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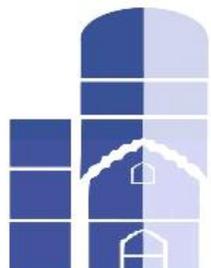
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*Central Asia- Caucasus Institute
Silk Road Studies Program*

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THE CENTRAL ASIA-CAUCASUS ANALYST

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KEY ISSUE: A short 75-word statement of your conclusions about the issue or news event on which the article focuses.

BACKGROUND: 300-450 words of analysis about what has led up to the event or issue and why this issue is critical to the region. Include background information about the views and experiences of the local population.

IMPLICATIONS: 300-450 words of analysis of the ramifications of this event or issue, including where applicable, implications for the local people's future.

CONCLUSIONS: 100-200 words that strongly state your conclusions about the impact of the event or issue.

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Those interested in joining *The Analyst's* pool of authors to contribute articles, field reports, or contacts of potential writers, please send your CV to: <scornell@jhu.edu> and suggest some topics on which you would like to write.

Svante E. Cornell

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IS AZERBAIJAN BECOMING AREA OF CONFRONTATION BETWEEN IRAN AND ISRAEL?

Emil Souleimanov

In January, Azerbaijani authorities made a series of announcements stating they had revealed a plot by three Azerbaijani citizens to assassinate leading members of Azerbaijan's Jewish community and a prominent Israeli official. Of even higher significance were Baku's allegations of Hezbollah and Iran being the masterminds of the prepared assassinations. The circumstances around the event signify Azerbaijan's increasingly difficult relationship with Iran and highlight both the country's vulnerability to Iranian leverage and its strategic significance as a conduit for intelligence and potential military operations against Iran.

BACKGROUND: According to Azerbaijan's Ministry of National Security, Rasim Aliyev and Ali Huseynov were captured along with automatic weapons and explosives smuggled from Iran. They were preparing attacks on the Israeli ambassador in Baku, Michael Lotem, and Rabbis Shneur Segal and Mati Lewis, both working in Baku's largest synagogue and an affiliated Jewish religious school. The third conspirator and likely leader of the plot is identified as Balagardash Dadashov and has allegedly been based in the Iranian city of Ardebil across the Araxes River, hence out of reach of Azerbaijani authorities. The three men are believed to be members of an Azerbaijani cell of Hezbollah, a militant Shiite organization and Iran's "terror proxy" in the Middle East. According to the Ministry of National Security, Aliyev, Huseynov, and Dadashov were supplied with all necessary equipment to carry out the operation and US\$ 150,000 by Iranian intelligence officers. According to some sources, the conspirators were also instructed by Iranians to assassinate Gaby Ashkenazi, chief of the Israeli defense forces, who was expected to visit the Azerbaijani capital in a few months.

The Azerbaijani government has long sought to profile itself as a leading partner of Israel in the post-Soviet space in general and the South Caucasus in particular. Baku incessantly emphasizes the fact that there have never been cases of anti-Judaism or anti-Semitism in Azerbaijan and that the country's Jews have always been a thriving community that has enjoyed trouble-free relations with the Azerbaijani majority. Accordingly, local elites have traditionally stressed the highly secular character of the Azerbaijani regime and society and its general lack of religious fundamentalism, in contrast to its direct neighbors to the north and south, in an attempt to display Azerbaijan as a pro-Western, pro-American and to a certain extent also pro-Israeli democracy, although with some local peculiarities when it comes to the practical implications of that democracy. This is attested by the fact that notwithstanding the recent – and significant – deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations, Baku has made its best effort to maintain a cordial relationship with Israel, improving cooperation with the Jewish state in a wide range of areas. This is perhaps the



reason why the former chief of Israel's ministry of defense and current Knesset member Binyamin Ben Eliezer has claimed that "Azerbaijan-Israel relations are so reliable that they will not be affected by the tensions with Turkey."

IMPLICATIONS: Israel has recently intensified its activities in the South Caucasus, a development that is conditioned by a number of factors. First, the region is host to a relatively large Jewish community which counts around 45,000 in Georgia and up to 40,000 in Azerbaijan, where the number of citizens adhering to the Jewish religion has tripled over the last fifteen years. Second, the region has still not entirely realized its potential as an exporter of oil and natural gas, as well as a transit hub that would link the Caspian with global markets. Today, around one-sixth of Israel's oil inflow comes from Azerbaijan. Last but not least, Israel's interest in the region has increased in the context of the fiercely debated possibility of an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities and the necessity to safeguard overland access to the Islamic Republic. With the considerable deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations in recent years, Armenia's pro-Iranian stance, Turkmenistan's neutrality, and the ongoing turmoil in both Iraq and Afghanistan, Azerbaijan has attracted Israeli interest. While Baku's hypothetical consent to any country that

would launch an attack on Iran is under current circumstances highly unrealistic given Azerbaijan's vulnerability to an Iranian counterattack, this probability cannot be ruled out completely. Most importantly, Azerbaijan's geographical location and its interconnection with Iran's 20 million-strong Azerbaijani minority might become instrumental for Israeli intelligence and secret services.

Following the Azerbaijani authorities' allegations, a number of observers both within and outside the country have interpreted them as another effort by the Aliyev government to strengthen its ties with Israel, securing support from both the Jewish state and the Jewish Diaspora, and gaining sympathies from the U.S. and key Western nations for the secular Azerbaijani state that has been at the forefront of the civilized world's struggle against religious fanaticism, a popular ethos that has been widely used by official Baku for at least a decade.

Even though this viewpoint cannot be completely ruled out, some facts indicate Tehran's involvement. Similar attempts have recently been foiled in Thailand and Bulgaria, with a range of similarities in the way the plots were organized. In all cases Israeli authorities have voiced considerable concern over the planned attacks, causing some observers to speculate that Mossad officers might have been involved in foiling the planned assassinations in Baku. Indeed, this was not the first attempt to assassinate Jewish – or Israeli – persons in Azerbaijan as a similar case was foiled in 2008. After being convicted to long sentences in Azerbaijan, the conspirators Ali Karaki and Ali Najmeddin, both Lebanese Shiites affiliated with Hezbollah, and an Iranian citizen were unexpectedly released and deported to Iran in

August 2010, following sustained pressure from Tehran.

It has recently become obvious that Iranian secret services are intensifying their efforts to use the Shiite factor to destabilize Azerbaijan from within. An overwhelming part of Azerbaijanis share the Shiite faith and religion has become increasingly appealing to a certain segment of the Azerbaijani population as a protest ideology to what they consider the degradation of traditional values and omnipotent corruption. The lack of a strong and widely supported (secular) opposition party has also played a role in this shift. In addition to ordinary believers, Tehran has reinforced its efforts to win the minds of the Azerbaijani Shiite clergy particularly in the peripheral areas, championing the rights of the “pro-headscarf party” in the recent clashes following the criminalization of head scarves in Azerbaijani educational institutions. Accordingly, the language used by Iran-based Azerbaijani-language TV and broadcast services aired to Azerbaijan has become more aggressive, contributing to increased tensions between Azerbaijan’s pro-secular and increasingly vocal and violent pro-religious camps. Indicative of this was the murder in November of the “Azerbaijani Salman Rushdie,” Rafik Taghi, a well-known physician and publicist known for his influential articles aimed against Islamic radicalism, as well as the Islamic regime in Iran. A fatwa sanctioning Taghi’s murder was issued in 2006 by the Iranian ayatollah Mohammad Fazel Lankarani, which was de facto approved of by Iranian authorities.

CONCLUSIONS: Whoever masterminded the recent events, they boosted Baku’s role as a secular Muslim bastion of pro-Western forces in the turbulent region and further strengthened

the crucial Azerbaijan-Israeli axis. Lacking strong allies and in a situation of latent conflict with at least two of its immediate neighbors, this is a rather favorable development for Azerbaijan, which cannot afford a one-off stand against Iran. For Iran, the world was reminded of an anti-Jewish – and prospectively also anti-Western – Islamist network operating in Azerbaijan that is capable of carrying out attacks on Iran’s enemies. In the current situation marked by the newly imposed sanctions on oil exports from Iran by the U.S. and key EU states, reducing Azerbaijan’s potential as a stable energy supplier and highlighting the existence of militant Islamist groups could help minimize prospective plans to base a possible attack on Iran on Azerbaijani soil. Azerbaijan’s importance to Israel also increases, as it is seen as a friendly country with a deeply contested relationship with its southern neighbor – a fact that has increased in significance following the recent deterioration of Jerusalem’s relationship with Ankara and consequent inability to use Turkish soil for the activities of Israeli intelligence. Following the intensification of the Israeli-Iranian rivalry, Azerbaijan’s key geographical location and the existence of a strong Azerbaijani minority with increasingly active pro-separatist and anti-Iranian sentiments is regarded with increasing interest in Israel and might turn the South Caucasian country into an area of Israeli-Iranian confrontation.

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IMU REESTABLISHES BASES IN NORTHERN AFGHANISTAN

Jacob Zenn

On January 25, NATO-led German forces handed over to Afghan forces control of Badakhshan Province and Balkh Province, bordering Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. By 2014, all 130,000 soldiers in the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) are scheduled to depart Afghanistan and the U.S. will end its combat mission. On December 29, 2011, U.S. forces evacuated their bases in Panjshir Province, north of Kabul. As U.S. and ISAF forces reduce their footprint in Northern Afghanistan, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is reclaiming its former bases in the region. Not only will the IMU help the Taliban to reassert authority in Northern Afghanistan; it will also be in prime position to launch operations into Central Asia.

BACKGROUND: At the time of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, most of Northern Afghanistan was under Taliban control, including Takhar, Kunduz, Baghlan, Balkh, Samangan, Jawzjan, Sar-e Pul and Faryab Provinces, with only parts of Badakhshan and Panjshir held by the Northern Alliance. The IMU, which had been forced out of the Fergana Valley after Uzbek President Islam Karimov's crackdown on Islamists in the late 1990s, was allied with the Taliban in Northern Afghanistan. The IMU fighters that survived the U.S. invasion fled to Pakistan where they enjoyed protection from Waziri Taliban commander Maulvi Nazir from 2002 to 2007 and the Beitullah Mehsud faction of the Taliban from 2007.

In 2007 Maulvi Nazir expelled Uzbek fighters from his territory because they offended local customs and acted like an "occupying" force, while in 2009 the Pakistani army began conducting operations to eliminate "foreign" fighters in IMU strongholds in South Waziristan, such as Kaniguram. Also in 2009, the U.S. initiated a drone campaign that killed many key IMU leaders.

The Turkic languages and features of Central Asian IMU fighters were easily distinguishable to the Pakistani agents who supplied intelligence information to the United States. Tahir Yuldashov, the leader of the IMU from its formation in 1998, and Najmiddin Jalalov, the founder of the IMU offshoot Islamic Jihad Group (IJG) from its formation in 2002, were killed in drone strikes in South Waziristan in August and September 2009. Yuldashov's potential successor, Usman Jan, was then killed in a drone strike along with five other Uzbek IMU fighters and 15 Pakistani Taliban in January 2010 in North Waziristan. The IMU's mufti, Abu Zar al-Burmi, delivered a sermon in Pakistan on September 30, 2011 saying that the IMU would "never forget the sacrifices of ... the poor people of Waziristan ... for harboring the mujahedeen." He chastised the "apostate Pakistan Army" for providing U.S. drones with on-the-ground intelligence.

Since 2007 the IMU has consequently reduced its presence in Waziristan. Large numbers of fighters joined the Taliban in Southern Afghanistan's Helmand province while others have been absorbed into the Pakistani Taliban.



IMPLICATIONS: As a result of the IMU's insecurity in Pakistan and the prospect of a full withdrawal of ISAF and U.S. forces from Northern Afghanistan in 2013, IMU fighters see relocating to the IMU's pre-October 2001 bases as the best option for their survival and reviving the IMU's founding goals to "liberate" the Fergana Valley, overthrow the Karimov regime in Uzbekistan, and transform Central Asia into an Islamic Caliphate called "Turkistan." Northern Afghanistan will be the first region in the country to have full control handed to Afghan forces, it shares a more than 1,000-mile border with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and it has two million ethnic Uzbeks among whom IMU fighters will blend into the local population more easily than in Waziristan.

In 2011 and the first five weeks of 2012, ISAF reported an unprecedented number of battles

with IMU fighters in Northern Afghanistan. According to ISAF's website, Nurullah Bai, an IMU leader who specialized in IED attacks on Afghan officials and ran drug trafficking networks between Badakhshan and Tajikistan, was killed by ISAF forces in a raid on January 25, 2011 in Takhar. The senior IMU leader and liaison to the Taliban in Kunduz, Bilal Konduzi, and the IMU leader for Samangan, Shad Mohammad, were killed in an ISAF air strike in Samangan on March 11, 2011. Afghan and ISAF forces captured an IMU leader in Sholgarah district, Balkh on March 21, 2011. The leader was responsible for running IMU training camps and facilitating the movement of IMU fighters to Samangan from training camps in Pakistan. In an online statement, the IMU claimed credit for an October 15, 2011 suicide attack on a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Panjshir which killed two

civilians and a security guard. The IMU released photos of two of the four suicide bombers and said they were Afghans from Kunduz.

A combined Afghan and ISAF force searched for an IMU leader in Chahar Darah district, Kunduz on December 8, 2011. The leader trains insurgents to construct roadside bombs and recruits suicide bombers. An Afghan-led and ISAF-supported force searched for an IMU leader in Taloqan district, Takhar on January 29, 2012. The leader, Ilhom, was responsible for a suicide bomb attack that killed an Afghan official and training suicide bombers. An IMU commander was captured in Helmand, Southern Afghanistan on February 3, 2012, but the commander had been appointed by the Taliban to direct operations, including weapons distribution and tax collection, in Badghis and Faryab in the north.

This sampling of ISAF reports shows that IMU leaders run training camps in Northern Afghanistan, that the IMU moves fighters from Pakistan to Northern Afghanistan, and that the IMU is recruiting local fighters from among the population in Northern Afghanistan. The two provinces that the NATO-led German forces left in January 2012, Badakhshan and Balkh, and the province that U.S. forces left in December 2011, Panjshir, were especially hit with an upsurge of an IMU activity in 2011.

In addition, in December 2011 the Islamic Jihad Union (a variant name for the IMU offshoot Islamic Jihad Group) issued a video titled "The Path to Paradise, Part 6," in which the narrator said that IJU members fight and train with the Taliban in "various jihadi battlefields, such as ... Badakhshan, Kunduz, and Mazar-e-Sharif." The narrator also claimed that the IJU "helps the Taliban in Northern Afghanistan and

provides them with military consultation" and that "neighboring Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, Northern Afghanistan is strategically a very important region for the Muslims of Central Asia."

CONCLUSIONS: Now that Central Asia is within striking range for the IMU from its bases and training camps along the Northern Afghanistan frontier, it is likely that the IMU will conduct operations to destabilize the Central Asian regimes. With ISAF and U.S. forces showing no signs of renegeing on their pledge to withdraw from the region, the Afghan security forces will be the last line of defense between Central Asia and Northern Afghanistan. The ability of Afghan forces to contain the IMU in Northern Afghanistan after ISAF and U.S. military forces leave the region will determine the security of Central Asia in the second half of this decade. The Afghan forces, however, are still highly reliant on international forces. This is why Islam Karimov warned at the 20th anniversary of the founding of Uzbekistan's armed forces in January 2012 that the U.S. withdrawal could lead to an expansion of "terrorist and extremist activities" in Central Asia, creating "a permanent source of instability."

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WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE U.S. LEAVES AFGHANISTAN?

Yury V. Bosin

In June 2011, President Obama announced the withdrawal of 10,000 troops from Afghanistan. Another 23,000 are scheduled to pull out by next summer, and all American troops will return home by 2014. Although the U.S. has a clear intention to end the war, some pessimistic voices warn that it will be a critical blow to U.S. security and a retreat in the war on terror. However, a sober analysis shows that the U.S. still has a range of strategic options that would protect major U.S. interests in post-American Afghanistan and minimize the negative consequences of the withdrawal.

BACKGROUND: The Afghan war has been the longest in the U.S. history. It has already cost almost half a trillion dollars, and more than 1,700 American troops have died in combat. Over the past years, U.S. public opinion has been increasingly turning against the war. According to the polls, a majority of Americans see the Afghan war as not worth fighting. With the growing anti-American sentiments in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the U.S. has fewer reasons than ever to wage the unpopular war. The death of Osama bin Laden on May 2, 2011 created a symbolic accomplishment for the U.S. in the prolonged engagement, which might have tipped public opinion even more allowing for U.S. withdrawal under the banner of success.

The remaining concern is that the Afghan army will be incapable to fight the Taliban after the Americans and NATO leave. As many fear, with the current momentum, the Taliban will defeat the Karzai government and establish a jihadist regime creating terrorist threats to the U.S. and its allies. While it is hard to deny that the Karzai government will be weakened by the American departure, it does not necessarily mean that it will have no chance against the Taliban. Building the capacity of the Afghan army and police can still be a huge factor of

success of the counter-insurgency operation. From previous experience, after the withdrawal of the Soviet troops in 1989, the Afghan army successfully defended itself against Mujahidin and even launched a series of victorious counter-attacks in 1990-1991. But what happens in the “worst-case scenario”, if the Karzai government does fall?

IMPLICATIONS: There are several options that the U.S. can pursue. The first one is to keep Afghanistan disintegrated between various warring factions by providing some support to each of them with one major purpose – to prevent the rise of Al Qaeda and other anti-American terrorist groups. In some sense, this strategy is similar to the British policy in the 19th Century, which was designed to buy the loyalty of Afghan tribes in order to forestall Russian overtures. Cash for loyalty may not be very effective, though. In the 1980s, various Mujahidin factions did compete for American money but they did not become any friendlier to the U.S. as a result. There is no guarantee that U.S. funds will not end up in an organization similar to Al Qaeda, which would use them against the U.S.

An alternative plan would be to sponsor a broad coalition government, which would cooperate with the U.S. in keeping Al Qaeda and other



radical groups down. The hard question is: if this task has not been achieved even with 100,000 American troops on the ground, why would it become more feasible after the U.S. leaves? Historically, coalitions never worked well in Afghanistan. Afghan rulers preferred to consolidate their power through brutal suppression and military force. Afghan politics have always been dominated by the principle “winner takes all”, and no attempts to end civil war through national reconciliation processes, such as in 1985-89 and 1992-96, have succeeded.

The third plan would be to let the strongest Afghan party monopolize the power. If, as a result, the Taliban win, it will pose a serious challenge for the U.S. But it does not mean that dealing with the Taliban will be impossible. Afghanistan will desperately need economic

assistance and international recognition, both of which the U.S. will be able to provide. Some areas might even see substantial progress, such as, for example, the elimination of illegal drug trafficking. The Taliban could restore their 2001 ban on poppy, which almost wiped out opium production in less than one year. Eradication of terrorist networks in Afghanistan will remain a difficult task. It will not, however, be much different from American efforts in many other countries such as Pakistan, Sudan, or Yemen. The U.S. will certainly maintain a significant economic and political leverage to make the new Taliban more receptive to U.S. demands.

Neighboring states may benefit from this policy too. Iran, Central Asian countries, and Pakistan have influences in Afghanistan and can offer their support for the U.S. strategy in

exchange for some perks. On the global level such a strategy will encounter neither surprise, nor major opposition. Pursuing national interests through pulling economic and political strings has been a common policy of great powers for centuries. It is hard to predict which scenario will most likely occur. For a long time, the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan has been driven by a belief in a military solution, which rejected the very idea of negotiating with the Taliban. For many Americans, it is still difficult to accept a Taliban comeback. The insurgents, in turn, have refused to participate in any peace talks until the “foreign occupiers” leave the country.

While the first rumors of negotiations began circulating in 2010, it took almost two years before the U.S. and the Taliban announced a pilot round of talks in Qatar in January 2012. Despite this progress, however, hopes for a peaceful transition would be premature. There are many bitter enemies of the Taliban in Karzai’s government, as well as in the Afghan army and security forces, especially in the northern and western provinces. Even if the U.S. cuts a deal with the Taliban, it will not likely prevent fighting after the withdrawal. Much depends on the Taliban themselves. If the new Taliban soften their radical image, the U.S. will have more reasons to legitimize them. But if the Taliban re-appear as intractable fanatics, the U.S. might turn to the “British” recipe and support the Northern Alliance and other Taliban rivals, thus prolonging the low

intensity conflict in Afghanistan for the indefinite future.

CONCLUSIONS: It is always painful for a great power to lose a small war. But history shows that the consequences of withdrawal are often less ominous than many predict. When the French left Algeria in 1962, the Portuguese said good bye to Angola in 1975, and the Soviets pulled out of Afghanistan in 1989, it happened because continuing war was more damaging than ending it. The U.S. seems to be in a similar situation in Afghanistan. The withdrawal will not be an easy solution. It will certainly leave Afghanistan with less hope for peace, economic stability, and prospects for women’s rights. But strategically, the U.S. will be able to pursue its interests, even if a radical force comes to power in Afghanistan. It will require some difficult compromises but it will save hundreds if not thousands of human lives and gigantic material resources, while still maintaining a large degree of U.S. influence in the region.

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RUSSIAN TREATMENT OF TAJIKISTAN UNDERLINES FEAR OF DEPENDENCE IN CENTRAL ASIA

Dmitry Shlapentokh

Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus recently agreed on a Customs Union and Russia has proclaimed its ambition to create a more integrated political body – the Eurasian Union – in the future. Russia, the largest of the countries involved, has promised that the Union would be based on absolute equality. However, Russia’s approach to Tajikistan – a potential participant of the Union – have put Russian intentions into doubt and have apparently made the other prospective members the Union consider other options to prevent Russia’s absolute domination in the post-Soviet space. Some post-Soviet states have flatly rejected the idea of the Union.

BACKGROUND: Tajikistan is one of the poorest and most underdeveloped countries of the former USSR and has had the most unstable and bloody post-Soviet history, ravaged by a bloody Civil War in the beginning of its existence as an independent state. Its relations to other former USSR states have been complicated, including occasional clashes with neighboring Uzbekistan and an unstable relationship with Russia. Yet, Moscow’s strategy toward Dushanbe has been based on Tajikistan’s limited geopolitical options. Consequently, Dushanbe’s future membership in the Eurasian Union would pose an example to other Central Asian states, which are still hesitant toward the project. Moscow has asserted that its desire to construct the Union stems purely from economic considerations and would be beneficial for all sides involved, while it has denied the existence of any hidden agenda behind the project. In reality, the Eurasian Union would serve to transform a large part of Central Asia into an exclusive sphere of influence for Moscow, a design from which it would reap mostly economic benefits.

Dushanbe’s recent behavior clearly contradicts Moscow plans in this regard. Indeed, Tajikistan has sought to establish a “multi-vector foreign policy,” a type of foreign policy behavior the Kremlin has worked hard to eradicate in the post-Soviet space. The approach builds on a strategy of simultaneously cultivating several foreign relationships in order to reduce dependence on a single actor, a strategy Moscow has frequently employed and regards as a manifestation of its geopolitical savvy. However, Moscow is strongly opposed to the idea that other former Soviet states would follow the same strategy. While Moscow has problems in dealing with Dushanbe, Dushanbe has particular grievances of its own. The tension caused Moscow to employ a final demonstration of force with the purpose of setting an example to other Central Asian states how Moscow intends to deal with those who cross its way and it would deal with future members of the Eurasian Union.

In November 2011, an airplane crossed into Tajikistan’s airspace from Afghanistan and landed on Tajik territory. The airplane was not registered in any state and had no permission



has a military base in Tajikistan and soldiers based there could be well used to liberate the pilots. While the use force was considered a too risky enterprise, other means for applying pressure were much easier

either to cross the airspace or to land. Consequently, Dushanbe decided to demonstrate both Tajikistan's sovereignty and its displeasure with Moscow. The airplane was confiscated and the pilots, one of which was a Russian citizen, were arrested and received harsh sentences. This infuriated Moscow, which rapidly turned to power politics against Tajikistan, regardless of any pronouncements about its intentions to treat other post-Soviet states, including prospective members of the Eurasian Union, as equals. The assumption that international law would be applied indiscriminately was ruled out as the Russian elite immediately started to propose and implement repressive policies.

IMPLICATIONS: These policies have two major components; one military and one economic. Of these, implemented policies against Tajikistan mainly consist of economic sanctions. Yet, some Moscow officials have suggested that Dushanbe understands only force and that Russia should employ it. Russia

to employ and have been utilized by Moscow in the past. In this case, Moscow "discovered" problems with agricultural products from Tajikistan while the most damaging measure from Tajikistan's perspective was Moscow's targeting of Tajik guest workers. During the rise of tensions between Moscow and Dushanbe, the Kremlin proclaimed that Tajik guest workers are the source of all evils, considered responsible for spread of diseases, crime, etc. Hundreds were arrested, their work and resident permits were annulled or plainly torn into pieces in front of them, and a significant number were deported. Finally, Dushanbe succumbed to Moscow's pressure and released the pilots.

The events are likely to have repercussions for the prospect of building a Eurasian Union, as well as for Moscow's general relationship with former Soviet states. First, it reaffirms the perception, already formed during the Russian-Georgian war in 2008, that Moscow is not only prepared to employ force in dealing with its

neighbors; it also does not exclude using military bases located in other states for “regime change” if needed. Secondly, any economic dependence on Moscow is dangerous for it could well be used as tool to force the submission of rebellious vassals. These facts are certainly not novel for the leaders of former USSR states. The treatment of Dushanbe just reaffirmed their old views and will definitely continue to shape their views of Moscow’s proposed geopolitical constructions, including the “Eurasian Union.”

This does not mean that the Central Asian countries would seek to depart from Russian influence. Rather, Russia’s behavior encourages them to build relationships with alternative geopolitical players if possible. In any case, Moscow could hardly expect that they would regard it and its Eurasian Union as the only geopolitical alternative. Even for those who already joined the Custom Union – viewed by Moscow as the first step toward building a more integrated Eurasian Union – the search for other geopolitical options continues.

Dushanbe will most likely continue building its relationship with Teheran, which provides it with substantial help and clearly supports it in the conflict with Uzbekistan. In addition, Dushanbe will exclude neither China, nor the West from its geopolitical options. Bishkek is likely to follow suit. Indeed, while proclaiming its close ties with Russia and desire to join the Eurasian Union, Kyrgyzstan has at the same time sought to develop its contacts with other countries such as Turkey, which the newly elected Kyrgyz president visited recently. Finally, Uzbekistan has flatly rejected the idea of the Union. In one of his recent speeches, President Karimov proclaimed that Uzbekistan remembers the oppressive Soviet rule well and

regards the Customs and Eurasian Unions as Russian imperialism in disguise. Tashkent clearly regards China as its major partner and has sought to forge its relationship with the West in general and Washington in particular, which seems ready to overlook Karimov’s dictatorial rule due to Tashkent’s strategic importance. Even Kazakhstan, a co-founder of the Customs Union and a seemingly staunch supporter of Eurasian integration, continues to be cautious regarding Moscow’s intentions and its dealings with Dushanbe hardly dispelled Kazakh skepticism about Moscow. Indeed, after the recent riots in Kazakhstan, one Kazakhstani official accused several countries of fomenting the revolts; Russia was one of them.

CONCLUSIONS: Russia proclaims that the creation of a Customs Union and plans for a much closer Eurasian Union build on absolute equality of all members, with the intention of attracting other former Soviet states to the Union. However, Moscow’s policy toward Tajikistan indicates that it tends to follow neo-imperial political practices. While this does not preclude the Central Asian states from accepting some of Moscow’s propositions, it simultaneously highlights their desire to follow “multi-vector” foreign policies where Russia is just one among many possible players. This implies that Central Asia will continue to lack a strong geopolitical patron and prevents the countries of the region from developing common foreign policies. It also creates problems both for the countries of the region to cooperate over common threats (such as jihadism) and for major global players vying for influence in Central Asia.

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FIELD REPORTS

OBAMA: U.S. TO STRENGTHEN DEFENSE COOPERATION WITH GEORGIA

Maka Gurgenidze

Tbilisi hails U.S. President Barack Obama's position on enhanced security cooperation with Georgia, while Moscow expresses principal objections to a new stage of the U.S.-Georgia partnership.

Security cooperation and a free-trade agreement (FTA) between the two countries became the main issues discussed during Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's and President Obama's meeting in the White House on January 30. The Georgian incumbent political elite as well as opposition leaders praised the meeting and highlighted its special significance on the 20th anniversary of U.S.-Georgia diplomatic relations. In the Oval Office, the U.S. President made clear that the general features of the strategic partnership between Washington and Tbilisi would be retained and new steps taken to buttress the ongoing institutional reform that will ensue an "enormous difference" for present and future generations of Georgians. He also said that the U.S. expects the Georgian parliamentary elections scheduled for this year to be free and fair, leading to "the formal transfer of power that ... will solidify many of these reforms that have already taken place." Further, Obama dubbed Georgia a "model of democracy and transparency" setting a precedent for the whole region. He expressed gratitude for Georgia's "extraordinary contributions" to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, and assured Saakashvili that the White House will continue to support Georgia's aspirations to become a member of NATO. "We

will continue to strengthen our defense cooperation, and there are a wide range of areas where we are working together," the U.S. president said.

In respect of deeper bilateral economic relations, Obama sketched out the prospects of an FTA between the U.S. and Georgia, disclosing new opportunities for American and Georgian business and creating a "win-win" situation for both countries. He noted, however, that the initiative is in need of tremendous preliminary work regarding tariffs, quotas and other trade restrictions.

President Saakashvili thanked the Obama administration for the possibility of an FTA that, in his words, would help the "nation-building process," and voiced his appreciation of U.S. support for Georgia's aspiration to integrate with NATO. Nevertheless, he was particularly satisfied with the agreement to move bilateral defense cooperation "to a new level," aiming to boost Georgia's self-defense capabilities. The entire Georgian political spectrum, including the most radical opposition leaders, assessed Saakashvili's U.S. trip positively. The recently emerged tycoon politician Bidzina Ivanishvili welcomed the president's productive talks, but warned that the Georgian government should well understand the signals embedded in the American leader's speech. He stated that the Georgian government concealed the main emphasis of Obama's speech whereas the U.S. president overtly referred to the importance of a legal transfer of power in Georgia through democratic elections.

While Obama clearly underlined the importance of “free and fair” elections, the most significant implication of the speech from a Georgian perspective is that the Obama administration appears ready to create a benevolent environment for enhanced trade and security relations with Georgia.

In terms of economic support, the U.S. granted Georgia the status of a beneficiary country of the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) in 2001. GSP allows a wide spectrum of Georgian products access to the U.S. market but only a few of 3,400 eligible product types are being exported. Therefore, the FTA might not automatically ensure a drastic increase of Georgian export to U.S., but it will certainly reaffirm the confidence of investors in the Georgian economy and will help the country secure a preferable position in the neighborhood.

Even more palpable results can be identified in a security perspective. According to the Georgian defense ministry, a new level of cooperation between the two countries will go beyond the current training of military servicemen for peacekeeping operations and will enhance Georgia’s defense capacities. Russia immediately reacted strongly to the prospects of a more robust security

partnership between the U.S. and Georgia. Russia’s Deputy Defense Minister, Anatoly Antonov said to RIA Novosti on February 2 that Georgian officials had simply replaced “arms sale” or “supply of arms” with “elevating defense cooperation to a new stage.” If such a decision [on any kind of arms supply] was taken, it will destabilize the situation in the Caucasus,” he said. On the next day Saakashvili stressed that “[the] decision has been made to move military cooperation [with the U.S.] to an absolutely new level in order to focus on our self-defense.”

Washington and Tbilisi signed the Charter on Strategic Partnership in 2009. At that time the deal was considered the beginning of a new phase in the history of the U.S.-Georgia strategic partnership, representing a framework for enhancing cooperation on a wide range of areas including security and defense. However, the public remarks of U.S. officials’ over the past three years have demonstrated more focus on educating the armed forces, sustaining a “brains before brawn” approach. “Elevation to a new stage,” as the Georgian president has designated it, more likely means a shift in this approach.

ARRESTS OF OPPOSITION LEADERS FOLLOW ZHANAOZEN UNREST IN KAZAKHSTAN

Georgiy Voloshin

Immediately after the early parliamentary elections in Kazakhstan brought into being a three-party system, the country’s law enforcement authorities proceeded to arresting several opposition leaders. On January 23, Vladimir Kozlov, the leader of the unregistered political party Alga, and Igor Vinyavsky, the editor-in-chief of the independent newspaper Vzlyad, were detained by officials of the National Security Committee.

Vladimir Kozlov, who has been very critical of the Kazakh Government’s response to social unrest in

the town of Zhanaozen in December 2011, is accused of attempts to instigate social discord. Article 164 of the Criminal Code of Kazakhstan provides for prison terms ranging from three to ten years accompanied by heavy fines and a ban from occupying certain positions. This may practically mean that Kozlov could find himself in a situation where his political activities, famously directed against the existing system, would be no longer tolerated even if his guilt is disproved. Moreover, Kozlov’s wife recently declared to the press that her

husband had been diagnosed with inguinal hernia, a disease he had never complained of before. She believes that this fact may reflect the use of torture against the renowned opposition leader.

Igor Vinyavsky, equally famous for his extensive critique of the ruling elite regularly expressed on the pages of his independent newspaper, is being charged with organizing subversive activities aimed at forcefully changing the constitutional order of Kazakhstan (article 170 of the Criminal Code). Interestingly, some experts have already pointed to the fact that the arrest warrant issued by the National Security Committee against the journalist is fully based on events dating back to 2010, when security officials intercepted a bunch of leaflets calling for the same revolutionary change in Kazakhstan as in neighboring Kyrgyzstan in April of that year.

This procedural detail speaks in favor of an already existing criminal investigation linked to the activities of the “Vzglyad” newspaper and its editor-in-chief. It is however unclear why it took almost two years for the National Security Committee to prove Vinyavsky’s guilt, while the issue in question directly concerns Kazakhstan’s national security and public safety.

These two arrests are not the first in connection with the Zhanaozen unrest, which took the lives of at least 17 people and left more than 100 seriously wounded. In early January, an activist of the People’s Front (an umbrella organization comprised of several opposition parties and created in anticipation of snap elections to the Parliament) was detained by the same National Security Committee in the airport of Aktau. She was later charged with trying to instigate social discord, based on her active involvement in the anti-government campaign in Western Kazakhstan.

A few days after the temporary imprisonment of both Kozlov and Vinyavsky, Freedom House in Washington DC issued a statement condemning

disproportionate action against opposition forces in Kazakhstan and called on Kazakh authorities to ensure their immediate release. According to Susan Corke, director for Eurasia programs at Freedom House, “Kazakhstan, as a former chair of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, must live up to its promise to the international community that it will advance democracy and human rights.” She also added that “the actions of the authorities and treatment of opposition activists and independent journalists undermine respect for fundamental freedoms.”

A statement of concern was also made by the European Union on the occasion of the OSCE Permanent Council meeting in Vienna on January 26. In its final sentences, the statement recalls “the commitment made by the authorities of Kazakhstan to conduct an open and transparent investigation into the Zhanaozen events.” It also recalls “OSCE commitments as regards the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms and call[s] on Kazakhstan to implement them fully, including during the investigation.”

Though the U.S. State Department has not yet made any particular statement on the arrest of opposition activists and its implications for the general state of freedom in Kazakhstan, some sources speculate that the issue was discussed during a meeting between Kazakh Foreign Minister Erzhan Kazykhanov and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during the former’s visit to Washington. The probability of external pressure towards Kazakhstan’s honoring its international obligations in terms of human rights and personal freedoms remains quite low, as the Western community is now struggling against Russia’s and China’s obstructionism to take action in Syria. The generally complicated situation in Central Asia and America’s continuing dependence on its regional partners as far as the state of affairs in Afghanistan is concerned make it rather difficult for opposition activists to count on whatever foreign support.

TAJIK AUTHORITIES PUNISH DISSIDENT CLERICS

Alexander Sodikov

Tajik authorities have apparently found a new way to discipline Islamic clerics daring to criticize state policies. The novel approach consists of mobilizing state-controlled Islamic leaders to discredit and penalize the dissidents. In December 2011, the nominally independent Council of Ulama (CoU) accused three influential clerics, the Turajonzoda brothers, of performing “alien” Shia rituals at their mosque. This is a very serious claim given that most people in Tajikistan are Sunni Muslims. The CoU is a government-controlled body of clerics charged with regulating Islamic activities in the country.

The accusations against the Turajonzoda brothers were leveled in a public statement on December 6. The document alleged that the clerics had performed the Shia ritual of “Ashura” at the Muhammadiya Mosque. This mosque in the brothers’ native village of Turkobod, some 30 kilometers east of the Tajik capital Dushanbe, is considered one of the most prominent in the country. Friday prayers at the mosque commonly attracted between 15,000 and 20,000 people, with many worshippers coming to listen to the traditional Friday sermons. These sermons were consequently circulated on CDs and DVDs across the country and were available for download on a website that the authorities have blocked since May 2011. The oldest of the Turajonzoda brothers, Eshoni Nuriddin, frequently used the sermons to condemn government policies which purportedly restricted Islamic expression in the country. He was repeatedly rebuked by the authorities for these criticisms. In January 2011, Eshoni Nuriddin resigned as imam, ostensibly under pressure from the security agencies. He was replaced by the youngest brother, Muhammadjon.

Yet many analysts interpreted the CoU’s accusations as targeting the most outspoken of the brothers, Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda. Unlike other brothers, Hoji Akbar is widely seen as a political

figure. He served as Tajikistan’s supreme Islamic authority in the final years of Soviet rule. During the civil war in the country in 1992-1997, Hoji Akbar became the second most senior leader of the United Tajik Opposition and the Islamic Revival Party (IRPT). For most of that period, he lived in exile in Iran and allegedly had close ties with Shia clerics there. After the 1997 peace accords, the cleric denounced his former “brethren in arms” from the IRPT and supported Emomali Rahmon’s reelection as president. In exchange for this support, Hoji Akbar was appointed First Deputy Prime Minister and put in charge of Tajikistan’s relations with the former Soviet states. However, the senior government post involved little real power, and the cleric was largely ostracized within the administration. In 2005, Rahmon appointed him to the upper house of the parliament, effectively marginalizing him from politics. After becoming a senator, Hoji Akbar began to openly criticize the government for restricting religious freedoms in the country. As a result, the cleric lost his seat in the parliament in 2010.

Hoji Akbar has denied accusations leveled against him and his brothers. Moreover, he alleged that the CoU’s statement lacked signatures of several members of the Council and was therefore invalid. These protests notwithstanding, the CoU ordered that all imams around the country read the statement to worshippers at Friday prayers. A number of mosque leaders who refused to do so were reportedly dismissed. On December 9, the CoU’s head, Saidmukarram Abduqodirzoda, arrived at the Muhammadiya Mosque to read the statement in person to worshippers there. However, after provocative remarks by Hoji Akbar and Eshoni Nuriddin, the worshippers interrupted Abduqodirzoda’s speech and forced him to leave the mosque. A government official who accompanied the CoU’s head at the mosque announced that President Emomali Rahmon would soon meet with

Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda to discuss the “recent developments”.

The meeting has not occurred. Instead, the authorities used the December 9 incident to penalize the Turajonzoda brothers. The government Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) appointed a new imam to the Muhammadiya Mosque. The committee also imposed a three-month ban on Friday prayers at the mosque, noting that the ban would be lifted only if the “shortcomings related to the functioning of the mosque” are properly

addressed. Moreover, Hoji Akbar and Eshoni Nuriddin were ordered by a Tajik court to pay a fine of 350 somoni (about US\$ 70) each, allegedly for insulting public officials. The brothers have decided not to appeal the court ruling, suggesting that it was clear that it had been sanctioned by senior government officials. Independent analysts suggest that Tajik authorities will continue using state-supported religious leaders to punish independently minded Tajik imams and political dissidents.

TAJIK PRESIDENT RESHUFFLES GOVERNMENT

Sergei Medrea

In January, 2012 President Rahmon carried out the by now traditional reshuffle in the government and state institutions. Over 20 senior officials from national and regional government were dismissed and relocated. Among the most notable were the appointments of new Interior, Education and Justice Ministers, the Head of the Security Council and the First Deputy Prime Minister. The reshuffle has also replaced a number of mayors and regional officials, most being assigned new posts. The reshuffle occurred shortly before the wrap-up government session of January 18, meant to summarize and review the major achievements and failures of the past year’s work. The session was broadcasted on the major national television channels and showed government officials of various ranks, including the Prime Minister, the heads of major ministries and chiefs of provinces, districts as well as large national enterprises awkwardly bowing their heads and reporting to President Rahmon. The president, in turn, questioned and criticized the work of some officials, sparingly complimenting others, and issuing numerous pompous orders and statements on the future work to be done.

The recurring reshuffles of government officials have accomplished little in terms of serious political reforms that are long called for in socio-

economically troubled Tajikistan. Rather, it appears to be a political spectacle, where the president publicly blames and lectures his subordinates for not performing their duties and meeting their set targets. Rahmon expresses his dissatisfaction or content by rotating these same political figures, all loyal to the president, from one government position (lower or higher) to another.

The most notable rotation was the appointment to head the Ministry of Justice of the former Deputy Head of the Executive Office of the President, Rustam Mengliev. He replaced Bakhtiyor Khudoyorov, who in turn was appointed head of the presidential administration. Ramazan Rahimov was appointed Minister of the Interior. His predecessor, Abdurahim Kahharov, was appointed Security Council secretary (a position vacated by Amirkul Azimov who became a member of parliament last spring). However, the greatest scandal surrounded the dismissal of the Minister of Education, mercilessly criticized for unsuccessful efforts to tackle corruption, shortages of teaching personnel and the low level of knowledge of the graduates of the educational system. The latest developments suggest that as many as 40 of 140 incumbent school principals in the capital city of Dushanbe are expected to be replaced. Overall, the

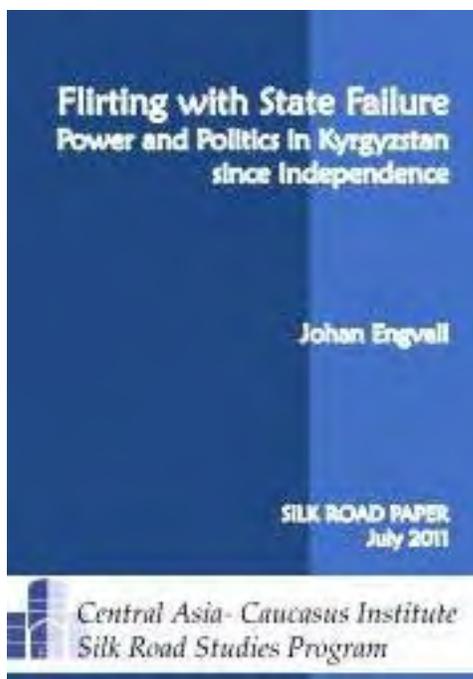
reshuffle brought very few new or young faces. Therefore independent experts expect few changes.

Independent expert Davron Zokirov, quoted by the Avesta.Tj news agency, says that the personnel changes made so far repeat Rahmon's usual practice of "betting" on the "old, tried and tested" officials close to his inner circle and loyal to him. This is especially true of this reshuffle, with presidential elections scheduled for next year. "The unity of an old team around its leader" is more important than ever. The earlier practice shows that even when high ranking government officials are scandalously dismissed and publicly blamed for corruption, malfeasance, incompetence and other misconduct charges, the "guilty" soon enough return to Rahmon's team, taking on new and sometime higher positions than before. Mahmatali Hoit, the deputy leader of the opposition Islamic Revival Party, also criticized the reshuffle, stating to news agency AsiaPlus.tj that "appointment of new personnel must be based upon principles of professionalism because only skilled managers will be able to bring the country out of the lingering economic, financial, and political stagnation."

Unfortunately, when the government is solely appointed by the president and its defining character is loyalty, it is unaccountable to the public. This alienates the government from public needs and encourages public disillusionment. Despite prevailing apathy, several local experts have noted some new trends in the current government

reorganization. For one, there are more women in government than usual, with as many as eight appointed as deputy heads of various departments. Most notably, the position of First Deputy Prime Minister was assigned to Matluba Davlatova. Another new feature is the disregard for the so-called "regionalism factor." The appointed heads of the regions used to be locals; the new appointments are not, as was noted by political expert Abduvani Mamadazimov.

The reshuffle of government officials has become a regular practice at the beginning of the year. The president publicly criticizes government officials, tearing some of them to pieces verbally, while they report back with their heads down. Meanwhile, little changes and the economic hardships persist, making people's lives an unbearable agony and forcing many to search for income elsewhere. According to official data, remittances sent home by Tajiks working in Russia comprised as much as 45 percent of Tajikistan's GDP in 2011. The governmental reshuffle and the ostentatious wrap-up session will hardly ease people's lives. It is likely that the rotational changes are part of the president's effort to keep and promote loyal members of his party. Also, it is a way to keep his inner circle of loyal people unchanged, but yet provide a sense of some "improvements" and "reorganization" happening inside the government to appease the general public discontent caused by hardship.



New Silk Road Paper:

Flirting with State Failure: Power and Politics in Kyrgyzstan since Independence

By Johan Engvall

This Silk Road Paper analyzes the foundations of politics in Kyrgyzstan, uncovering the key factors of personalities, money, and patron-client networks as means of power.

The Silk Road Paper can be downloaded free at www.silkroadstudies.org. Hardcopy requests should be addressed to Paulette Fung at caciz@jhu.edu.

NEWS DIGEST

KYRGYZSTAN TO GET 1 MLN TONNES OF FUEL AND LUBRICANTS FROM RUSSIA, DUTY-FREE IN 2012

12 January

Russia is expected to ship 1 million tonnes of fuel and lubricants to Kyrgyzstan, duty-free, the head of Kyrgyzstan's Oil Traders Association, Zhumakadyr Akeneyev, told Interfax. "Kyrgyzstan's estimates its need in fuel this year at 1.15 million tonnes. Russia was prepared to provide 650,000 tonnes. The parties agreed on 1 million tonnes in talks," he said. Akeneyev also said that the Association and the Agriculture and Land Reclamation Ministry are expected to sign a deal on fuel supplies needed to run the spring sowing campaign. Russia and Kyrgyzstan signed an indefinite agreement on duty-free shipments of fuel and lubricants in March 2010 and they have only been adjusting the figures since then. Russia is the main supplier of petroleum products to Kyrgyzstan. Another 5%-7% arrives from Kazakhstan. (Interfax)

INFOR-WAR WAGED AGAINST NAZARBAYEV –ADVISOR

12 January

An information and ideological war is being waged against Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev, said Nazarbayev's political advisor Yermukhamet Yertysbayev. "I have been saying all along that a real information and ideological war is being waged against the president. The website Respublika and the K+ television channel are at the forefront of this war, and they openly called for a 'national revolt' in their live coverage of the unrest in Zhanaozen," Yertysbayev said in an interview with the Svoboda Slova (Speech Freedom) newspaper, published on Thursday. Reports in the Russian printed press were "extremely biased," too, sometimes, he also said. "One had the impression that the decision was made to neutralize the Bolotnaya Square protests and to overshadow them by a hotter theme, even though related to Kazakhstan," Yertysbayev said. But he argued that the unrest in Zhanaozen will not have a negative impact on the governing party Nur Otan's positions ahead of the parliamentary elections. "How will the Zhanaozen events impact the January 15 elections?"

The Zhanaozen factor is rallying citizens around the president. I have no doubts about that at all," he said. (Interfax)

EX-SOCAR BOSS SEES LOW NABUCCO ROLE

12 January

A former president of a state oil company in Azerbaijan said the number of gas pipelines planned through Turkey could diminish the role of Nabucco. European consumers are eager to add diversity to a natural gas market that depends heavily on Russia. The Nabucco natural gas pipeline through Turkey is the most ambitious of the non-Russian gas transit projects outlined in Europe's so-called Southern Corridor. Nabucco would get some of its natural gas from offshore fields in Azerbaijan. Sabit Bagirov, a former president of the State Oil Co. of the Azerbaijan Republic, told the Interfax news agency plans between Russia and Turkey could diminish Nabucco's role. In December, SOCAR and Turkish pipeline company BOTAS signed a memorandum of understanding to build the \$5 billion Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline through Turkey. "With the implementation of the Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline, the necessity to construct the Turkish section of Nabucco will disappear," Bagirov told the news service. SOCAR holds a majority interest in its consortium with BOTAS, though Baku said others were welcome to join. Nabucco directors note the project is based on a multisourced concept, which they said expands Europe's natural gas options substantially. (UPI)

IVANISHVILI PLANS TV CHANNEL

14 January

A company co-owned by wife of billionaire opposition politician Bidzina Ivanishvili took over management of a firm which owns cable and satellite broadcast license and plans to launch a new TV channel. In late December Aktsept LLC in which Ivanishvili's wife Ekaterine Khvedelidze owns 80% of shares took the management rights of Igrika, which obtained cable broadcast license from Georgian National Communications Commission in September and then satellite broadcast license in December. Igrika was founded by Ilia Kikabidze,

who is now director of Tbilisi-based Maestro TV station. One of Ivanishvili's spokespersons, Nona Kandiashili, has confirmed that Aktsept LLC had a plan to launch TV channel. She said the date of launch and other details would be announced by the planned channel's management. "I am sure that it will be a TV channel with absolutely independent news programming. The viewers will judge it themselves," she told Civil.ge on Saturday. According to the agreement with Igrika, Aktsept took over the management rights till December 31, 2013 and it will receive as a fee 15% of the channel's annual profit. Reports about Ivanishvili planning a television channel first emerged last month when the Georgian daily, Rezonansi, reported that the billionaire's team was already in the process of recruiting staff. In one of his first written statement released after announcing about his political plans, Ivanishvili offered owners of TV televisions with news broadcasting license that he was ready to buy TV channel for a price three times higher than its market value and to return it back to its previous owner after two years for a symbolic price of GEL 1. On January 6 executives of the companies from Ivanishvili's Cartu Group met with representatives of foreign diplomatic missions in Tbilisi and complained that shipments for their companies were subject of thorough scrutiny at customs, not seen before Ivanishvili's decision to go into politics. They said that some of the equipment was even "deliberately damaged" and presented at the meeting results of examination of some damaged cargo, among them of eight LiveU's portable video-over-cellular transmitters. Ivanishvili's spokesperson, however, did not confirm that transmitters were intended for the planned TV channel. (Civil Georgia)

SEVEN CANDIDATES TO RUN AGAINST TURKMEN PRESIDENT

18 January

Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov will face seven candidates in a presidential election next month, which is being seen as a formality for the all-powerful leader of the Central Asian country. The candidate list published on January 18 by the Central Election Commission includes nominees drawn from a variety of government ministries and state-owned companies, all of which have voiced their full support for the policies of the president. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe has declined to send an observer mission to the February 12 election,

citing the lack of political competition and limited freedoms. Berdymukhammedov became president in 2007, after the death of authoritarian leader Saparmurat Niyazov. (RFE/RL)

APARTMENT COMPLEX FOR RUSSIAN BORDER GUARDS IN SOKHUMI

18 January

An apartment complex for the border guard forces of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) and their families stationed in breakaway Abkhazia is being built in Sokhumi. After completion later this year it will be the largest apartment complex built for the Russian border guards in Abkhazia, according to the January 18 report by Abkhaz news agency Apsnipress. The complex, which is built by the Sochi-based construction firm, will include six apartment buildings and an administrative building. Since signing an agreement with Sokhumi "on joint efforts in protecting Abkhaz state border" in April, 2009, Russia has built four settlements for its border guard units in the breakaway region. The largest of them is located in the village of Otobaia in the predominantly ethnic Georgian populated Gali district not far from the administrative border. The settlement with an area of about five hectares involves four-storey apartment buildings with total of fifty flats for Russian border guards and their families. Three other settlements are of smaller size; one is located in the villages of Pichori in Gali district; another one in Okumi in the Ochamchire district and the third one is in New Athos (Akhali Atoni). At the time of signing of the agreement on border protection in 2009 Abkhaz officials reported that about 1,340 Russian border guards on top of Russian army troops would be stationed in the breakaway region. (Civil Georgia)

KAZAKHSTAN'S PM VOWS POLITICAL LIBERALIZATION

20 January

Kazakhstan's long-serving prime minister said Friday that his Central Asian country will move gradually toward greater political liberalization and downplayed international criticism of this week's parliamentary election. Karim Masimov spoke shortly after newly elected deputies assembled for the first time since the election that saw the ruling Nur Otan party's control of the Majlis, or lower house, fall from 100 percent to 89 percent. Deputies from three parties were sworn in at an official ceremony overseen by the oil-rich former Soviet

nation's powerful veteran president, Nursultan Nazarbayev. Monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe expressed substantial misgivings over the conduct of Sunday's election, saying the vote count lacked transparency. Masimov said in an interview with The Associated Press that he respected the views of the OSCE and that Kazakhstan would continue working to improve standards. "For the next election we will make the necessary steps to be close to international standards, but at the same time I, as the prime minister, strongly believe that we did have free-and-fair elections," he said, speaking in English. Nur Otan's commanding victory in the elections gave it control of 83 of the lower house's 107 seats. The pro-business Ak Zhol and the People's Communist Party have eight and seven deputies, respectively. Nine deputies were appointed by a presidential advisory body. The more militant wings of the opposition insist they have been denied a fair attempt at gaining even a foothold in parliament. In its first session, parliament reconfirmed Masimov as prime minister, putting an end to speculation that Nazarbayev might appoint a new head of government. Masimov has held the country's No. 2 post since 2007, making him the longest-serving prime minister since Kazakhstan gained independence in 1991. An urbane polyglot with a command of several languages — including English, Chinese and Turkish — Masimov is liked by international investors and widely credited with steering the country through a downturn caused by the global economic crisis. (AP)

TAJIKISTAN 'READY TO HELP' RUSSIANS FIND TAJIK DISSIDENT'S ATTACKER

21 January

Tajik Interior Minister Ramazon Rakhimov says Tajik investigators would assist Russian officials in investigating an attack against a well-known Tajik dissident in Moscow, RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports. Lieutenant General Rakhimov told journalists in Dushanbe on January 20 that "at this point there is no official request from Russian officials to help in the investigation, but if such a request is made, we are fully ready to assist in that matter." Rakhimov said he learned about the attack against Tajik government critic Dodojon Atovulloev from the media. He added that Atovulloev's statement saying that the attack against him might have been masterminded by people in the Tajik government is "his personal

opinion and has no basis in fact." Atovulloev, who lives permanently in Moscow, was attacked by an unknown man with a knife on January 12. He was brought with multiple stab wounds to hospital at Moscow's Sklifosovsky Medical Center, where he is currently being treated. Atovulloev, 56, is well known for his articles harshly criticizing the Tajik government, President Emomali Rahmon, and members of his family. Atovulloev left Tajikistan in December 1992. He has since lived mainly in Moscow, but spent one year in Germany as well. He has remained active as a journalist critical of the Tajik authorities throughout. (RFE/RL)

TAJIKISTAN ANTIDRUG OFFICIALS ARRESTED FOR NARCOTICS SMUGGLING

23 January

Tajikistan has arrested several high-ranking antidrug officials for their alleged involvement in narcotics trafficking.

Among them is Faridun Umarov, the head of the antidrug department in the southern Farkhor district, which borders Afghanistan. Umarov is the brother of the first deputy head of the State Committee for National Security, Mansur Umarov. Also arrested were the chief of the Interior Ministry's antinarcotics department and a colonel overseeing the antidrug unit of the Dushanbe city's interior affairs department. Umarov was the leader of the "organized crime group," which allegedly involved several other officers from antidrug departments and security services in the southern Khatlon province. Khatlon is a major drug route for narcotics coming from Afghanistan. An unnamed official told RFE/RL that arrests were made earlier this month. (RFE/RL)

KYRGYZ AUTHORITIES TO FORCIBLY FEED INMATES ON HUNGER STRIKE

23 January

Kyrgyz authorities say they have decided to forcibly feed prison inmates who have been on hunger strike over conditions at a handful of detention facilities all over the country. RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reports that State Penitentiary Service officials announced that the "forced feeding" means a transfusion of glucose solution via an intravenous system to protesting inmates whose health is in immediate danger. Thousands of inmates in Kyrgyzstan's 13 jails and detention centers have been on a hunger strike since January 17, a day after security forces violently quelled a prisoner riot in a Bishkek detention center, allegedly killing one and

wounding dozens. It is still unclear what sparked the riot and clashes in the detention center. Kyrgyz Ombudsman Tursunbek Akun has said the inmates' rights were violated and they were severely beaten. (RFE/RL)

UZBEK REFUGEE ARRESTED ON TERROR CHARGES IN CHICAGO

23 January

An accused member of an Islamic group that is suspected of plotting attacks in Germany, Turkey, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan has been arrested and charged with providing support to foreign terrorists. Jamshid Muhtorov, 35, an Uzbekistani refugee who resides in suburban Denver, was taken into custody on Saturday at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago by FBI agents, federal authorities said on Monday. A criminal complaint charging him with providing and attempting to provide material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization was unsealed in Denver on Monday shortly after Muhtorov made his initial court appearance in Chicago. Court documents filed in the case said Muhtorov was heading overseas to fight on behalf of the Islamic Jihad Union, a Pakistan-based extremist group that opposes secular rule in the U.S.-backed former Soviet republic of Uzbekistan and seeks to replace the current regime there with a government based on Islamic law. The public defender assigned to Muhtorov at his court appearance could not immediately be reached for comment. An FBI affidavit for Muhtorov's arrest said German authorities in 2007 disrupted an IJU plot and arrested three operatives of the group targeting unidentified facilities with explosives. It said Turkish authorities separately seized weapons and detained "extremists with ties to the IJU." The court affidavit also said the organization claimed responsibility for attacks in 2008 that targeted coalition forces in Afghanistan, including a suicide attack against an unidentified U.S. military post. In addition, the group conducted simultaneous suicide bombings in 2004 of U.S. and Israeli embassies, as well as of a Uzbekistani government office, all in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, FBI agent Donald Hale wrote in the FBI affidavit. Federal prosecutors said Muhtorov's arrest, capping a "long-term investigation," highlights "the continued interest of extremists residing in the United States to join and support overseas terrorists." If convicted of the charge against him, Muhtorov faces up to 15 years in prison. The FBI began monitoring his telephone calls and email messages last March, including a

conversation in July in which he told his daughter he would never see her again "but if she was a good Muslim girl he will see her in heaven," Hale's affidavit said. (Reuters)

AFGHAN AVALANCHE DEATH TOLL DURING PAST WEEK RISES TO 46

24 January

Officials in Afghanistan say heavy snow and avalanches in the country's far northeast have killed at least 46 people during the past week. Afghan President Hamid Karzai has declared an emergency in the mountainous northeastern province of Badakhshan and promised a relief fund of \$160,000. A statement from Karzai's office on January 24 quoted provincial officials who updated the death toll and said 60 people have also been injured by recent avalanches. Afghanistan's harsh winters and mountainous terrain make avalanches an annual hazard. Last year, at least 171 people died in an avalanche at the Salang Pass -- the major highway route through the Hindu Kush mountains linking Kabul with the north of the country. (RFE/RL)

UZBEKISTAN NO FUN OF VALENTINE'S DAY

24 January

Authorities in Uzbekistan are, apparently, unwilling to give love a chance. The Russian news agency RIA-Novosti cited several local media in the Central Asian nation reporting Tuesday that Uzbekistan has canceled concerts and other events for Valentine's Day. Instead, residents in the capital of Tashkent can enjoy readings of poems by Mughal emperor Babur, who died in the 16th century. The unofficial ban on romance-related festivities echoes long-standing antagonism in Uzbekistan toward the holiday. Last year, the Turkiston newspaper described Valentine's Day as the work of "forces with evil goals bent on putting an end to national values." Although most people across former Soviet Central Asia are Muslim, many enjoy celebrating what is nominally a Christian feast. (AP)

AZERBAIJAN COMPANY SAYS IT'S PLANNING WORLD'S TALLEST BUILDING

24 January

A property developer in oil-rich Azerbaijan says the company is aiming to construct the world's tallest building on a chain of artificial islands in the Caspian Sea. Kana Guluzade, marketing director of the Avesta company, said Tuesday the plans for the complex include a business center soaring to 1050

meters (3,645 feet), which would be 27 percent taller than the current champ, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai. The tower initially had been planned at 560 meters (1,837 feet), he said. The project is to include 41 islands about 25 kilometers (15 miles) south of the capital Baku, including hotels and apartment buildings. Guluzade said construction of the complex, called Khazar Islands, is to begin at the end of 2013. (AP)

MEDVEDEV, ANKVAB TOUR NEW BORDER CROSSING INFRASTRUCTURE

24 January

Russia's President Dmitry Medvedev, accompanied by Abkhaz leader Alexander Ankvab, toured a newly reconstructed border crossing point with Abkhazia at Psou river, which has increased capacity capable to handle larger traffic to put an end to long queues especially during summer holiday season, Russian and Abkhaz news agencies reported. "It has been constructed quickly; everything is in civilized way, corresponding to the requirements, including those of WTO," Medvedev was quoted by Russian and Abkhaz news agency as telling Ankvab, while touring the new infrastructure at border crossing point "Adler" on the Russian side of the border not far from Sochi. Medvedev also said that focus should be made on infrastructure capable to handle increased flow of traffic across the border. Ankvab responded that border crossing procedures would be carried out much faster and there would be no long queues anymore. Part of the new border crossing point, designed to handle traffic of vehicles, which also includes a new bridge, will be opened on January 25 and a separate part of the crossing point for pedestrians will be put into operation in February. The renovated border crossing point includes six lanes for vehicles; three separate lanes for cargo trucks and one for tourist buses. It is designed to handle at least 1,500 vehicles, including 150 cargo trucks, per day, according to Itar-Tass news agency. (Civil Georgia)

PRESIDENT NOT TO APPEAL COURT RULING OVER CITIZENSHIP OF IVANISHVILI'S WIFE

24 January

President's administration has no intention to appeal a ruling of Tbilisi City Court ordering restoration of Georgian citizenship to billionaire opposition politician Bidzina Ivanishvili's wife, President Saakashvili's spokesperson, Manana

Manjgaladze, said on January 24. On December 27, the Tbilisi City Court partly held a presidential order number 602 stripping Ivanishvili of his Georgian citizenship, but in the same judgment the court also said the part of the same presidential order, which revoked citizenship of Ivanishvili's wife Ekaterine Khvedelidze, was illegal. Earlier this month, when it was not yet clear whether the president's office was going to appeal the ruling or not to the higher court, Khvedelidze requested the Tbilisi City Court to order an immediate enforcement of its judgment on the grounds that she was intending to run for the parliamentary elections in October. Khvedelidze cited that in case of appealing the ruling by the president's office the court proceedings could have lasted for over a year effectively barring her to run for parliament. Ivanishvili tries to regain Georgian citizenship for himself through naturalization. He submitted relevant papers to the authorities on January 5. According to the law on citizenship, the authorities have maximum of three months to respond to the application on citizenship. Ivanishvili said on January 15, that he was sure he would regain his Georgian citizenship allowing him to personally establish and lead a political party, but if not he was considering as a plan B that his wife would do that on his behalf. Also this month, Ekaterine Khvedelidze became an owner of a company, which holds a license to carry out news broadcasting via cable and satellite. Ivanishvili's press office said on January 20, that the new TV channel would be launched in the nearest future. If Ivanishvili will have to put in practice his plan B and assign her wife in charge of establishing his planned political party, Ekaterine Khvedelidze, will have to formally distance from TV channel, as law bans a political party official to at the same time be a holder of broadcast license. (Civil Georgia)

KYRGYZSTAN PRISON PROTEST: INMATES SEW LIPS TOGETHER

25 January

More than 1,300 Kyrgyz prisoners have sewn their lips together as part of an ongoing protest at poor living conditions, say officials. Nearly 7,000 are already on hunger strike. Their latest move came in response to an official decision to force-feed them, reports said. The protest follows a riot last week in which at least one person was killed. "They are demanding that state prison authorities and guards stop beatings," a human rights official said. "They are worried that if they stop their hunger strike they

will be beaten again," Tursunbek Akun said. He described the situation of the protesting prisoners as "catastrophic." But authorities say the protest has been orchestrated by criminal gang leaders who oppose new tighter regulations inside prisons, reports the BBC's Central Asia correspondent Rayhan Demytrie. Hundreds of prisoners have joined the latest protest, which according to reports involves sewing their lips together in such a way that only liquids can be consumed. One of the prisoners' demands is said to be the lifting of restrictions on their movement, but this demand was dismissed by the head of the penitentiary services, Sheishenbek Baizakov. Prisoners would no longer "be able to make fools of the guards", he said at a news conference in the capital Bishkek, according to AFP news agency. "Let them all sew shut their mouths." Mr Baizakov's resignation has been demanded by prisoners' relatives, who have been picketing the parliament building every day since 16 January - the day of the deadly prison riot said to have triggered the protest. Kyrgyzstan is a former Soviet nation of 5.5 million which hosts a US air base key to US operations in nearby Afghanistan. Its jails are notoriously overcrowded and teeming with disease, reports say. (BBC)

KAZAKH POLITICIAN FLEES COUNTRY, FEARING ARREST

25 January

The former leader of a Kazakh political party that was barred from taking part in parliamentary elections earlier this month has left his country for London, fearing possible pressure and arrest by Kazakh authorities. Serikzhan Mambetalin told RFE/RL that he left Kazakhstan last week and does not plan to return in the near future. He said "political oppression against opposition politicians has increased." Mambetalin's Ruhaniyat (Spiritual Strength) party harshly criticized authorities last month for opening fire at striking oil workers in the southwestern town of Zhanaozen. Several Kazakh opposition activists and a journalist were arrested in recent days for alleged involvement in the fatal clashes in Zhanaozen. On January 25, the New-York-based Human Rights Watch urged Kazakh authorities to stop applying criminal law to crack down on opposition politicians. (RFE/RL)

RUSSIA TO DOUBLE AZERBAIJAN GAS IMPORTS

25 January

Azerbaijan said this week it has struck a deal with Moscow to double the amount of Caspian Sea natural gas exported to the Russian energy monopoly Gazprom. The two sides announced the agreement Monday in Krasnaya Polyana, Russia, where Rovnag Abdullayev, president of the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic, or SOCAR, praised the deal as a good one for his country. "The agreement was undersigned on very favorable terms for us," Abdullayev told the Azerbaijani Press Agency. The agreement raises the volume of Russia's gas purchases from 1.5 billion to 3 billion cubic meters per year. While negotiating new pipelines to potentially lucrative European consumers, Azerbaijan's biggest gas export customers are currently its closest neighbors. Turkey buys about 6 billion cubic meters annually from SOCAR, followed by Georgia at 2 billion cubic meters and Russia at 1.5 billion cubic meters. The doubling of sales to SOCAR's third-biggest customer was greeted with enthusiasm in Baku, the report said. Abdullayev and Gazprom Chief Executive Officer Alexey Miller noted the deal calls for even more to be delivered in 2013. "We have doubled the purchase of Azerbaijani gas for the second consecutive year," Miller said. Miller agreed Baku was getting a good deal under the arrangement, lauding the agreement's lack of an upper purchase limit and asserting Azerbaijan makes more money selling gas to Russia than to Europe. The potential for much more Caspian Sea gas heading to Russia is also there, Russian trade representative to Azerbaijan Yuri Shedrin said in September. The pipeline between the countries is able to transport up to 5 billion cubic meters of gas per year, he told the Baku news portal News.az. "Azerbaijan needs to diversify its export routes since the domestic market cannot consume the extracted amounts. All the same, the Southern Gas Corridor, Nabucco, ITGI and TAP will be launched after 2016," he said, referring to planned pipelines to Europe. The value of gas exports to Russia jumped to \$286.6 million during the first seven months of 2011 compared with the year-earlier period -- an increase of \$104.1 million. That represented 37.6 percent of Azerbaijan's total exports during the period. (UPI)