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# Regional Demographics and The War on Terrorism

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## **Introduction**

The ultimate success of the United States and her allies in the war on terrorism will depend upon myriad variables. Some, such as military capabilities and public support for military operations, are well known or easily discerned. Others are less obvious, but will still be critical. Among these are demographic trends in regions where counter-terror campaigns are being prosecuted, and the effectiveness of US policies, formulated in response to these trends, to mitigate the appeal of Islamist extremism.

High fertility rates, unchecked and unregulated migration flows, volatile ethnic (including religious) rivalries, and haphazard urbanization can all contribute to extremism in Muslim regions, especially when occurring in areas of weak infrastructure, rising economic expectations, and resource shortages.<sup>1</sup> If the link between demography and the causes of extremism can be broken in the major theatres of the war, the prospects for a decisive and durable victory will be enhanced. This article therefore addresses two questions: What do selected local demographic trends portend for regional counter-terrorist efforts?; and, given these trends and their implications, what are the best policies available to the US for preventing demography from becoming a de facto ally of Al Qa'ida and its fellow travelers?

To answer these questions, I review the implications of demography in three regions: Afghanistan, the Philippines, and

the former Soviet republic of Georgia. I focus on these three regions because they were the first to which significant contingents of American troops were committed in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks on the US.

## **Analytical Approach**

The approach used here is based on subjective codings of seven demographic variables in each region: fertility rate, ethnic (particularly religious) composition, internal migration, international migration, level of human capital, population/environment interactions, and level of urbanization. These variables are leading indicators for most issues of development and population dynamics.

### *Fertility Rates*

High numbers (e.g., four or greater) of children born per woman, such as those seen in Muslim nations of North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, can strain the social fabric of a nation. This is particularly true in poor countries with limited private sector employment and weak infrastructures where disenchantment and hopelessness can make large numbers of youths more susceptible to recruitment by movements like Al Qa'ida.<sup>2</sup> The risk of such mobilization is greater where the governing regime is seen as narrowly based, corrupt, and lacking popular legitimacy.

### *Ethnic/Religious Composition*

This variable matters most in countries on the edges of the Islamic world (e.g.,



Afghan refugees move into Roghani Refugee Camp, Pakistan, December 2001. Photo courtesy of United Nations

the Philippines, Georgia), particularly where there is a large difference in growth rates between Muslim and non-Muslim populations. The slower-growing religious group often perceives a threat of political dominance by the faster-growing group, regardless of the absolute sizes of the two groups. Concern over the implications of differential growth rates can lead to mistrust and violence that abet extremism.

#### *Internal Migration*

When internal migration results in the displacement of a particular ethnic group from ancestral or fertile agricultural lands, the resulting enmity can provoke conflict and sow the seeds of extremism.

#### *International Migration*

Unchecked or poorly regulated movements of people across international borders create opportunities for Al Qa'ida to conceal transfers of personnel and resources.

#### *Level of Human Capital*

Muslim countries with poor public educational systems produce only small numbers of employable, technically-

skilled youth. Low levels of human capital lead to chronic underemployment and disillusionment among those who are prime recruiting targets for Al Qa'ida and like-minded groups. Radical religious schools (madrasas) in countries like Pakistan and Indonesia tend to gain students when other educational opportunities are sparse.

#### *Population/Environment Interactions*

High population densities or coerced internal migrations cause rural residents to farm infertile tracts or to overfarm their land, depleting the soil. The resulting damage to the environment can reduce agricultural yields and impoverish whole areas, creating breeding grounds for Islamism.

#### *Urbanization*

Increasing urbanization in Muslim countries creates opportunities for extremists to accelerate violent campaigns against secular governments and their supporters. In particular, the problems that urban sprawl generates can distract modern militaries and police forces from combating guerilla operations in rural areas.

Each variable is coded based on its potential to contribute to Islamist extremism in each region. There are three codings: 3 (large potential to contribute to extremism), 2 (medium potential), and 1 (low potential). An average of the codings is used to assess the likely effect of local demographic trends upon the fortunes of Islamist extremism.

### **Political Background**

Each of the regions I review have extremely volatile politics that have led Al Qa'ida to target them.

In Afghanistan, the principal issue of concern is whether the Karzai government will be able, with the help of American troops and international peacekeepers, to consolidate its grip throughout the country without sparking resistance from local warlords. Historically, Afghanistan has never had a strong government; local tribal leaders have always enjoyed considerable autonomy. Failure by the Karzai regime to achieve with the warlords a tacit accommodation, in which the warlords pledge loyalty to the national government in exchange for significant power of their own, would imperil efforts to develop the economy and public infrastructure. Such a failure would also lead to a resurgence of Al Qa'ida activity, which is currently confined to local pockets.

Unlike Afghanistan, the Philippines is overwhelmingly Catholic. Only about 5 per cent of the population is Muslim, and the Muslims are concentrated on the southern island of Mindanao and adjacent islets.<sup>3</sup> About 17 per cent of Mindanaoans are Muslim.<sup>4</sup> Muslim Filipinos nurse many grievances against the Manila government over perceived neglect of economic development. These grievances, plus the importation of Islamist ideologies from the Persian Gulf, have allowed Filipino Islamist guerrilla groups to conduct violent campaigns in the southern Philippines against government and Catholic targets.

***If the link between demography and the causes of extremism can be broken in the major theatres of the war on terrorism, the prospects for a decisive and durable victory will be enhanced***

The most dangerous is the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), with several hundred members and likely links to Al Qa'ida. ASG has kidnapped Western tourists for ransom, bombed government buildings and churches, and engaged in jungle warfare against the Filipino Army. A contingent of US Special Forces advisers and military support personnel arrived in the southern Philippines in 2002 to train the Philippine Army to better deal with ASG.

The former Soviet republic of Georgia achieved sudden prominence in the war on terrorism in early 2002 when local authorities discovered small numbers of Arab Al Qa'ida operatives in the Pankisi Gorge region of northeastern Georgia, abutting the breakaway Russian republic of Chechnya. Over the past several years, Chechen rebels have retreated to Pankisi after periods of bitter fighting with the Russian Army. Movement of rebels back and forth across the border has led to lawlessness in Pankisi, which has an ethnic Chechen population. Al Qa'ida operatives probably viewed the tiny enclave as an ideal, isolated spot from which they could spread Islamist extremism throughout the North Caucasus. Perhaps Al Qa'ida was also hoping to link up with Muslim separatist movements in the Abkhazia and South Ossetia parts of Georgia. In early 2002, the US dispatched a group of Special Forces advisers to Georgia to train the Georgian Army in counter-terror techniques.

**Assessing Regional Demographic Variables**

*(i) Afghanistan*

The *fertility rate* in Afghanistan is very high, with each woman, on average, giving birth to 6.0 children, similar to some of the fastest growing states of Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.<sup>5</sup> This fertility rate, and the fact that 43 per cent of Afghans are under fifteen, means the Afghan population could increase by an astounding 151 per cent over the next half century.<sup>6</sup>

Even if Afghan fertility rates were to drop suddenly in response to nascent family planning programmes, population momentum, resulting from previously high fertility rates skewing the current population toward age cohorts in or soon entering their childbearing years, will sustain rapid growth rates for at least another generation (Figure 1). If the large number of Afghan youths become disenchanted with the new

democratic government because of overburdened educational, public health, and transportation infrastructures, Islamist extremism could find fertile ground once again in this nation, sparking a resurgence of Al Qa'ida and Taliban activity. This danger compels one to code fertility rate as a 3 for Afghanistan.

The *ethnic composition* of Afghanistan also poses a great danger for conflict. The country has a very rich and complicated ethnic mix, which unfortunately has been exploited by a number of warlords, as well as the Taliban, for sustaining their power. Afghanistan has no ethnic majority. The Pashtuns, who have historically dominated the country's politics, comprise 44 per cent of the population; Tajiks constitute 25 per cent, the Shiite Hazara 10 per cent, and the Uzbeks 8 per cent. The current Karzai regime has a large number of Tajiks in key ministerial positions because of the role

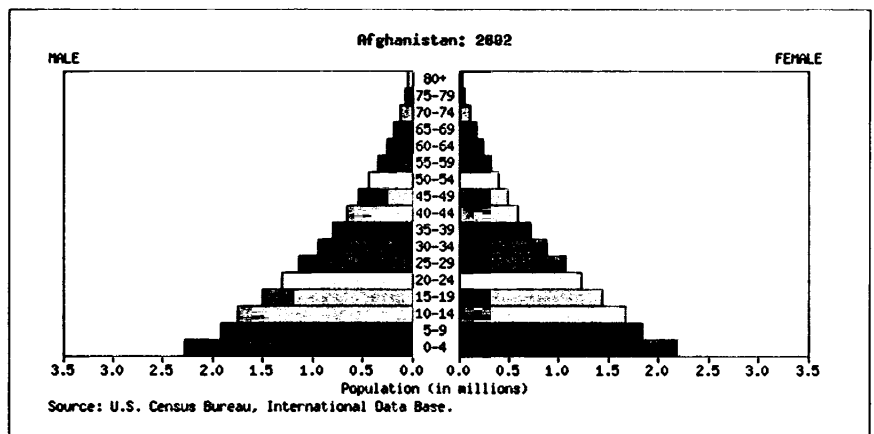


Figure 1: Afghanistan Population Pyramid

that group played in the Northern Alliance that helped drive the Taliban from power. This has created resentment among some Pashtun leaders, who feel that demography and history mandate that any national government carry a clear Pashtun stamp. It will be absolutely critical that, over the long term all major national institutions – including the army, cabinet, judiciary, legislature, and bureaucracy – be multiethnic, lest simmering ethnic tensions reinvigorate local warlords and their ethnic constituencies.

The difficulties posed by the ethnic composition of Afghanistan are complicated by the particular geographic concentration of each ethnic group, with Tajiks in the northeast, Uzbeks in the north, Hazara in the central area, and Pashtuns in the south, southeast, and southwest. These settlement patterns can easily lead to warlordism and conflict over disputed 'border regions'. They also contribute to the traditional weakness of national governments in Kabul. Ethnic composition is therefore also coded as a 3.

The remaining five variables – *internal and international migration, level of human capital, population/environment interactions, and level of urbanization* – have less dire implications for the stability and security of Afghanistan, though they are not insignificant. All except urbanization are coded as a 2, or as having moderate potential to contribute to extremism or terrorism. The low

level of urbanization in Afghanistan likely means it has little potential for contributing to extremism or terrorism.

International migration is the most worrisome of these because of the large numbers of Afghan refugees, estimated to number up to one million, returning from camps in Iran and Pakistan. Many refugees, however, have family and clan networks into which they can be rapidly reintegrated. Internal migration may also present some concern, given reports that Tajiks and Hazara were conducting 'ethnic cleansing' campaigns in some Pashtun areas in revenge for Pashtun support of the Taliban.

The level of human capital is also a concern because of Taliban gutting of the non-religious education system in the country, which also forbid girls and young women from attending. Although a secular educational system open to all is re-emerging, some schools are still targeted by extremist gangs and suffer shortages of teachers and equipment. If educational levels and opportunities do not increase, some rural provinces, especially in Pashtun areas, will become vulnerable to extremist Wahhabi/Deobandi teachings of Islam, which still find a home in many madrasas located just across the border in western Pakistan.

Very little information is available about population/environment interactions in Afghanistan, although the continuing preference by many Afghan farmers for growing opium poppies may indicate some level of 'ecological marginalization' that could ultimately contribute to extremism.

**Table 1 – Scoring the Afghanistan Case**

Variable	Score
Fertility rate	3
Ethnic composition	3
International migration	2
Internal migration	2
Level of human capital	2
Population/environment interactions	2
Urbanization	1
<i>Average score:</i>	<i>2.1</i>

*(ii) the Philippines*

The demographic challenges to the Philippines as a whole are less imposing than those in Afghanistan. None of the demographic variables that I examine are coded as 3, or with great potential to contribute to extremism. There are some demographic factors of concern, but they are not overwhelming. Filipino *fertility rates* are fairly high at 3.5, exceeding those for every other Southeast Asian nation save Cambodia, East Timor, and Laos.<sup>7</sup> Although the fertility rate appears to be declining, population momentum (see Figure 2) will likely cause the total population to rise from 77 million today to about 108 million in 2025.<sup>8</sup> Such growth will strain public infrastructure and services, lead to higher numbers of unemployed persons, and put pressure on agricultural lowlands that are already over-farmed. Nevertheless, the Filipino fertility rate is considerably lower than that found in several other nations that may be challenged by militant Islam; hence, this

variable should be considered as having only moderate potential to contribute to extremism, and is scored as 2.

*International migration* poses greater problems than does *internal migration* as a cause of Islamist extremism. Filipino guest workers, particularly Muslims, in the oil producing countries of the Persian Gulf (of whom there might be as many as 1.4 million) might become radicalized and form the nucleus of an expanded Islamic extremist movement upon their return to the archipelago. More generally, entry points for immigrants to the Philippines have proven permeable for leading terrorists, including Ramzi Yousef, the ringleader of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing and Muhammad Jamal al-Khalifa, Osama bin Laden's brother-in-law, who established several Islamic charities in the Philippines that likely aided the ASG. Both men spent significant time in the Philippines in the mid-1990s,

plotting an escalation of Islamist terrorism in the Western Pacific. Once in the Philippines, these terrorists were able to form links between the global Al Qa'ida network and local Muslim extremists, channeling money, weapons, and expertise to organizations like ASG. The possible migration of Muslim Filipino extremists to and from the Persian Gulf and the inability of Filipino authorities to control international migration to and from the Philippines have a moderate potential to contribute to extremism, leading to a score of 2 for this variable. By contrast, although the legacy of earlier internal migration continues to cause bitterness among Muslims who were dispossessed from their land, it is unlikely that such residual resentment, in the absence of any such current migration, will by itself help stimulate Islamist extremism or terrorism. Internal migration is therefore coded as a 1.

*Level of human capital and*

*population/environment interactions* are each considered to have a moderate potential for contributing to Islamic extremism or terrorism. Young Muslim Filipinos have traditionally had low levels of access to quality education, especially post-secondary education. Among other problems, this lack of access may have driven a number of the brightest young Muslims, lacking any other educational alternative, to accept religious scholarships at Middle Eastern universities with radical curricula. Such schools often turned these students into junior clerics who returned to the Philippines as proponents of militant Islam. They eventually emerged as a foreign-trained *Ulama* cadre that challenged the traditional community chieftains in Muslim areas for political influence. The government's recent creation of an autonomous Muslim regional authority in parts of Mindanao may lead to a more responsive local educational system, which is why this factor was given a 2 instead of a 3. Regarding *population/environment interactions*, certain areas of the Philippines have long suffered from ecological marginalization. With one of the highest population densities in Southeast Asia and a property code favouring large landowners, many small farmers and peasants have been forced to eke out an existence on less fertile upland tracts. As land availability has declined, small farmers have had to work smaller plots or clear virgin upland areas. The resulting soil

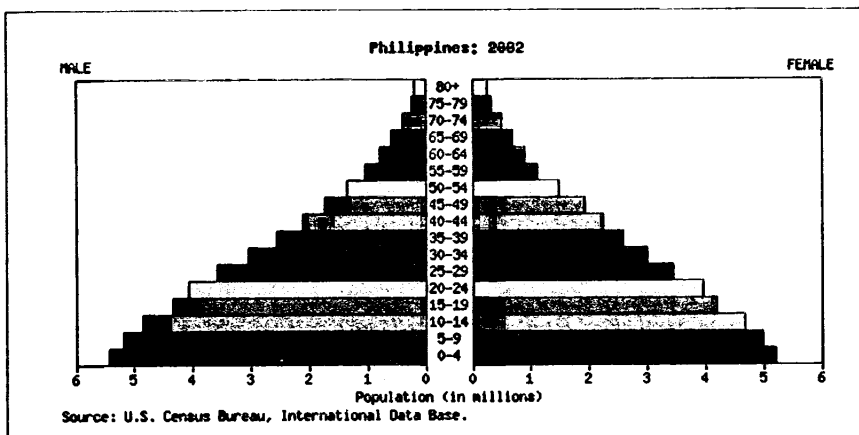


Figure 2: Philippines Population Pyramid

depletion has reduced crop yields and further impoverished small farmers. This is likely occurring in both Muslim and Christian areas. In Muslim areas, ecological marginalization could drive small farmers toward religious extremism if no relief is forthcoming.

The remaining demographic variables have little potential for increasing Islamic extremism or terrorism and are coded as 1. Muslim and Christian population growth rates appear to be similar, mitigating the chances of changes in religious composition of the population to contribute to extremism or terrorism. While 47 per cent of the Filipino population lives in urban areas,<sup>9</sup> most Islamist guerilla activity has occurred in rural areas with larger Muslim populations, suggesting that urbanization has not had a significant effect on the Islamist guerilla movement.

Variable	Score
Fertility rate	2
Ethnic composition	1
International migration	2
Internal migration	1
Level of human capital	2
Population/environment interactions	2
Urbanization	1
<b>Average score:</b>	<b>1.6</b>

(iii) Georgia

Like the Philippines, Georgia has no demographic factors that have a large potential to contribute to Islamist extremism. The *fertility rate* in Georgia, at 1.2 children per woman lifetime, is very low, well below the natural replacement level of 2.1 and a cause of loss in the population of 5.5 million, with the youngest population cohorts smaller than those born in earlier years (Figure 3).<sup>10</sup> Rather than that of Afghanistan, the Philippines, or other developing states, the fertility pattern in Georgia resembles that of mature West European states, although Georgia is not wealthy enough to be considered a fully developed country. The fertility rate is therefore scored as 1 for its low potential to contribute to Islamic extremism or terrorism.

Three variables – *ethnic composition*, *internal migration*, and *international migration* – were rated as having a moderate potential to contribute to

Islamist extremism in Georgia. The large majority (70 per cent) of the population in Georgia is ethnic Georgian (most of whom are Orthodox Christian) and other predominantly Christian groups, such as Armenians (8 per cent) and Russians (6 per cent), are also numerous; however, there are also several ethnic groups in the country, including Azeri (6 per cent), Ossete (3 per cent), and Abkhaz (2 per cent), with many Muslims.<sup>11</sup> A few Muslim-majority enclaves across the northern tier of the country, from which many Georgians were expelled during the ethnic unrest of the early 1990s, pose some risk of Islamic extremism. The Pankisi Gorge, for example, is heavily populated by Kists, a Chechen Muslim group. In South Ossetia, which has a population of 99,000, about two-thirds are Muslim Ossetes. In Abkhazia to the northwest, Muslims comprise almost half of the population of 300,000. At the moment, both the Abkhaz and the South Ossetes are resolutely secular, but if

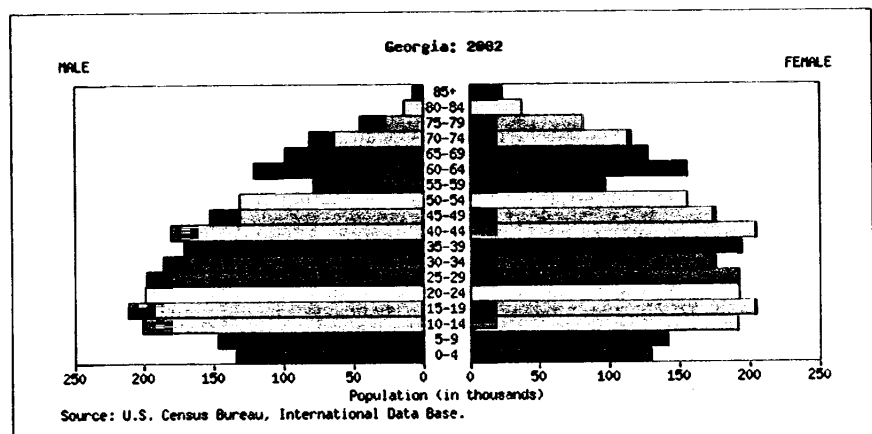


Figure 3: Georgia Population Pyramid



Al Qa'ida were to gain a foothold in the Pankisi Gorge it might be able to spread its extremist beliefs among these Muslim populations on the northern frontier of Georgia. Ultimately, this could strain Tbilisi's meager military and law enforcement resources. Hence, ethnic composition is scored as a 2. Internal migration is also scored as a 2 because Abkhaz and South Ossetia conflicts have displaced about a quarter-million ethnic Georgians. A population of this size in a country of only five and a half million persons drains the economy and diverts the government's attention from counter-terrorism. International migration was also viewed as a moderate contributor to Islamist extremism given an annual emigration rate of 2.48 persons per 1,000, an outflow presumably concentrated among younger and healthier persons seeking better opportunities abroad.<sup>12</sup> Such an outmigration can only weaken the capacity of the Georgian state to become a bulwark of stability against Islamist extremism in the Caucasus.

The remaining three variables – *level of human capital*, *population/environment interactions*, and *urbanization* are all considered to have low potential for contributing to extremism or terrorism, and are coded as 1. Literacy in Georgia, at 99 per cent, is nearly universal, indicating a comparatively high level of human capital. Urbanization, at 56 per cent, is relatively high, but the separatist areas are primarily rural.<sup>13</sup> There is no discussion in the area studies literature indicating population/environment interactions pose significant problems in Georgia.

**Table 3 – Scoring the Georgia Case**

Variable	Score
Fertility rate	1
Ethnic composition	2
International migration	2
Internal migration	2
Level of human capital	1
Population/environment interactions	1
Urbanization	1
<i>Average score:</i>	<i>1.4</i>

### Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The average of the seven factor scores for Afghanistan is 2.1, indicating that, overall, demographic variables may have a moderately high and positive effect upon the growth of Islamist extremism. By contrast, the average scores for the Southern Philippines, 1.6, and Georgia, 1.4, indicate demographic variables may have a low to moderate effect on extremism in these areas.

On the surface, this ranking appears to correspond with political realities. In Afghanistan, the remaining pockets of Al Qa'ida/Taliban resistance to US and international forces are more threatening than the ASG elements left in the Philippines. ASG, in turn, is more threatening than are Al Qa'ida cadres in the Pankisi Gorge of Georgia.

Some broad patterns are evident in these variables. Each region has a different score for fertility rate and ethnic composition; for none of the

other variables was scoring so disparate. Both variables were rated as having a major effect in the Afghan case, but only a low or moderate effect in the other regions. Ethnic composition is particularly interesting, because each of the three countries has a non-homogenous population, yet each was scored differently. This is because differences in both the location and size of ethnic groups have significant effects on the strength of Islamist extremism. International migration was scored equally for each case, indicating this variable has a fairly even effect on Islamist extremism across regions. Urbanization had the lowest average score of any variable across the three cases.

These scores have some broad implications for US policy in the war on terrorism. In each area, the US employs a mix of military, diplomatic, socioeconomic, and political policies to achieve counter-terrorism objectives. The main issue to be addressed is which policy ought to be emphasized in a given theatre.

In Afghanistan, high fertility and a volatile ethnic mix have led to anarchy and lawlessness in the more remote regions of the country. To counteract these in the near term, the US and its European partners should emphasize military and political policies. Military power (including use of intelligence gathering, Special Forces, and airmobile infantry) will be needed to expand the zone of stability in Afghanistan outward from Kabul into the more remote provinces. Without an end to anarchy,

no economic reconstruction programme, no matter how well crafted, can succeed.

Political or ideational measures are needed for two objectives. First, they should be used to inculcate democratic principles into the emerging institutions of the new Afghan national government, especially the bureaucracy, military, and judiciary. Second, they are needed to help broker an accommodation between the Karzai government and the regional warlords in which the government will expand its authority across the country while still leaving some political space in which local warlords can exercise influence on local issues.

In the Philippines, issues related to human capital, international migration, and environmental impacts are most important. Socioeconomic initiatives, coupled with continued military assistance to the Arroyo government, may be most important here. Economic and infrastructure development programmes that build new secular schools, provide agricultural assistance, and establish microcredit programmes in Muslim areas would reduce the appeal of radical Islam considerably. Such initiatives might eliminate the need of bright young Muslims seeking educational advancement to travel to the Middle East on religious scholarships to study at radical schools as well as the need of other Muslims to travel to the Persian Gulf region as guest workers to support their families and help Muslim small farmers use new planting techniques with more benign environmental effects. Socioeconomic initiatives will take time to have an

effect; during this interim, military assistance to the Philippine Army will be required to keep ASG at bay.

Finally, in Georgia, diplomatic and political or ideational measures ought to be emphasized. Georgia's demographic challenges are the smallest of the three cases and they exist largely because of the weakness of a Georgian government riddled by corruption.<sup>14</sup> The Georgian state could be strengthened by both direct and indirect measures. Direct measures to facilitate democratic reform and openness (including seminars on democratic development, scholarly exchanges, and legislative workshops) should be pursued to move the country toward political transparency. Indirectly, on the diplomatic front, the US should hold out the possibility of eventual NATO membership as an incentive for Georgian leaders to reform corrupt institutions and make themselves more accountable to the public.

If Georgia is able to complete the transition to democracy and capitalism, the resulting state structure will have enough capacity to defeat local Islamist extremism and terrorism by exerting full control over the Pankisi and negotiating final agreements with South Ossetia and Abkhazia that grant these regions some autonomy while maintaining the overall territorial integrity and stability of Georgia. ■

*The author would like to thank RAND colleagues Clifford Grammich, Julie DaVanzo, and Bruce Hoffman for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this article.*

#### NOTES

1. For a good overview of demographic trends in the Middle East and North Africa, see Population Reference Bureau, *Population Trends and Challenges in The Middle East and North Africa*, Washington, D.C., October 2001.
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3. See John K. Cooley, *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America, and International Terrorism* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 248.
4. Angel Rabasa and Peter Chalk, *Indonesia's Transformation and the Stability of Southeast Asia*, RAND, Santa Monica, CA, MR-1344-AF, 2001, pp. 85-86.
5. Population Reference Bureau, *2001 World Population Data Sheet*, Washington, DC, 2001, p. 6.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
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9. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
11. *2001 CIA World Factbook*, Online Version at <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/gg.html>
12. *Ibid.*
13. Population Reference Bureau, *2001 World Population Data Sheet*, p. 6.
14. For a description of Georgian corruption, see Robert D. Kaplan, *Eastward to Tartary* (New York: Random House, 2001), ch. 21.

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