission of obtaining these WMDs. Their main activities were focused on the arsenals of the former USSR. Thanks to contacts arranged by Afghan Mujahideen with corrupt officers of the Red Army or the intelligence services involved in trafficking of various types (narcotics, precious stones and other materials), Al-Qaida could calmly begin searching for WMD in the former USSR.

This is what explains the weak intensity of Al-Qaida operations in Central Asia. By making people *'forget'* it in this way, the Bin Laden movement avoided drawing attention to itself and rousing from its disturbing lethargy the Russian-American process of securing the arsenals of mass destruction of the former Soviet Union.



### c) Lower cost activism

In fact, it appears that Bin Laden and Al-Qaida could profit from possible chaos in Central Asia without needing to devote any major financial resources or many activists there. The repression of the Islamist movements in the region and in China, the growing interest of Central Asian Muslims for a conservative Islam, the proselytising of NGOs sponsored by the Gulf States, the exponential growth of Afghan drugs trafficking networks and the steady rise in power of the subversive Islamist organisation *Hizb-ut Tahrir* in this region are all factors in sowing disturbance which are less costly in men and resources, and are clearly more profitable for Al-Qaida and the Taliban.

## 4. The attitude of the Central Asian rulers

The last but not least factor in Islamist agitation is the attitude of the local regimes to the religious movements. This attitude has been subject of a very interesting film entitled *The Myth of Religious Extremism in Central Asia*<sup>13</sup> directed by Michael Andersen, a Danish journalist and political analyst who has specialised in Central Asia. In an interview with the information agency *Ferghana.ru*, the director explains that he was able *'to observe over a number of years how the dictators of Central Asia have used the so-called terrorist threat to subjugate and oppress those who oppose them by characterising them as terrorists or extremists and how Western democracies have listened closely to dictators like Islam Karimov.'*<sup>14</sup>

Historically, Central Asian Islam has always been a remarkably moderate and tolerant Islam. As far as you go back in time, in particular in the dogmatic writings of Najm ad-Din Abu Khafs Omar un-Nasafi (1068 - 1142), the Central Asian theologians have always believed that *'living under the authority of a non-believer (ghayr-i din), or even a heathen (kafir), does not pose any problem for Muslims insofar as these rulers do not threaten the existence of mosques and schools of Quran (madrassas) and authorise Muslims to practice their faith and guarantee the application of the Sharia.'*<sup>15</sup>

By presenting themselves as the sole bastion against terrorism, Karimov and his counterparts have used the image of extremist Islamism to ensure their rule and to justify *'stretching'* the democratic process in the name of stability and domestic security. At present this threat, which is the direct consequence of the attitude of the authoritarian governments and of the weakness of their socio-economic policies, has become much more genuine and less mythic. It is important to define the roots in order to better counter it.

Although extremism is the result of the policies of oppression in Central Asia, it would be naive to sum it up as solely religious extremism. The writer Mohammed Solikh, leader of the Uzbek opposition who lives in exile in Norway says: *'one should worry about a dramatic increase in extremism in Uzbekistan, and not only on the religious level.'*<sup>16</sup> According to him, many businessmen, teachers and workers are becoming more and more attracted to radicalism. In the view of Michael Andersen, the film director, the tragic events of Andijan in 2005, as well as the demonstrations and murderous clashes which have taken place since then in Central Asia clearly show that more and more people are shifting towards extremism.

Parwiz Mullojanov, a Tajik expert, believes that the Central Asian rulers don't understand Islam at all. *'They are afraid of it! Being unable to distinguish the difference between extremists and moderate believers, they show no discernment in their attitude and, in doing*

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<sup>13</sup> <http://english.aljazeera.net/programmes/peopleandpower/2010/01/201012062540517354.html>

<sup>14</sup> <http://enews.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=2604>

<sup>15</sup> *'Roots of Radical Islam in Central Asia,'* Carnegie Endowment Carnegie Paper No. 77, January 2007 (<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=18967>)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

so, they prepare the grounds for radical organisations.’<sup>17</sup> According to Muhiddin Kabiri, leader of the Islamic Party of Renewal of Tajikistan (IPRT), the Westerners ‘only see Central Asia from two angles, either that of religious extremism or that of authoritarian regimes.’<sup>18</sup> And in their concern to preserve their economic interests and the stability of their energy supplies, the main leaders of the Western powers prefer to support Central Asian despots to the detriment of the populations of Central Asia. As Michael Anderson noted in May 2008, ‘the policy of the European Union in Uzbekistan can be summed up in a question of geopolitical interests.’<sup>19</sup>

Only the kleptocrats in power have profited from the situation. Throwing thousands of persons in prison is especially counterproductive and constitutes the foundations for radical groups as we see from the reports of the International Crisis Group.<sup>20</sup> Dilyor Jumabaev, one of the representatives of the HTI in Tajikistan sums up the situation as follows: ‘There are presently in prison some persons who have nothing to do with us but who will join us when they are let out because they will have nothing more to lose!’<sup>21</sup> This is what Craig Murray, a former ambassador of the United Kingdom in Uzbekistan confirms: ‘By supporting authoritarian regimes in Central Asia, the Westerners have unleashed the reverse of their expectations, preparing a formidable bomb which will feed on resentment and discontent of the subjugated.’<sup>22</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

The situation in the Af-Pak area is perilous and no sensible person wishes to wait for the contamination of neighbouring areas. The extension of the Afghan conflict to an arc which takes in Central Asia would be an illustration of the famous ‘domino effect’ and would signify the destruction of the region.

This is neither more nor less than what was said on 7 January by Richard Holbrooke, America’s Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, the ‘Mr Af-Pak’ of the Obama Administration, during a seminar run by the Brookings Institute of Washington. He stated in particular that ‘from Beijing to Moscow and Washington, from Riyadh or Abu-Dhabi to the countries of the European Union, everyone is in agreement in believing that the stability of Afghanistan and of Pakistan constitute a vital strategic issue not only for the United States but also for Europe, Central Asia, South Asia and the Near East.’<sup>23</sup>

In the present state of affairs, the Islamist threat does not seem capable of endangering the powers that be, but it nonetheless constitutes a factor causing harm which is not insignificant. As a sign of the times, several days after Richard Holbrooke’s trip through Central Asia at the end of February, the United States announced its intention to set up an anti-terror training centre for Kyrgyz forces within Kyrzyzstan, in the southern region of Batken. Last October, the American ambassador to Kyrgyzstan, Tatiana Gfoeller, participated in the inauguration of the Battalion Scorpion training centre for Kyrgyz special forces established at Tokmok, to the east of Bishkek, for which the United States invested 9 million dollars.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> <http://enews.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=2376>

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[http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/asia/central\\_asia/b97\\_central\\_asia\\_islamists\\_in\\_prison\\_web.doc](http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/asia/central_asia/b97_central_asia_islamists_in_prison_web.doc)

<sup>21</sup> <http://enews.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=2604>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> [http://www.brookings.edu/events/2010/0107\\_afghanistan.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/events/2010/0107_afghanistan.aspx)

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav030410.shtml>



Out of concern to maintain a strict balance between Moscow and Washington, President Bakiev also announced his wish to see the Russian proposal to build a training centre take concrete form. For Bakiev, the southern borders of his country constitute a menace more than a bastion. Any Russian base would also be set up in the south of the country and would serve as the base for one of the military units of the new rapid reaction force of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO).<sup>25</sup>

Overall, the policy of the Western countries in Central Asia is confronting a dilemma from which we fear that Al-Qaida and its allies will extract the maximum of benefits. Ever since the events of Andijan, there has been a simply untenable attitude which consists in looking for tacit support from the Central Asian leaders – the concession of military bases and permission for overflights and transit – while displaying an undisguised desire to gain access to the immense energy resources of these countries and at the same time keeping the right to criticise and condemn violations of human rights in Central Asia. Whatever option is chosen – defence of human rights or, for sober economic reasons, access to energy resources – this will only contribute to strengthening the position of the Islamist activists.

As a bonus, there is China's dreamed of opportunity to establish itself massively in Central Asia for the long term, thereby preempting the formidable energy resources which its impressive economic development cruelly needs. Without much concern about respect for human rights and a '*remarkable and effective determination*' to settle the conflict between the Muslim minority of Uighurs and the Hans (at least 150 dead) in the province of Xinjiang in August last year, China can only please the Central Asian potentates, reassuring and comforting them in their intransigent opposition to the religious movements challenging them.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.