

# An overview on crime and terrorism in CENTRAL ASIA

*Editor's note: This is part one of a two series article. Part one provides an overview of crime and terrorism in Central Asia. Part two will discuss the position of the AML/CTF regimes in each country in the Central Asia region.*

Central Asia's relevance in geopolitical terms is increasing due to the abundance of natural resources in the region. The following article aims to provide a snapshot of the Central Asian region, which includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The article will set out some general background information, and then elaborate on the threats facing the region as a result of criminal activity, such as those resulting from money laundering, political corruption and terrorism.

## Central Asia: the transition process and the region's geopolitical political role

Following the collapse of the former Soviet Union, Central Asia emerged as an ethnic hotbed, prone to instability and conflict. For the five former Soviet Union states, the tran-

sition process has proved to be both difficult and protracted. Since independence, progress toward democracy and a market economy has been patchy and the final outcome of the journey remains uncertain. Freedom House<sup>1</sup>, which provides a yearly comparative assessment of global political rights and civil liberties worldwide listed all Central Asian states as "not free." According to Transparency International's *Corruptions Perception Index 2009*<sup>2</sup> out of the 180 countries ranked, the Central Asian states rank as some of the most corrupt countries in the world. Kazakhstan is listed at 105, Tajikistan at 154, Kyrgyzstan at 164, Turkmenistan at 172 and Uzbekistan being at 172.

These figures are however an improvement on those published in the same index for the year 2009. In particular Kazakhstan registered a distinct improvement from being listed at 120 in 2009. Central Asian states have been weakened through the ongoing crises in the institutions of criminal justice. In particular, the aggregation of power in the hands of an executive has led to a judiciary that lacks de facto independence and a legislative branch that is ineffective in exer-

cising oversight functions. The problems in the Central Asian criminal justice systems extend to the law enforcement agencies.

Despite some improvements in the region's overall transition process, country and regional experts see ethnic enclaves in the border regions in Central Asia and beyond as being particularly prone to future conflicts, in particular given that Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan border with Afghanistan.

In addition, being rich in energy resources and minerals has given the region an important geostrategic positioning and Central Asia has emerged as an international playground into which not only Russia project influence, but also Turkey, Iran, China, Pakistan, India, the United States and the European Union.

## Crime in Central Asia and the resulting security threat

As highlighted in the report, *An Assessment of Transnational Organised Crime in Central Asia*<sup>3</sup>, published by United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in 2007, the difficult transition process in Central Asia has provided a highly favorable envi-

<sup>1</sup><http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=363&year=2010>

<sup>2</sup>[http://www.transparency.org/policy\\_research/surveys\\_indices/cpi/2009](http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2009)





ronment for organized crime to flourish and expand. The favorable factors included the breakdown of governance, the combination of large-scale economic dislocation and a tradition of corruption and criminality. Long before the Soviet Union collapsed, the Central Asian states had a well-established history of corrupt and criminal behavior.

In Uzbekistan for example, a virtual parallel economy existed alongside the formally Soviet one. The slow transition toward a market economy provided opportunities for both government and criminals to gain control over key sectors and key industries. The lack of transparency as a consequence of continued authoritarianism facilitated the activities of rent seeking political elites and of organized criminal groups, who often worked together in mutually beneficial ways. One of the major concerns, which has also been identified as a key security threat internationally,

is noted in the Millennium Project's *State of the Future Report 2010*<sup>4</sup>, whereby Central Asia is presented as exemplifying the kind of disturbed area where transnational organized crime, terrorism and governmental corruption work hand in hand.

The UNODC report identified drug trafficking to be the most serious problem within the region. With three of the Central Asian states, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, sharing borders with Afghanistan, the largest producer of illicit opiates in the world, Central Asia is an important transit zone for illegal drugs. Other significant crimes include human trafficking, firearms, fraud and corruption. In 2010 the UNODC published a *Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment report*<sup>5</sup>, which noted that the heroin trade is controlled by well-established trafficking networks of various sizes located in Central Asia, which cooperate with corrupt officials

with a range of international connections. Some of the larger traffickers and corrupt officials may launder their money internationally, particularly in the financial hub of Dubai.

In October 2010, James Jones, then national security adviser under President Barack Obama, was reported to have said that nations need to work together better to combat money laundering and other crimes that facilitate the movement of arms, drugs and other weapons across international borders. Jones and other U.S. officials warned that international crime syndicates are expanding and acquiring more powerful weapons, and that there is a growing connection between organized crime, government and intelligence figures in Russian and Eurasian states. The major concern was that this trend risked undermining competition in gas, oil, aluminium and precious metals markets.

<sup>3</sup><http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/organized-crime/assessments.html?ref=menuaside>

<sup>4</sup><http://www.millennium-project.org/millennium/2010SOF.html>

<sup>5</sup><http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/tocta-2010.html>



## The threat of Terrorism in Central Asia

In September 2010 Miroslav Jenca, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's Special Representative and head of the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA)<sup>6</sup>, stated that to date, the region's five countries had been spared large-scale terrorist attacks but added that it cannot be denied that there is a growing concern about the possibility of intensifying activities of various extremist, terrorist, and criminal groups and networks operating in Central Asia. All of this is fuelled by instability in the wider region and porous borders through which extremism and criminal networks penetrate the region, Mr. Jenca emphasized. It is also a matter of global concern given that the wider region is fast becoming the main front on the global war against terror.

The UNODC *Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment* report published in 2010 noted that insurgent-led insecurity is no longer confined to southern and western Afghanistan, as even the once relatively calm northern areas bordering Tajikistan have seen anti-government elements resurfacing. This is particularly true in the Kunduz province where the Taliban have steadily staged a resurgence and now appear to threaten a vital NATO supply line. Violence spilled over the border into Tajikistan in 2009, with a number of clashes reported between Tajik security forces and Al-Qaida linked groups. A number of related incidents have also been reported in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, perhaps indicating a regional destabilization strategy on the part of militants.

According to political scientist Patrick Frost<sup>7</sup>, US officials have stated that Al-Qaida and Taliban militants in the Afghanistan Pakistan border region have systematically created an underground network into Central Asia. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have been called 'feeder channels' for the terrorist groups. He noted that the foreign militants who have come to enlist in Jihad in today's Afghanistan and Pakistan got their start in Islamic extremist groups in their home countries and have roots stemming back from the turbulent Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and subsequent civil wars.

A report published by STRATFOR<sup>8</sup> in September 2010, underlines the risk attached to the Afghan war with the United States. It also mentions that NATO is set to begin withdrawing troops from Afghanistan in less than a year, as well as the problems that the Central Asian countries will face with a much less restrained Taliban in Afghanistan.

In its report, STRATFOR presented an overview of the fragmented militant landscape in Central Asia, which has been active in the region since the end of the Soviet Union. The report underlines that many have split or joined up with one another and that there is often a tendency to brush all activities under the name of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) when they are really not as consolidated or organized today as they once were.

- *Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP)*. Founded in 1990, it was the first Islamist political party to gain Soviet recognition. After it was banned throughout Central Asia in 1992, many of its members resorted to violence.
- *Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT)*. The Tajik branch of the IRP, the IRPT was active during the Tajik civil war of 1992-97 but has since turned to the political sphere.
- *United Tajik Opposition (UTO)*. UTO was an umbrella organization for the groups that fought against the Moscow-backed Tajik government during the Tajik civil war, but most of its members turned to politics at the end of the war. UTO derived much of its strength from constituent Islamist groups like the IRP, but it also encompassed the Democratic Party of Tajikistan and the ethnic Gharmsi group.
- *Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT)*. Founded in East Jerusalem in 1953, HT seeks to establish a worldwide caliphate. The group is present in more than 40 countries; its Central Asian base is Uzbekistan. The group promotes ideological extremism, though it does not directly engage in violence. Even so, the region's security forces have targeted it.
- *Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)*. A militant Islamic group aligned with Al-Qaida and the Afghan Taliban, IMU was formed in 1998 after the UTO turned to politics. Its ultimate aim was to transform Uzbekistan into an Islamic state. IMU leaders since have

spread to Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

- *Islamic Jihad Union/Group (IJU)*. The IJU split off from IMU; it has a small presence in Europe.
- *Movement for the Islamic Revival of Uzbekistan (MIRU)*. MIRU was formed in 1994 and was incorporated into the IMU in 1998.
- *East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM)*. A group primarily focused on independence for the northwestern Chinese region of Xinjiang, ETIM is thought to have ties with the IMU.
- *Islamic Movement of Turkistan (IMT)*. Like ETIM, IMT is thought to have ties with the IMU.

Recognizing the emerging threat, in September 2010, the UN unveiled a new scheme which brings together the UNRCCA the UN Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF), Central Asian governments, civil society and others, to boost Central Asia's fight against terrorism. The new scheme aims to help Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan establish a regional counter-terrorism plan in line with the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.

From a geopolitical perspective, in particular given Central Asia's proximity to Afghanistan, and the activities of local terrorist groups, the region as a whole, remains high risk as it embarks on the slow process of combating crime. Furthermore, the 'Great Game' being played out in Central Asia by the world's largest powers leave the region fraught with a very insecure and volatile future. Like its neighboring country Afghanistan, Central Asia is culturally, ethnically and politically complex making the region a difficult and sensitive construct with which to operate.

Moreover, the issues of human rights protection in relation to the declared aim of the international community to combat terrorism in the region need careful handling. **A**

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<sup>6</sup><http://unrcca.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=1980>

<sup>7</sup>[http://www.fpa.org/topics\\_info2414/topics\\_info\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=785930](http://www.fpa.org/topics_info2414/topics_info_show.htm?doc_id=785930)

<sup>8</sup>