
**THE POLITICAL EVOLUTION OF
CENTRAL ASIA AND SOUTH CAUCASUS:
IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL SECURITY**
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INTRODUCTION

Ten years after independence, transitions from Soviet authoritarianism and planned economies to democracy and market economies have not been successfully completed in any of the states of Central Asia and South Caucasus (henceforth CASC). Although there are variations among them, each of the eight states in question faces serious challenges to peace and growth. The lack of real economic reform or sustainable development, the persistent centralized controls built on the foundation of Soviet bureaucracy, and the growing problems of corruption and public cynicism all constrain efforts to build effective and popular governance. The capacity of state structures and police and military forces to effectively de-escalate or deter conflict remains highly questionable.

Conflict could result from any of a wide range of factors present in this part of the world. Potentially explosive ethnic tensions and irredentist border challenges, severe poverty, drug trafficking, and, for Central Asia, the threat of Islamic insurgency and conflict across the border in Afghanistan could all separately or together lead to fighting within and between states. Political, social, religious, ethnic, and economic structures are such that the risk of conflict spreading from one state to another is significant. Moreover, there are few mechanisms for effective regional cooperation that could mitigate these problems.

But warning signs for serious conflict do not necessarily translate into conflict itself. Considering the ten years of predictions to the

contrary, CASC has seen surprisingly little conflict since independence. The exceptions include Georgia, which has been plagued by small-scale rebellions and kidnappings in its western portions, border skirmishes near Chechnya (and an influx of refugees from that territory—probably including at least some militants), repeated attempts to assassinate or overthrow the president, separatist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and general lack of central control; Azerbaijan and Armenia's war over Nagorno-Karabakh; and civil war in Tajikistan. Overall, however, conflict has remained at fairly low levels, and although it has sometimes crossed state borders, it has yet to threaten outright interstate war. Armenia, for example, has maintained a relatively stable domestic situation despite economic stagnation, debilitating emigration, and the murders of a prime minister and a speaker of parliament. It has been able to do so in large part because the cease-fire in its conflict with Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, although oft-challenged, remains in place. In Central Asia, the Tajik conflict has cooled to a simmer, although incursions by Islamic militants into Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1999–2000 worried leaders in the region and beyond.

This situation, however, could be exacerbated if active conflict continues or worsens in Afghanistan, creating an influx of refugees (and very likely militants) into the Central Asian states. This could potentially reignite the civil war in Tajikistan and would strain Uzbekistan's and Kyrgyzstan's capacity to maintain state control—even assuming U.S. and other foreign assistance. Even stability in this region is a decidedly relative concept, as the best of times have been marked by assassination attempts on government officials and the occasional bombing. But if there is little doubt that this sort of low-level conflict will continue in this part of the world for the foreseeable future, the real question is to what extent, and under what circumstances, these situations might be expected to escalate into full-fledged war.

This chapter will consider some of the political-institutional factors that have been linked to political instability and conflict and apply them to the CASC region. It will then consider both aggravating and constraining factors for conflict, and provide a tentative assessment of the likelihood of an outbreak of civil and/or multistate war in the region.

POLITICAL INSTITUTIONALIZATION, DEPRIVATION, AND STATE AND SOCIETAL CAPACITY: A FRAMEWORK FOR RISK ANALYSIS

In the last decade, global sectarian violence has been accompanied by a renewed academic interest in the ways in which changes in institutional structures and elite strategies for regime legitimacy can either exacerbate or dampen the risk of civil conflicts. While spreading democracy and increasing civil and economic liberties in newly independent countries may be an important policy goal of certain western democracies, it is not without risk, particularly in the near term. Most of the states or territories with bloody ethnic conflicts in the 1990s shared a common trait, a move toward a more open election or greater civil liberties in the year or so before conflict erupted. These included Burundi, Yugoslavia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, and Russia (Chechnya).¹ Thus, one strategy for regime legitimacy, that of increasing democratic liberties, provides a means for groups to organize but has the danger of increasing social mobilization without adequate institutional capacity to fully enable effective political participation. This can increase the risk of conflict. Moreover, some have argued that the actual liberalizations that attend political openness can help increase the danger of violence by making it easier for leaders to mobilize on the basis of societal divisions, exacerbating sectarian hatred.² Groups and individuals competing for power may appeal to ethnic or nationalist symbols and allegiances, fostering conflict with those of other ethnicities or those who disagree with the nationalist concept advocated.³

In addition, decades of research on the relationship between economic growth and sustainable state-building argue that when there is a downturn in economic growth, particularly when it is accompanied by a gap in the expectations that the citizens have of their eco-

¹Jack L. Snyder, "Nationalism Among the Ruins," in Jack L. Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2000, p. 18.

²See Snyder and Karen Ballentine, "Nationalism and the Marketplace of Ideas," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Fall 1996), pp. 5–40.

³See Snyder, *From Voting to Violence*. See also his previous work with Edward D. Mansfield, "Democratization and the Danger of War," *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Summer 1995), pp. 5–38.

conomic future, conflict is a possible outcome. Scholars have also identified a host of risks that accompany increased social mobilization in situations when economic and political change increase popular grievances.⁴ Samuel Huntington argued in the 1960s that propensity to conflict is increased by social and economic modernization, particularly when such modernization is rapid. His argument was based on the notion that when social mobilization moves at a faster rate than does economic development, social frustration results at both the individual and group levels. When there is limited capacity for individuals and groups to take action to improve their economic situation (per Huntington, “mobility opportunities,” such as a move from a rural to an urban area), those socially mobilized individuals and groups will seek to change the situation through political participation, that is, demands on the government for change. But if political institutionalization in a country is insufficient for the socially frustrated to express those demands through existing legitimate channels, they may seek other illegitimate channels, increasing instability and the risk of violence. Huntington writes, “Political instability in modernizing countries is thus in large part a function of the gap between aspirations and expectations produced by the escalation of aspirations which particularly occurs in the early phases of modernization.”⁵

Economic and political inequality and instability are also a part of this equation, as social mobilization makes people more aware of the inequalities that exist in society, and demands for change are often demands for redistribution of wealth and privilege. While in the long run development will lead to a more equitable distribution of wealth,

⁴The argument that economic reversals combined with expectations gaps can lead to conflict was formulated as the J curve of social insurrection in Crane Brinton, *Anatomy of Revolution*, New York: Vintage Books, 1957, and has been further developed in James C. Davis, “The Revolutionary State of Mind: Toward a Theory of Revolution” in James Chowning Davies (ed.), *When Men Revolt*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997, pp. 133–148. See also Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1966, on the importance of the middle class to democratization, and D. Rueschmeyer, E.H. Stephens et al., *Capitalist Development and Democracy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, on the importance of the working class.

⁵Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968, pp. 39–56.

in the short term it more often exacerbates existing inequalities, increases corruption, and further heightens frustration.⁶

The key to this argument is the combination of rising expectations that are not met, the lack of existing political institutions to channel popular demands for change, and a perception of inequality. Weak states, that is, those whose institutions are not considered legitimate by the population,⁷ are at particular risk. If institutions are not sufficiently developed, then participation is likely to be in forms that threaten social order and state capacity.⁸ Moreover, when perceived (and real) inequality can be clearly linked to divisions between specific social groups (ethnic, economic, etc.), this leads to tension within society, as well as against the state. This further exacerbates the danger of conflict, and to some extent helps determine its form.

When weak institutionalization and political mobilization combine to create instability, the result can be termed the “contested state.” Such a state is characterized by the following:

- **Low levels of legitimacy and authority of the government.** This can be the result of a lack of consensus about the basic principles on which society should be governed. For states in transition from communism to capitalism, a lack of consensus can be an extremely serious problem, with continuing divisions between those who cling to the old principles and those who want to move toward democracy and the free market. Alternatively, low legitimacy and authority result where government is monopolized or dominated by one ethnic group in societies that are ethnically diverse.
- **Low state capacity for governance.** This is often reflected in a variety of domains, including poor economic management, ineffective foreign and domestic policy implementation, and a

⁶Huntington, pp. 56–59.

⁷Karl Deutsch, “Social Mobilization and Political Development,” *American Political Science Review*, 55 (September): pp. 493–514, 1961.

⁸On state failure, see Steven R. David, “Saving America from the Coming Civil Wars,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (Winter 1999), pp. 103–116; Gerald Helman and Steven R. Ratner, “Saving Failed States,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 89 (Winter 1992–1993), pp. 3–20; and David Hoffman, “Yelstin’s Absentee Rule Raises the Specter of a ‘Failed State,’” *Washington Post*, February 26, 1999, p. A1.

criminal justice system where there are serious gaps in both the legal framework and enforcement capabilities. Such characteristics facilitate criminalization.

- **Nonstate affiliations and loyalties.** Where primary loyalties are not to the state, but to the family or clan, the ethnic group, or the region, the state is not seen as the arbiter of disputes and disagreements, but as the prize of politics. Once the state has been captured, the benefits can then be distributed to members of the clan, those of the same ethnic identity, or those from the favored region. The concomitant, of course, is that nonmembers are discriminated against. Indeed, politics based on clan, ethnicity, or region can also be understood as the politics of exclusion.
- **Violent politics.** Political competition may take forms that are not well structured or carefully regulated. In the more extreme cases, of course, political competition degenerates into violence. The failure to convince all too easily leads to a willingness to coerce or, as Jack Snyder put it, “from voting to violence.”⁹ This can take the form of riots, assassination attempts, ethnic strife, insurgency, or contract killings. The essential point is that violence in the society is an accepted and legitimate continuation of politics by other means.
- **The existence of many areas of society to which the writ of the state does not extend.** These can be informal economic activities beyond the purview and regulation of the state or geographic regions that are essentially beyond the control of the government, and in some cases constitute no-go areas for government representatives, including law enforcement.

The contested state is the last stop on the road to complete state failure. However, a strategy of liberalization is not *solely* tied to increased civil conflict. Contested states are not the inevitable outcome of political and economic liberalization. Some argue that as states relax the limits on political expression and reform their economies to become more open economic systems, conflict can be managed through growing institutions. In addition, greater stability can be attained when economic gains reach beyond the ruling class

⁹Snyder, *From Voting to Violence*.

to benefit middle- and working-class members of society. In other words, an increased risk of conflict may well be only a temporary risk in the short term if elites manage the transition well.

In addition, even high levels of discontent, if the discontented lack the resources, capability, or leadership to mobilize, will not present much threat to a regime.

Much depends, then, on the strategies that elites choose to legitimize their regimes, the institutions they build to further these strategies, and the regime's capacity to effectively utilize these governance structures and strategies. Liberalization is only one option for regime legitimacy. The capacity of society to develop and utilize resources and capabilities, and to follow opposition leaders, can be effectively constrained by a state that is willing and sufficiently strong to use such authoritarian means as an effective internal security force to stifle overt dissent. This is, of course, the model the Soviet Union followed for three-quarters of a century.

A second option is to postpone the dangers of conflict arising from democratization (albeit by halting the democratization itself). Useful for understanding this second elite strategy is the concept of "sultanistic regimes."¹⁰ This notion has its origin in the work of Max Weber and was initially developed in relation to Latin American countries.¹¹ Such a regime is characterized by personal rule and a system of fears, rewards, and extensive corruption. The staff of the government is often chosen directly by the ruler to include his family, friends, and business associates. In sultanistic regimes, the most important politics is what might be termed "palace politics," where the leader distributes both rewards and penalties with little or no external constraint. Greed and fear are used as inducements for loyalty and support. Position becomes a privilege that is granted by the leader and is valued because it provides access to rent-seeking opportunities. Because there are no countervailing factors, decisionmaking is generally arbitrary, and guided by expediency and calculations of self-interest and self-aggrandizement.

¹⁰See H.E. Chelabi and Juan Linz (eds.), *Sultanistic Regimes*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, and the review thereof by Anatol Lieven, posted November 8, 2000, on www.eurasianet.org.

¹¹Ibid.

The sultanistic regime makes up for its weak institutions with strong and repressive leadership.¹² Sultanism effectively halts or never initiates the progress of a transition to democracy and thereby mitigates the problems such a transition engenders, for as long as the ruler can maintain control of the state through repression. Thus, although the level of political institutionalization is very low in this type of regime, while it is in place, the potential for domestic conflict is also very low. However, these regimes are inherently unstable in the longer term because their lack of institutionalization makes them prone to succession crises when and if something happens to the leader. Finally, in a repressive state led by a single strongman, the leader's need to maintain power and privilege can easily degenerate into political paranoia that brooks no dissent or opposition. Although successful as a short-term palliative, when regimes of personalistic rule fail, the factors that make conflict more likely—those that the repressive leadership was able to keep under control—re-emerge with a vengeance (literally), and create a strong likelihood that the formerly sultanistic regime will become a contested one. However, it is never clear when this implosion will occur. Sultanistic regimes can sometimes be maintained for the very long term, with successive authoritarian rulers following one another.

Clearly, transitions involve both factors that mitigate and those that increase the danger of conflict. A risk analysis for domestic conflict in CASC should therefore examine the constraining and facilitating factors for conflict in several key domestic areas that are at the core of these arguments: economic growth, political institutionalization, elite strategies for regime legitimacy and stability, and the strength of civil society in states across the region.¹³ Such an analysis will yield a nuanced view of the short- and longer-term risks of civil conflict within CASC states. It is such an analysis to which we now turn.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Juha Auvinen, "Political Conflict in Less Developed Countries 1981–1989," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (1997), pp. 177–188.

INSTITUTIONALIZATION IN CENTRAL ASIA AND SOUTH CAUCASUS: RATING THE RISK OF INTERNAL CONFLICT

The states of CASC do not score well on the indicators identified by scholars who link institutionalization and conflict. Unexpectedly independent in 1991, many of the states in the CASC region lacked the infrastructure of governance, the bureaucratic tools, and the political and administrative experience needed to effectively run a state.¹⁴ Although a decade of independence has differentiated some countries from others, institutional weakness in the region continues to be the norm. The strategies and risks for conflict differ across the region and between the two subregions of CASC. The elites in Central Asian states as a whole have not gone as far in liberalizing their political and economic systems as the countries of the South Caucasus have. Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan have most closely approximated a transition to a more liberal political and economic system. This choice, however, at least in the near term, has left them with large gaps between high levels of mass political participation and underdeveloped political institutions as well as problems with the distribution of economic resources to middle-class and working-class sectors of the economy. Thus, these countries face the risks discussed in the section above on liberalization and conflict in contested states.¹⁵

In Central Asia there are even fewer mechanisms for resolving the economic, ethnic, or political grievances and ambitions, many of which were unleashed and/or aggravated by the processes of independence. None of the CASC states has come all that far in creating coalition and power-sharing arrangements between key groups of elites, much less opposition parties. Instead, in many of them a “strong leader” has emerged to balance the “weak institutions.” The effectiveness of the Soviet system at eliminating alternative elites left the Communist republic elites the most credible leaders of the states that emerged from the Soviet dust. Of the eight republics in CASC,

¹⁴Ronald Grigor Suny, “Southern Tears: Dangerous Opportunities in the Caucasus and Central Asia,” in Rajan Menon, Yuri Federov, and Ghia Nodia (eds.), *Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia: The 21st Century Security Environment*, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999, pp. 147–176.

¹⁵Snyder, *From Voting to Violence*, Chapter 6, “Nationalism Amid the Ruins of Communism.”

five are ruled by former Communist first secretaries. (Tajikistan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan are the exceptions.) The development of both these leaders and Kyrgyzstan's Askar Akaev into nascent "sultans" is evidenced by the fact that for the most part, the same men are still in power. Although there were elections in almost all Central Asian countries in 2000, the result was largely the maintenance of the status quo.¹⁶ Incumbents retained their hold on power and showed they were willing to use any means to continue to do so. New elections are not expected in the region until 2003, although in the past sitting presidents have called elections early to show their popular support.¹⁷

Of the regional states moving toward sultanism, the clearest examples are Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In a very real sense, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have not undergone political transitions but have preserved the old system, thus largely avoiding the overt threats to the regime that more open political systems in the region have faced. The political elites' choice in both of these countries to govern through personalistic rule is directly tied to their ability to create effective and loyal internal security forces, capable of stifling any overt challenges to their legitimacy.

In Turkmenistan, President Saparmurat Niyazov has led a repressive regime likened by some to Stalin's cult of personality. Not only have political parties been banned and all media controlled by the government, but meetings of any kind are forbidden and torture and execution are common "law enforcement" measures.¹⁸ Although President Niyazov has been named president for life, he has recently announced that he will step down in 2010—when an election will be held to select his successor. There are many who fear, however, that this election will not occur and that Niyazov will instead proclaim himself king and pass power to his son. If Niyazov chooses to be

¹⁶Uzbekistan held presidential elections, Tajiks voted on a new parliament, and Kyrgyz voters held both presidential and parliamentary elections.

¹⁷Valery Tsepakalo, "The Remaking of Eurasia," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 77, No. 2 (March/April 1998), pp. 107–126, and Zbigniew Brezinski, "The Eurasian Balkans," in *The Grand Chessboard*, New York: Basic Books, 1997, pp. 123–150.

¹⁸Ahmed Rashid, "The New Struggle in Central Asia: A Primer for the Baffled," *World Policy Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Winter 2000/2001), pp. 33–45.

crowned, as some rumors suggest he might, opposition leaders (in exile) are promising a coup.¹⁹

In Uzbekistan, President Islam Karimov has banned opposition parties, set heavy restrictions on the press, and imposed state control over mosques. Arguing that the only way to avoid the fate of Tajikistan was to quash dissent, the regime crushed the internal democratic opposition in a series of crackdowns in 1993–1997, and it has forced regime opponents, particularly Islamic militants (largely based in Ferghana), underground. The government’s control of the press is sufficient to limit coverage of the U.S. presence in Uzbekistan, and of the war in Afghanistan itself (although Uzbek residents can often pick up Russian television stations).²⁰ Moreover, closer ties with the United States do not appear to have driven Karimov to greater democratization. On January 27, 2002, Karimov was able to extend his presidential term from five to seven years by means of a referendum in which 91 percent of voters apparently supported the extension.²¹

There are signs that other elites in the region may chose to follow Uzbekistan’s and Turkmenistan’s lead. To a lesser extent, most leaders in the region share elements of the sultanistic model, most commonly corruption (which is pervasive throughout the region) and personal leadership.

In Kazakhstan, power has increasingly become concentrated in the hands of President Nursultan Nazarbayev and his clan, alienating the majority of the urban population as well as the resource-rich western part of the country.²² Corruption at every level of government has become routine, as oil companies are offering bonuses simply for the privilege of submitting contract bids. In June 2000 through a parlia-

¹⁹“Turkmen Leader Prepares to Step Down,” *BBC News Sunday*, February 18, 2001.

²⁰Tamara Makarenko and Daphne Biliouri, “Central Asian States Set to Pay Price of US Strikes,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review* (2001).

²¹George Gedda, “U.S. May Remain in Central Asia,” *Johnson’s Russia List (AP)*, February 6, 2002.

²²Nurbulat E. Masanov, “The Clan Factor in Contemporary Political Life in Kazakhstan,” translated by Mark Eckert, *Johnson’s Russia List*, February 20, 1998.

mentary bill, Nazarbayev and his family were granted lifetime immunity from any charges of corruption.²³

Kyrgyzstan, once cited as a model of Central Asian democracy, is also exhibiting dangerous signs of authoritarianism. The parliamentary and presidential elections of 2000 were widely criticized by international monitors. President Akaev, who came to power upon the Soviet Union's collapse, shows no signs of loosening his hold on its reins. Moreover, Akaev has been under significant pressure from his neighbors (including China) to clamp down on Islamic fundamentalism through arrests, press restrictions, and electoral rigging, and he appears to be increasingly in agreement that those are the right mechanisms to deal with the rise of opposition in his country. Akaev's government has placed opposition members under arrest on a number of probably fictional charges and has assisted neighboring Uzbekistan in its efforts to pursue its own opposition with the arrest and extradition of individuals.²⁴ In all of these states, elites have made the choice to buy current stability at the price of political and economic liberty, fostering significant grievances in the population that may ultimately threaten the regime.²⁵

In the remaining states the commitment to liberalization is not always clear. Azerbaijan, for example, shares aspects of both a democracy and an authoritarian state, and it is difficult to predict where its future lies. While Azerbaijan does have an active and diverse opposition, opposition leaders who are perceived to pose a real threat to the Aliev government are in prison, in exile, or under constant surveillance. Elections are manipulated, and while there is some freedom of the press, there is also serious censorship.²⁶ The

²³Rashid, *The New Struggle in Central Asia*, p. 39.

²⁴*The IMU and the Hizb-Ut-Tahrir: Implications of the Afghanistan Campaign*, Osh/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2002. Also available at www.crisisweb.org/projects/showreport.cfm?reportid=538.

²⁵There may be interesting comparisons here to certain states in the Middle East, who have found that various combinations of political repression and democratization have proven sustainable over some years. See Nora Bensahel, *Political Reform in the Middle East*, unpublished manuscript.

²⁶Svante E. Cornell, "Democratization Falsters in Azerbaijan," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2001) pp. 118–131; "Heidar Aliev, Maestro of the Caucasus," *The Economist*, Vol. 356 (September 2, 2000), p. 48; Ronald Grigor Suny, "Provisional Stabilities," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (1999).

ailing Heidar Aliev's moves to appoint his son his successor, and the grumblings this has engendered, illustrate the danger of a succession crisis in Azerbaijan.

This leaves Georgia, Armenia, and Tajikistan. Georgia and Tajikistan have made moves toward political liberalization, but their tremendous fragmentation and limited central control threaten their success (even assuming real commitment and political will on the part of their governments). Tajikistan is still recovering from its bitter civil war of 1992–1997, which pitted government loyalists against a coalition of Islamic, democratic, regional, and ethnic opposition factions.²⁷ The current power-sharing regime represents a step forward for state stability and regime legitimacy; but tension continues as regional armed authorities retain significant control, while the central government can claim to control little territory outside the capital (although it has been cracking down with raids and attacks). Tension between groups and regions remains a volatile factor, and many regional leaders, despite ostensible incorporation into the government, are not trusted by the Rakhmonov regime—often with good reason. Local groups, in turn, assert that the government does not distribute funds and resources to former opposition strongholds. Tajikistan remains tremendously poor, with poverty rates over 50 percent and unemployment over 80 percent in some regions. In parts of the country the economy is entirely dependent on the efforts of aid organizations such as the Aga Khan foundation. The drug trade has become one of the few sources of income for local residents, and insurgent groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) have repeatedly taken advantage of good relations with local leaders in parts of the country outside of central government control to establish and maintain bases. Finally, Tajikistan also exhibits some of the authoritarian aspects identified in connection with its neighbors. In addition to crackdowns on opposition members, it should be noted that in 1999 President Emomali Rakhmonov

²⁷See "Tajikistan: An Uncertain Peace," (Osh/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2001). Matthew Evangelista, "Historical Legacies and the Politics of Intervention in the Former Soviet Union," in Brown, *International Dimensions*, p. 123.

won the presidential election with a reported 97 percent majority—and a difficult-to-credit 98 percent turnout.^{28, 29}

Georgia has chosen to legitimize its regime (at least to the outside world) through a public commitment to political and economic liberalization, but corruption is particularly acute in Georgia, even compared to the rest of the CASC region, and the central government has largely failed to consolidate its borders and ensure stability in such areas as Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and the Pankisi Gorge, where large numbers of refugees from Chechnya (including some number of rebels and their leaders) have fled. As in Tajikistan, little that could be described as central control extends beyond the city limits of the capital. While primarily a contested state, Georgia exhibits at least one indicator of sultanism in the very personal rule of Eduard Shevardnadze. Shevardnadze's capacity to command respect abroad has helped him maintain the foreign support that he, in turn, has used to retain power at home. However, opposition to Shevardnadze's continued rule is growing, in large part due to his failure to take real steps to combat corruption, and the president himself, at 73, is aging and appears visibly tired at public appearances. He has said that he will not participate in the presidential elections of 2005. While it is possible that after Shevardnadze leaves power, by whatever means, Georgia will begin to truly develop as a democratic state, it is also quite plausible that a succession crisis will completely undermine the few government structures and institutions that do exist.

Armenia is something of an outlier in this part of the world. Although it faces severe economic decline largely tied to its continued hold on the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh within Azerbaijan (discussed in greater detail below), Armenia is neither a sultanistic nor a contested state. While corruption is astronomical here, popular discontent with the government is openly manifested in protests and demonstrations. While there has been some significant discord and even violence in the parliament, Armenia appears to be in less

²⁸“Tajikistan: An Uncertain Peace.”

²⁹Vladimir Davlatov and Turat Akimov, “Dushanbe Alarmed Over IMU Activity”; “Central Asia: Drugs and Conflict,” (Osh/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2001); “Tajikistan: An Uncertain Peace.”

danger of a succession crisis than of a contentious election between bitter political party divisions. In addition, its ethnically homogeneous population exhibits few ethnic cleavages that might otherwise be exploited in ways that foment conflict. Thus, the likelihood of internal conflict stemming from Armenia's political transition is comparatively low, although the risks of renewed interstate conflict with Azerbaijan remain.

THE ROLE OF ISLAM

A discussion of the political landscape of CASC would be incomplete without consideration of the additional wrinkle of the rise of political Islam, alluded to previously. The Central Asian regimes are faced with a strange dilemma in that the one factor that could be thought to unite their multiethnic and tribal countries is a shared Islamic religion, which, in Central Asia, also takes on aspects of identity somewhat divorced from religion itself.³⁰ At the same time, these increasingly sultanistic regimes feel that political Islam directly threatens their hold on power, as groups such as the IMU and Hizb ut-Tahrir openly seek to overthrow existing secular governments and to replace them with ones founded on the Shari'a, or Islamic law. Rather than addressing the particular brand of Islam that these groups represent and embracing a more moderate Islamic identity, however, secular governments in Central Asia (particularly Uzbekistan) have deemed Islam the enemy and sought to suppress Islamic political movements more broadly. Every Central Asian republic except Tajikistan currently prohibits Islamic political groups, regardless of agenda, and most are fairly broad in defining "political."³¹ Moreover, Tajikistan's neighbors see its incorporation of the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) into the government, and thus the legit-

³⁰Georgia and Armenia are predominantly Christian, and Azerbaijan does not face the challenges of a multiethnic society, see Chapter Five. Suny, "Provisional Stabilities," compares Islamic identity in Central Asia to the emerging European identity, to differentiate it from an identity that implies affinity with Muslims outside of the region. He argues that post-Soviet Muslims see themselves as a community, separate from both non-Muslims generally and Muslims elsewhere.

³¹Ebon Lee, "Central Asia's Balancing Act: Between Terrorism and Interventionism," *Harvard International Review*, July 2001, pp. 30-33.

imization of political Islam, as a dangerous precedent.³² But by suppressing Islam, the region's elites may have eliminated their best available mechanism for cultivating a unifying multiethnic nationalism that could compete with fundamentalist Islamic movements for the loyalty of their citizens. Moreover, by treating all political Islam as a singular antagonistic force, they have left their countries and the region that much more vulnerable to ever-more extremist strains of Islam. This problem is exacerbated by the support such groups received from the Taliban while it controlled Central Asia's southern neighbor Afghanistan (support may also continue to flow from non-government actors in Pakistan and the Middle East).³³

Islam in CASC under Russian imperial and later Soviet rule was in many ways isolated from Islamic development in the rest of the world. This factor is important to understanding some of the peculiarities of religious and ethnic identity in the post-Soviet space as a whole. Official policies on Islam changed over time, from efforts to undermine it (at times with violence and deportations) to a more accommodating stance, with officially approved clerics, after World War II. The closing years of the Soviet Union saw a renewal of state-sponsored anti-Islamic propaganda. The result of Soviet policies was secularization to a significant extent, but coupled with a popular identification with Islam as somewhat more of an ethnic/identity determinant than an indicator of religious belief or practice. Moreover, in South Caucasus particularly but in rural areas of Central Asia as well, a "parallel" Islam developed, an Islam with unofficial (i.e., un-sanctioned by government) religious leaders and mystical brotherhoods. Observant Muslims in the region, denied opportunities to make pilgrimage to Mecca, often visited saints' graves and various shrines as another aspect of their religious faith.³⁴

³²"Central Asia: Fault Lines in the New Security Map," (Osh/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2001).

³³See *The IMU and the Hizb-Ut-Tahrir: Implications of the Afghanistan Campaign*.

³⁴On Islam under Tsarist and Soviet rule, see Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, especially Chapter 29: "Inner Asia under Russian and Chinese Rule," pp. 784–822; Michael Rywkin, *Moscow's Muslim Challenge, Soviet Central Asia*, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe Inc., 1982; Alexandre Benningsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Mystics and Commissars, Sufism in the Soviet Union*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985. See also Shireen T. Hunter, *Central Asia Since Independence*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996, pp. 14–16, 35–36; Martha Brill Olcott, *Central Asia's New States*, Washington, D.C.: United States

Today, levels of observance of the Islamic faith vary widely throughout the post-Soviet Muslim world. As elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, however, political independence brought with it a resurgence of religious feeling, and Islam was no exception. There is a wide range of movements, including those modeled on the Wahabist traditions of fundamentalist Islam.³⁵ To some extent this can be attributed to the broad range of religious material (books, schools and teachers, and religious leaders, as well as funding) that arrived in the region at the time of the Soviet collapse and independence from Islamic states worldwide (including Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and others). The isolation of Central Asian Islam from global Islamic movements for so many years in some ways dampened some of the aversion that might have been expected by largely Sunni Central Asia to Shi'ite efforts to influence Islamic development in the region, even as, as Suny notes, primary identification remained with fellow Central Asian Muslims. With a newfound interest in religion combined with distrust of the Soviet Union's approved clerics, many new messages found ready ears.³⁶

There can be little doubt that there has been a flourishing of new mosques, religious schools, and institutes (numbering in the thousands), all founded and built over the last ten years. Moreover, many new Islamic organizations go unregistered, in part to avoid unwanted government attention. This makes the actual extent of Islamic resurgence difficult to measure.³⁷

Like ethnicity, Islam can be a rallying cry for the frustrated, and thus a mechanism for political participation. In a region where Soviet rule made Islam far more a question of identity than religion, this is par-

Institute of Peace Press, 1996, pp. 31–33; Suny, “Provisional Stabilities”; and Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993.

³⁵Although Wahabism is often used by post-Soviet and other political leaders to refer to Islamic political movements generally, its roots are the fundamentalist form of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia. Wahabism is a puritanical movement that rejects the Sufi tradition that was common in Central Asia and the Caucasus. See Lapidus, pp. 673–675; M. Ehsan Ahrari, *Jihadi Groups, Nuclear Pakistan, and the New Great Game*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2001, pp. 20–21.

³⁶See Poonam Mann, “Fighting Terrorism: India and Central Asia,” *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 24, No. 11 (February 2001); Olcott, p. 33.

³⁷Ahrari, pp. 21–22. See also Hunter, pp. 36–37.

ticularly important since as a religion Islam also provides a useful mobilizing mechanism in that it is an acceptable reason for people to gather, and mosques are an acceptable place for them to do so—even if religious political parties are banned. As Nora Bensahel points out, when Islamic groups and parties are incorporated into the political process they appear (admittedly on rather little data) to behave more moderately,³⁸ but Islam as an underground opposition force may focus on more divisive and radical agendas. In Central Asia, where Islamic political parties are banned everywhere except in Tajikistan, Islamist fundamentalist movements tend specifically to focus their appeal on the economically and politically disadvantaged. Insofar as these appeals are successful, continued government repression of political Islam then becomes another in a series of grievances that can unite the disadvantaged against the government; in the absence of legal institutions for channeling political participation, the religion serves as an extralegal channel of participation to voice grievances both about economic disadvantage and repression. To date, the extremes of illegal actions have been limited to isolated acts of terrorism or minor border incursions. However, the broadening (although still very small) base of support enjoyed by groups such as the Hizb ut-Tahrir, which does not explicitly advocate the violent overthrow of the state but does urge the creation of an Islamic government (and which is discussed in more detail below), suggests that the danger to the states of Central Asia may still be developing.

The IMU, created in Uzbekistan in the late 1980s, aims to establish an Islamic state first in the Ferghana Valley, and then in Uzbekistan. Its political leader, Tahir Yuldashev, reportedly fought in Tajikistan's civil war on the side of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) and spent part of the mid-1990s in Afghanistan. IMU military commander Juma Namangani (also known as Djumbai Hodzhaev and Tadzhibai) fought in Afghanistan during the Soviet Union's war there as a member of a Soviet paratrooper unit. He developed an interest in Islam and Islamic political activism after he returned home to Uzbekistan. His involvement in Islamic political and religious groups brought him to fight with UTO forces in Tajikistan and to train in Afghanistani Mujahideen training camps. Namangani, who is now

³⁸Bensahel.

believed to have been killed in Afghanistan fighting in late 2001, controlled a multinational militia whose size is estimated by various sources as between 2,000 and 7,000 men.³⁹ Russian sources linked him to Pakistani security forces, who reportedly guided aspects of his training, and to Saudi intelligence, as well as to a wide range of nongovernmental Islamic groups throughout the world.⁴⁰ His probable successor, Tohir Yuldash, had held responsibility for external fundraising under Namangani, and thus reportedly has his own contacts in the Middle East and South Asia.⁴¹ The IMU as a whole appears to have received significant assistance from the Taliban, Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda group, Pakistani radical Islamic movements Sepakhe Sakhaba and Kharakat-ul'-Mujeheddin, and other groups in Pakistan and elsewhere.⁴² As will be discussed in Chapter Four, they also reportedly receive some financial assistance from the drug smuggling business in Central Asia.⁴³ Russian sources indicate that training takes/took place at IMU camps in Tajikistan, as well as in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Chechnya at camps run by Al Qaeda, Kharakat ul-Ansar, Hizbi-Islami, Kharakat ul-Mujeheddin, Djamaat at-Tablig vad-Daua, the Taliban, and, in Chechnya, by the warlord Khattab.⁴⁴ Other Islamic groups in the region, including the IRP (now officially incorporated into government in Tajikistan, although Tajik President Rakhmanov clearly continues to see the group and its offshoots as threatening) also reportedly receive(d) foreign support from Afghanistan and Pakistani movements.⁴⁵

³⁹Ahrari, pp. 17–19; Dmitri Nikolayev, "They Want to Turn Central Asia into a Tinderbox" (in Russian), *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, August 31, 2001, Internet edition, nvo.ng.ru/wars/2001-08-31/2_asia.html.

⁴⁰Nikolayev. Groups reported to have taken an interest in his career and provided support for his activities include the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan and Djamaat-e-Islami.

⁴¹*The IMU and the Hizb-Ut-Tahrir: Implications of the Afghanistan Campaign.*

⁴²Ahrari, Mann, Nikolayev. Other groups include, according to Nikolayev, Islamic Relief Worldwide, Djamaat-e-Islami, Qatar (transliterated from Russian), the Saudi International Islamic Rescue Organization (translated from Russian), Ihvan al-Muslimun (transliterated from Russian), and the Global Assembly of Islamic Youth.

⁴³Ahrari, p. 17; Nikolayev; "Central Asia: Drugs and Conflict"; *The IMU and the Hizb-Ut-Tahrir: Implications of the Afghanistan Campaign.*

⁴⁴Nikolayev. Organization names transliterated from Russian.

⁴⁵Mann.

It is, of course, the IMU that was behind incursions into Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in the late 1990s and early 2000s. From bases in Afghanistan and Tajikistan, the IMU has also played an important role in destabilizing southern Tajikistan, which in turn made it difficult for the opposition Northern Alliance in Afghanistan to receive supplies and assistance.⁴⁶ The IMU was also involved in continuing fighting in Afghanistan.⁴⁷ At present, the targeting by allied forces of IMU bases and camps in Afghanistan, as well as the death of military commander Namangani and countless others, appears to have dealt the IMU a heavy blow. While it may be able to regroup to some extent at bases in poorly controlled parts of Tajikistan, the International Crisis Group estimates that further incursions of the sort the IMU carried out in recent years are probably unlikely. Smaller-scale operations, however, like bombings and possibly attacks on U.S. or allied bases and facilities in the region, may become the new *modus operandi* for the group.⁴⁸

The Hizb ut-Tahrir also advocates Islamic rule, in fact, its ultimate goal, like that of many revolutionary Islamic political groups, including Al Qaeda, is the restoration of a Caliphate and the spreading of the Islamic message to the world. While it does not explicitly advocate taking up arms in this cause, its literature directs that when an Islamic emir calls on the people to take up arms as Muslims, they should do so, and more recent statements in the wake of U.S. and allied attacks on Afghanistan have moved closer to advocating violent action. Its stated goal is “to carry the Islamic call in a political way, so as to change the current corrupt society and transform it to an Islamic society.”⁴⁹

Hizb ut-Tahrir propaganda on the subject of Uzbekistan argues that Uzbek president Karimov is of Jewish ancestry and “not one of our own.” It calls on Muslim Uzbeks to work for his removal and the in-

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Nikolayev.

⁴⁸*The IMU and the Hizb-Ut-Tahrir: Implications of the Afghanistan Campaign.*

⁴⁹See the group’s web site at www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org. Accessed September 16, 2001; October 24, 2001. See also www.khilafah.com, another site operated by the Hizb ut-Tahrir.

stitution of Islamic rule.⁵⁰ The Hizb claims a global membership and tends to focus recruitment on the young, unemployed, uneducated, and/or rural, and minority groups often prove most responsive. Its cell structure makes accurate assessments of the group's size and makeup difficult, but there is good reason to believe that the group has grown significantly in recent years, although most estimates for even those areas where it is believed to be most active remain below 10 percent of the population. Certainly its distribution of leaflets and propaganda in the region, particularly in the Ferghana Valley but spreading to such states as Kazakhstan, is growing, and is a concern to regional leaders.⁵¹ Even Tajikistan, which accepts a measure of Islamic participation in government, has cracked down on the group with mass arrests of presumed members as well as those possessing Hizb ut-Tahrir leaflets.⁵²

Changes in patterns of support for the Hizb ut-Tahrir and similar groups may prove to be an important factor. It is notable that the Islamic Renaissance Party has seen a growing membership in previously predominantly secular parts of Tajikistan, and that the Hizb ut-Tahrir appears to be gaining membership at the expense of the IRP, suggesting an increasing radicalization and perhaps a dissatisfaction with the IRP's involvement in secular government structures. The Hizb's support base in Tajikistan has also enlarged from a primarily ethnic Uzbek population to include more Tajiks and others.⁵³ The Hizb is also moving beyond its Uzbek base of support in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and there are reports that it and similar groups are spreading beyond rural villages and into urban areas throughout Central Asia.⁵⁴

⁵⁰Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Raheem, "Is Uzbekistan Really Independent?" *www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org*. Wilaya Publications link, issued August 28, 2001, downloaded September 16, 2001.

⁵¹*The IMU and the Hizb-Ut-Tahrir: Implications of the Afghanistan Campaign*. Ahrari, p. 19.

⁵²"Tajikistan: An Uncertain Peace."

⁵³*Ibid.*

⁵⁴Ivan Aleksandrov, "Is the Islamic Threat to Uzbekistan Real," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta—Religii*, October 10, 2001; *The IMU and the Hizb-Ut-Tahrir: Implications of the Afghanistan Campaign*.

Increasing popularity of the Hizb ut-Tahrir, which disseminates literature telling Central Asian Muslims that they are oppressed by their current secular leadership and duty-bound to overthrow it, may prove more dangerous in the long term than the threat posed by the IMU. The IMU attracts those already committed to the cause of violent action, whereas Hizb ut-Tahrir and similar groups appeal to those rediscovering their faith and then encourage them to see that faith as commanding their opposition to secular state power. Moreover, continued crackdowns on this group by Central Asian governments will probably only enhance its popular support—and possibly further radicalize its membership. The International Crisis Group notes that in Tajikistan, at least, individuals arrested for fairly minor offenses can be imprisoned for up to five years. In prison, they come in contact with a more radical group of individuals and can emerge with more fundamentalist views—as well as ties to criminal and militant groups.⁵⁵

POLITICAL LANDSCAPE: CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, a survey of the political landscape illustrates the limited progress in transitioning to democracy and market economies in CASC. The levels of institutionalization and the capacity of states to institutionally manage conflict vary, but even the comparatively democratic regimes exhibit striking institutional weaknesses. The impact of these institutional weaknesses is mitigated in some states by sultanistic and repressive rule, and in others by the fragmentation of opposition movements. In the former, however, it seems likely that by stifling any overt dissent, the governments in question have reduced conflict in the near term but, by sending dissent (and with it religion) underground, perhaps provided more societal support to the most extreme of their opponents in the longer term.

The one clear near-term indicator of a significantly increased risk of internal strife in this region is expected succession crises in several states over the next 10–15 years. While only Aliev in Azerbaijan and Shevardnadze in Georgia are currently over 70, Uzbekistan's Karimov, Turkmenistan's Niyazov, and Kazakhstan's Nazarbaev will be

⁵⁵*The IMU and the Hizb-Ut-Tahrir: Implications of the Afghanistan Campaign.*

senior citizens within a decade.⁵⁶ Moreover, the sudden death of any of these “strongmen” from illness, accident, or assassination would throw their countries into turmoil no less, and probably even more, than death from old age. These regimes will not have institutions of succession to rely on when the current leaders die or retire. Successions will almost certainly be a catalyst for unrest and civil strife. While it is possible that this will be merely a brief period of instability while elites challenge each other for power, to be followed by yet another individually powerful leader, in the longer term, these regimes based upon personalistic rule are not sustainable, and they carry with them a significant risk of longer-term conflict and strife.⁵⁷

PROXIMATE CAUSES OF CONFLICT IN CENTRAL ASIA AND SOUTH CAUCASUS

As the previous analysis has demonstrated, CASC states remain institutionally weak. This increases not only the risk of civil strife, the mechanisms for which were discussed above, but also the danger of interstate conflict. States that see themselves as weakening may seek to wage pre-emptive war, hoping to fight while they retain sufficient strength to win—and thus perhaps retain control of assets and power. Increasing domestic political disorder and chaos within a state may bring its leaders to wage war as a means of overcoming internal strife and dissent by building popular unity against a common enemy.⁵⁸ And even if the weak or declining state is not itself interested in war, its weakness may invite attack from those who see in it a window of opportunity to increase their own power through victory and/or conquest.⁵⁹ Geoffrey Blainey points out that states fight wars in large part because they believe they can win them. Another state’s weakness can lead to such a belief on the part of others, while the weak state itself, particularly if it is in transition, may not realize the extent of its weakness, and therefore join in battle rather

⁵⁶Kyrgyzstan’s Akaev is in his mid-50s.

⁵⁷Chelabi and Linz.

⁵⁸See discussion in Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, New York: The Free Press, 1988 edition, pp. 72–86.

⁵⁹For an argument on how and why conquest continues to be advantageous to the conqueror, see Peter Liberman, “The Spoils of Conquest,” *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Fall 1993), pp. 125–153.

than surrender.⁶⁰ Moreover, many processes of internal transition, such as revolution, make a state appear weak and vulnerable to outsiders.⁶¹ As we have discussed, the factors of state weakness in the CASC region are far from ambiguous.

In addition to the potential for weak adversaries, the pretexts for internal and interstate war in the region are plentiful. Concentrated resources such as soil, water, and agriculture,⁶² competing historical claims to large swaths of land, and national borders disconnected from ethnic and cultural borders,⁶³ all provide potential proximate causes for war and reasons to believe that it might be profitable. Moreover, the lack of cooperation between regional elites means that—to paraphrase from U.S. history—they are increasingly prone to hanging separately, having failed to hang together. Finally, insofar as Islamic revolution can be thought to be on the rise as a mobilizing revolutionary ideology throughout much of the region, particularly in Central Asia, the likelihood that conflict spurred by its adherents could remain confined within one state's borders appears slim.

All that said, there are other factors that make interstate war somewhat less likely. The economic incentives, particularly for the development of Caspian energy resources, appear to balance out the possible spoils that war might bring. While cooperation among regional leaders remains limited, there is a growing recognition that it is necessary, and it is possible that increased foreign involvement may spur more cooperation.⁶⁴ Moreover, the presence of regional, Russian, and now Western security forces in the region has played a stabilizing role in the past, particularly in Tajikistan, and may do so again in the future.

⁶⁰See Blainey, pp. 72–86, 123.

⁶¹Stephen M. Walt, *Revolution and War*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996, p. 32.

⁶²See Chapter Five of this report.

⁶³See Chapter Six of this report.

⁶⁴However, the opposite effect is also a possibility. If neighbors believe that Uzbekistan is using the opportunities presented by the foreign presence and assistance to consolidate power, for instance, they will feel threatened and may respond by seeking allies against the threat.

The balance of this chapter will examine some of the most likely proximate causes for conflict in CASC, specifically the situation in the Ferghana Valley and the rise of militant Islamic political movements in the region, the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute, and secessionism in Georgia. It will then conclude with some tentative insights for the prospects for large-scale conflict in CASC.

THE FERGHANA VALLEY AND CROSS-BORDER INCURSIONS

Central Asia offers numerous possibilities for interstate border conflict. Existing borders separate ethnic Tajiks from their principal cities. Tajikistan can, in theory, lay claim to all of historic Bukhara, which largely lies in Uzbekistan. While Tajikistan as a state is much weaker than Uzbekistan, the Uzbek leadership remains concerned that small but determined Tajik terrorist cells might wreak significant havoc on Uzbek territory. Turkmenistan also has claims on Khiva in Uzbekistan. Kazaks can make a claim to Tashkent, Uzbekistan's capital. Uzbekistan, for its part, has claims on all three of these countries as well as on Kyrgyzstan's Osh oblast (which has received *de facto* limited extraterritorial rights to Uzbekistan). The large Uzbek diaspora in various states of the region fuels fears of an Uzbek intervention on behalf of its nationals—or that such an intervention will serve as a pretext for Uzbek imperialism.

The implications for conflict of ethnic divides in Central Asia as a whole are discussed in detail in Chapter Six. This chapter will highlight only the most likely setting for large-scale conflict in the Central Asian subregion: the Ferghana Valley. The valley has already hosted both localized border incursions by the IMU and other groups and counterterrorist operations conducted by a coalition of regional forces with the significant support of Russia and others. Regional cooperation for keeping the peace in Ferghana is crucial, as jurisdiction over its territory is complex to say the least. The valley includes portions of eastern Uzbekistan, southern Kyrgyzstan, and northern Tajikistan, with borders that look like nothing so much as a difficult puzzle (see Figure 2.1, as well as the frontispiece). One hundred fifteen miles long and sixty-five miles wide at its widest point, with a population of 10 million, the Ferghana Valley is one of the most densely populated and agriculturally rich areas of Central Asia. It

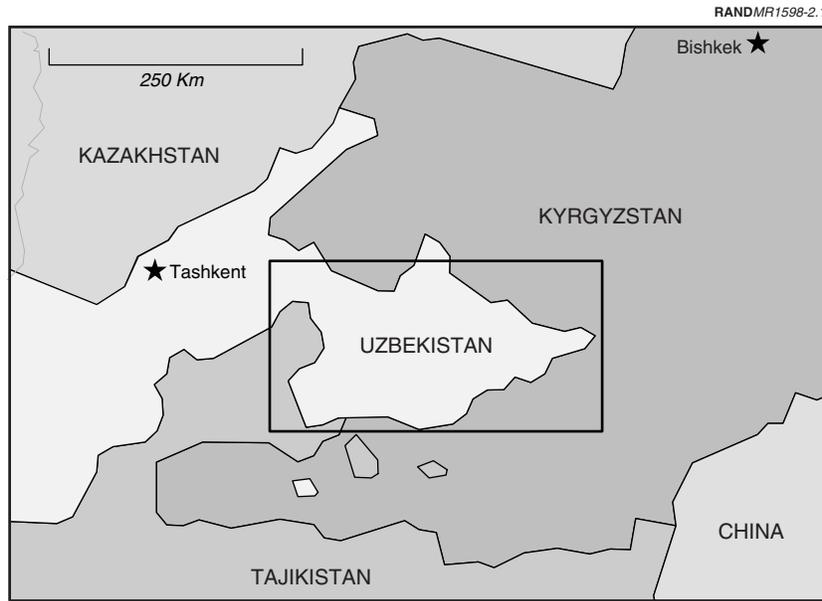


Figure 2.1—The Ferghana Valley

includes 5 percent of the territory but 20 percent of the population of the five states of Central Asia, and almost the entire Uzbek population of Kyrgyzstan lives within it.⁶⁵

The Ferghana Valley’s heritage as the political and cultural center of Islam in Central Asia was what led Stalin to divide it among the three states with its present convoluted borders, ensuring control from Moscow by a divide-and-conquer mechanism. The valley is the major source of food and water for the subregion. In recent years, it has been a primary target of IMU recruitment and activities.

The true extent of the threat from Islamic militant revolutionary groups such as the IMU remains subject to extensive debate. As the discussion above indicates, state policies of suppression may in

⁶⁵Senator Sam Nunn, Barnett Rubin, and Nancy Lubin, “Calming the Fergana Valley,” *Report of the Fergana Valley Working Group for Preventative Action*, New York Century Foundation Press, 1999; Tsepakalo, “The Remaking of Eurasia.”

some ways drive more people to a more radical form of Islam, which is dangerous in the longer term for overall state stability. Evidence suggests that at present, however, these movements remain relatively small.

In addition to widespread arrests and crackdowns on a range of Islamic groups, Central Asian leaders have repeatedly sought to increase cooperation in their efforts to strengthen border enforcement. They have also established a rapid-reaction force, at least on paper, with Russia's leadership and logistical support, to counteract the perceived threat.

Actual cooperation among the current leaders has, however, been hindered by distrust and personal animosities between them—and the fact that border incursions are often thought to be supported by one or another regional state. The presidents of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, Karimov and Nazarbayev, still regard each other as regional rivals for pre-eminent power. Uzbekistan has complained that former members of the Tajik opposition—now in the coalition government—have aided the IMU, providing basing areas and other support. There is truth to these reports. For example, Tajikistan's Minister of Emergency Situations Mirza Ziyayev, who fought with Namangani in the UTO, helped him maintain bases in the Tavildara region at least into 2000.⁶⁶ Tajikistan, in turn, recounts the believed Uzbek support to former Rakhmonov associate Khudojberdiev, who took refuge in Uzbekistan and in 1998 staged an attack into Tajik territory, briefly taking control of Sughd Province.⁶⁷ Uzbekistan has mined its borders with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, in some cases in contested areas, and the result has been numerous civilian casualties. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan also suffered from unsanctioned Uzbek air force attacks into their territories after the 2000 IMU incursions. Kyrgyzstan, too, has mined its borders with Tajikistan and used explosives to make some mountain passes between the two countries impassable, actions that have not found favor with Tajikistan.⁶⁸

⁶⁶Aleksandrov, "Is the Islamic Threat to Uzbekistan Real"; "Central Asia: Fault Lines in the New Security Map."

⁶⁷"Tajikistan: An Uncertain Peace."

⁶⁸"Central Asia: Fault Lines in the New Security Map."

In addition, the convoluted and porous borders in the Ferghana Valley make it extremely difficult to patrol effectively. This difficulty has led to a concern that the region's leaders are not capable of containing a rebellion and will be unable to prevent its escalation into a regional conflict over power and territory. If the situation continues to deteriorate, there is a chance that Uzbekistan may unilaterally move to consolidate the Ferghana Valley under its jurisdiction, re-drawing borders to consolidate its defenses.⁶⁹ Instability as a result of the actions of the IMU or similar groups may thus provide an opportunity and an excuse for Uzbekistan to achieve territorial expansion. As the mining and air force strikes show, Uzbekistan's evolving security policy seems to include the right to intervene in neighboring states if it perceives its own interests to be threatened.

The impact of the U.S. force presence in the region is likely to be primarily positive, as long as the forces remain in place. That said, the potential for continued low-level conflict in and near the Ferghana Valley puts U.S. forces in danger of becoming targets of attacks by radical revolutionary groups. Moreover, U.S. military presence increases the likelihood that U.S. forces will get involved if conflict breaks out for other reasons. Finally, if U.S. troops do play a significant stabilizing role while in place, there is a risk that their eventual withdrawal will spur deterioration of the situation, particularly if local and regional conflicts remain unresolved.

NAGORNO-KARABAKH

The South Caucasus subregion is also not immune to the danger of border conflict. Azerbaijan and Armenia have yet to settle their territorial dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh, an area that is populated by Armenians but was located inside the territorial borders of Azerbaijan. The Nagorno-Karabakh war that ended in a cease-fire in 1994 left 20 percent of Azerbaijani territory under Armenian control. Since the May 1994 cease-fire, which left Nagorno-Karabakh *de facto* independent but linked to Armenia, the conflict over the status of the Armenian enclave has been in a deadlock.

⁶⁹This was suggested by John Schoeberlein, Director of the International Crisis Group's Central Asia Project, at an Open Forum on April 27, 2001, sponsored by the Central Eurasia Project of the Open Society Institute.

Recently, intensified peace talks have increased hope that a settlement can be reached.⁷⁰ Several factors have contributed to this shift. First, the leaders of both Azerbaijan and Armenia, Heidar Aliiev and Robert Kocharian, no longer consider the status quo to be viable. Armenia's economy has been seriously damaged by the war and both Armenia and Azerbaijan recognize the need for broader relations with Turkey and the West. Secondly, both the United States and Russia have been more committed to reaching a settlement. Russia has been playing a more constructive role in the process and has sought to cultivate a closer relationship with Azerbaijan. While Russia's motives for this are far from selfless, Russian-Azerbaijani rapprochement has the potential to increase the likelihood of a settlement.

If peace talks fail, opposition movements in both Azerbaijan and Armenia are likely to be strengthened, and a new phase of military escalation between the states is probable. There are already warning signs that this escalation, at least in rhetoric, is already under way. Both sides are currently increasing military spending. Armenia is in the process of preparing a new military doctrine that envisions a larger army. In Azerbaijan, parallels have been drawn to Croatia's 1995 cleansing of Krajina as a precedent for regaining territory.⁷¹

Conversely, a peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict would have a significant stabilizing effect on South Caucasus. It would enable the reconstruction of war-damaged areas, and the more peaceful transportation of goods across the region. It would also strengthen Azerbaijan and Armenia and limit their vulnerability to Russian direct interference.

But reaching settlement has been difficult because it requires painful compromise for both sides. Moreover, public opinion in both states is a long way from being committed to peace. Armenian politics have been largely dominated by those determined to hold onto the territory and to annex it to Armenia. In addition, the withdrawal of

⁷⁰Stephen Blank, "Armenia at the Crossroads of War and Peace," and Blanka Hancilova, "Prospects and Perils of an Armenian-Azerbaijani Settlement," Bi-Weekly Briefing, *The Analyst*, Wednesday, May 23, 2001.

⁷¹Seymour Selimov, "Peace Over Nagorno-Karabakh Remains Elusive As Populaces Drift Further Apart," *Transitions Online*, August 24, 2001.

Armenian units from Azerbaijani territory, which is a necessary element of any deal, will certainly be followed by the return of hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons in Azerbaijan back to their homes in those areas. Estimates are that there are between 700,000 and 1,000,000 internally displaced people in Azerbaijan, or about 10 percent of the population.⁷² Such a major population movement would be a strain on the economy of Azerbaijan, as well as a potential political problem.

GEORGIAN SEPARATISTS AND RUSSIA

In Georgia, President Eduard A. Shevardnadze has sought to balance a desire for a more Western orientation for his country, one that ends 200 years of Russian dominance, with the historical and economic relations that tie Georgia to the rest of the post-Soviet world. This challenge has been exacerbated by political and military challenges to Georgia's integrity since independence. In 1992, independent Georgia's first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, was ousted from power, the first step in an underground conflict that continues to simmer in the form of military sabotage operations. Secessionist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia pose additional complications, as does the situation in the Pankisi Gorge, where a large number of Chechen refugees are believed to include Chechen and other potentially Al Qaeda-linked extremist leaders and insurgents.

Abkhazia, in northern Georgia, enjoyed a measure of political independence under the Soviets. Soon after Georgia declared independence, Abkhazia demanded autonomy from Georgia and asked for Russian help. At the time (and since), some in Georgia accused the Russians of stirring up the unrest in the first place. As the conflict intensified, Russia was accused of supporting the rebels (in part via forces stationed there), and there is no question that the Abkhaz separatists wanted Russian support. By 1993, reports suggested that they had it, as well as assistance from Chechens and other North Caucasus peoples. Fighting continued until the Abkhazians (with the assistance of Russian forces and aid) forced the Georgians out of the region in fall 1993. Two hundred thousand Georgian refugees fled

⁷²Nancy Lubin, "An Old Story With a New Twist," in Menon et al., p. 222.

into the rest of Georgia. At that time, Russian peacekeepers were deployed to the region. Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) peacekeepers, which are predominantly if not entirely made up of Russian forces, remain there to this day, and Russia provides energy and economic support to keep the de facto independent region functioning.⁷³

The situation in South Ossetia has significant parallels with that in Abkhazia. South Ossetia enjoyed less formal autonomy than did Abkhazia under Soviet rule, and it is a more ethnically homogenous region (fewer than 20 percent of Abkhazia residents are ethnic Abkhaz, while over 60 percent of those in South Ossetia are Ossetian). Moreover, North Ossetia, which shares the same ethnics, is just across the border in Russia. Even before Georgian independence, South Ossetian leaders expressed a desire to secede and join Russia (and North Ossetia). This led to violence in 1990, in which Russia supported Georgian efforts to prevent secession. But in the winter of 1990–1991, an effort to impose direct rule from Tbilisi over the region resulted in outright civil war, and Russian forces intervened. Russian and Georgian peacekeepers continue to separate the factions in this conflict, creating a stable, if not peaceful, situation. Ossetian separatists continue to voice their aims.

Although it is now drawing down its presence, Russia continues to maintain military bases within Georgia, including ground and air forces. It is widely believed that Georgia's initial acquiescence to Russian military presence was based on a Russian promise to help Georgia regain Abkhazia. As this has clearly not occurred, the Georgian parliament has refused to ratify the 1995 treaty on the bases with Russia and is seeking a full Russian withdrawal. At an Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) summit in Istanbul in November 1999, Russia agreed to close down two military bases in Georgia, at Vaziani (near Tbilisi) and Gadauta (in Abkhazia), and it has largely done so. It also agreed to negotiate on the fate of the remaining two Russian bases in Georgia (Akhalkalaki and Batumi) and to complete those negotiations by the end of 2001. Even now that Russian forces have withdrawn from two bases, Russia will con-

⁷³Rajan Menon, "The Security Environment in the South Caucasus and Central Asia," in Menon et al., pp. 3–27; Emil Pain, "Contagious Ethnic Conflicts and Border Disputes Along Russia's Southern Flank," in Menon et al., pp. 177–202.

tinue to maintain high troop levels inside Georgia.⁷⁴ Moreover, in light of the continuing Chechen conflict, Russia has clear strategic reasons to maintain forces in Georgia.

The situation in Pankisi, and the recent revelations that the United States will be assisting Georgia with its efforts to take control of the region, create a number of additional complications. Russia has been arguing for several years that Chechen rebels are hiding in Pankisi, with Georgia generally denying that this was the case and refusing Russia's repeated offers of assistance. In early 2002, rumors that Al Qaeda militants might also be taking shelter in the area led initially to Georgian denials that it would be launching joint operations with either the United States or Russia, and then, of course, to the admission that the United States would be providing assistance in the form of training and equipment.⁷⁵

While the United States has been careful to assert that its presence in Georgia would be minimal and would not include combat operations, the result is that at this point in time, both U.S. and Russian forces are engaged on the territory of this ravaged country. Insofar as Georgia's leadership hopes to hasten the end of Russian military presence in their country, they may see the U.S. involvement as a mechanism to achieve this goal. Certainly, an end to Russia's military presence in Georgia would mitigate at least some aspects of Russia's leverage over Georgia, something Russia is loath to give up, while a greater U.S. involvement would potentially involve the United States in the difficult (and perhaps hopeless) effort of consolidating central control over Georgia and preventing further conflict within its borders. This, of course, has implications for the interests of the United States and Russia, as well as Georgia, interests that are discussed in Chapter Seven of this report.

⁷⁴Brian Whitmore, "Bear Hug Pulls South Closer," *Moscow Times*, January 29, 2000, electronic edition.

⁷⁵"Georgian Officials Exclude Bin Laden's Presence in Pankisi," *RFE/RL Newslines*, Vol. 6, No. 32, Part I, February 19, 2002; Vernon Loeb and Peter Slevin, "U.S. Begins Anti-Terror Assistance in Georgia," *Washington Post*, February 27, 2002, p. A1.

CONCLUSIONS

While the above discussion has focused on some specific regions where conflict has emerged in the past and is likely to flare up again in the future, as the balance of this report indicates, there are many other potential areas of conflict in CASC. The fragile political and economic structures of these states will have difficulty containing conflict if and when it emerges. Domestic authoritarianism can stem the tide in the short term but is unlikely to be sustainable, particularly given the economic and political weakness of these states. Foreign presence can play a mitigating role to some extent, but it can also exacerbate the level of conflict once it begins, in part by involving outside states and their interests (see Chapter Seven). Although sources of conflict are varied, it is possible to identify key developments to watch for. Political change, that is to say, movement toward either greater authoritarianism or democratization, has the potential to create conditions favorable to armed strife in all of these states. Political developments ought therefore be watched closely, particularly with regard to the mechanisms and approaches to popular mobilization that develop in coming years.

Successions will almost certainly take place in Azerbaijan and Georgia within the next decade, and are also possible in other states in the 10- to 15-year time frame. While much could change over that period, absent significantly increased political institutionalization, the retirement or death of a leader may well bring one or more states into crisis and domestic unrest. Ongoing efforts within states to define succession ahead of time bear careful monitoring. If these efforts are successful, they will determine the next leader. If they are not, they will at least provide insight into whom the players in the contest for power will be.

The situations in the Ferghana Valley, in Georgia, and around Nagorno-Karabakh are also crucial to the future of CASC. The growth and shape of Islamic movements throughout the region will have an important impact on the future political development of these countries. Such groups' links to organizations abroad and their political and religious agendas are key components of both their goals and their capacities. Tajikistan also cannot be ignored. Central control remains lacking in most of the country, and Dushanbe has been deemed so unsafe that the U.S. Ambassador and his staff com-

mute from Kazakhstan. Tajikistan, and to a lesser but still significant extent Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan, are also vulnerable to developments in neighboring Afghanistan. Refugees, drug traffickers, and militants have been crossing these borders with relative ease for years. Continued or resumed unrest and conflict in Afghanistan could, as noted above, reignite the Tajik civil war and strain the state capacity of other neighbors.

At the time of this writing, U.S. troops have arrived at Central Asian airfields and bases (in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and also, according to some reports, Tajikistan) in conjunction with the U.S. military response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. How this situation will evolve depends tremendously on the actions and reactions of a wide variety of actors, but there can be no question that it will both affect and be affected by the situation in Central Asia. Force protection for U.S. forces will involve worries about cross-border incursions and IMU activity. Presence in the region will also require significant coordination with Russian forces, as Central Asian states, particularly Tajikistan, are already heavily dependent on Russia for assistance with border security.⁷⁶

⁷⁶Moshe Gammer, "Post-Soviet Central Asia and Post-Colonial Francophone Africa: Some Associations," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (April 2000), pp. 124–149.