

Political Murder in Central Asia: No Time to End Uzbekistan's Isolation

I. OVERVIEW

There are strong indications that Uzbek security forces murdered one of Kyrgyzstan's most prominent journalists, Alisher Saipov, in October 2007 during the build-up to Uzbekistan's end of year presidential elections, most likely because of his involvement in Erk (Freedom), a leading exile opposition party. If this is the case, it would appear that the security organs, which are the key to keeping President Islam Karimov in power, are increasingly willing to move against any perceived danger, even if it involves pre-emptive strikes in foreign territory. This may be a sign not only of the ruthlessness of the regime but also of its increasing fragility. At the least it underlines the need for the U.S. and the European Union (EU) to resist the temptation to respond to Karimov's dubious December 2007 re-election with efforts at re-engagement, in the apparent hope of regaining or retaining military bases for Afghanistan operations or of outflanking Russia.

Saipov's murder shook Kyrgyzstan's establishment and deeply embarrassed its law enforcement agencies. Politicians and police investigators officially denied it was a political assassination carried out by Uzbekistan's secret police, claiming instead it was the result of the victim's dubious dealings with Islamic fundamentalists, but there are strong circumstantial and other indications of Tashkent's motives and responsibility.

The killing laid bare a deeply ambiguous Kyrgyzstan government policy with regard to its powerful neighbour. Kyrgyz security and law enforcement bodies appear to have been aware of Uzbek threats against Saipov and to have done nothing to neutralise them. Indeed, Bishkek complains that its ethnic Uzbek citizens in southern Kyrgyzstan make excessive demands for political power in the border areas, and it allows Uzbek special services virtual carte blanche on its territory.

However, senior Kyrgyz officials privately express frustration at the political situation in Uzbekistan. They complain that Karimov's single-minded insistence on retaining power and his brutality are the main factors in the development of a radical Islamic underground but that his government refuses to discuss the resulting security

issues. The president's abrasive character and paranoia, they say, have alienated even his inner circle, and worry that his departure, whenever it happens, will leave a dangerous vacuum and create the possibility of massive cross-border refugee flows.

On 16 January 2008, Karimov was sworn in for a third presidential term after defeating three candidates in an election that was strongly criticised by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), though praised by the heavily Moscow-influenced Commonwealth of Independent States. Uzbek officials subsequently expressed confidence the EU and U.S. would now soften their line on Uzbekistan, and they may be right. Karimov received a senior EU diplomat the day after his inauguration and the admiral who leads the U.S. Central Command a week later.

The Saipov affair, if the Uzbek regime indeed was responsible, indicates, however, that any efforts to soften the sanctions the EU put in place after the May 2005 massacre in the Uzbek city of Andijon, to restore the aid the U.S. reduced or otherwise to lessen the Karimov regime's political isolation, would be misguided. Those measures sent a strong message; in spite of Tashkent's official contempt for Europe, for example, it has deployed major diplomatic resources to have the Brussels sanctions removed. Nevertheless, Saipov was murdered less than two weeks after the EU announced it was suspending some of its travel restrictions on Tashkent officials to "encourage ... positive steps" by the Uzbeks.

The West wants to start a meaningful dialogue with Karimov, but offering unilateral and unreciprocated concessions is likely simply to encourage a dangerous and unpredictable regime that has stimulated the rise of radical Islam while bringing misery to its own people and becoming an increasing menace to its neighbours. It would be a poor geopolitical bet.

II. THE MURDER

Shortly after 7pm on 24 October 2007, Alisher Saipov, a 26-year-old journalist and editor, was shot dead on Masaliyev Prospect, one of the busiest streets of Osh,

southern Kyrgyzstan's main city.¹ Two heavy-set men, apparently in their thirties and dressed in track suits, accosted Saipov as he and a colleague left the office. The colleague fled, as one attacker fired three times from close range at Saipov, the last point blank into his head to be sure he was dead.² The killing was unusually brazen: a public place early in the evening, a gun without a silencer.

The murder brought attention to Saipov's political activities against Islam Karimov: a friend recalled that he had lived, breathed and dreamed the overthrow of Uzbekistan's president. Kyrgyz authorities chose to ignore this possible motive and concentrated instead on his contacts with underground Islamist movements and the substantial amounts of money they claimed he received from foreign sources, including the U.S.-based National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Privately, though, many observers, including some Kyrgyz intelligence and security sources, believe that Saipov was murdered by Uzbekistan security: both for his own activities and to send a chilling message to other Karimov opponents.

Despite his youth, Saipov had developed a reputation as an energetic, hard-driving journalist with an unusually wide network of contacts. In addition to running his own weekly, *Siyosat (Politics)*, founded in February 2007 with NED funds, he reported for a number of regional and foreign outlets on Uzbekistan issues, notably the Voice of America (VOA). A Kyrgyz citizen of Uzbek origin, Saipov was a militant, outspoken opponent of Karimov. When police searched his office after the killing, they discovered a rucksack full of well-printed fliers calling on the president to give up power. These were intended for distribution inside Uzbekistan during the build-up to the December 2007 presidential elections, Uzbek opposition activists said.³

The initial response in Kyrgyzstan to the murder was shock and indignation. President Kurmanbek Bakiyev announced that he had taken personal control of the case and dispatched an interior ministry major general from his staff to Osh

to oversee the investigation.⁴ A special investigative commission was established, but a senior police officer who looked around Saipov's office on the night of the murder seemed certain who was behind it. Referring to the anti-Karimov leaflets, he remarked in the presence of a witness, "everything is clear".⁵ Similarly, the immediate reaction of many journalists, politicians and friends of Saipov was that there was only one real suspect: Uzbekistan's secret police.

A. THE OFFICIAL VERSIONS

The Kyrgyz government quickly decided otherwise. Official outrage shifted to hints that Saipov had brought it on himself with his dubious contacts in the Islamic underground. Documents published by the Hizb ut-Tahrir, a banned Islamic party active throughout Central Asia, and particularly in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, were found on his computer; investigators also claimed he regularly received money from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), an Islamist insurgent force currently based in Pakistan's South Waziristan territory and closely linked to al-Qaeda. A senior police investigator asked rhetorically: "Why interfere in the affairs of a foreign state?... Why get involved in things that were none of his business?"⁶

Hizb ut-Tahrir activists, however, have said repeatedly he was not a member, and met with them only for journalistic purposes.⁷ In a conversation in August 2007, Saipov remarked that he admired the movement's devotion but would not be able to tolerate its rigid discipline.⁸ Kyrgyz police officials working on the murder, meanwhile, admit that Hizb ut-Tahrir, which claims to use purely peaceful methods to seek a world caliphate, has never been suspected of a political killing.⁹ While Saipov had met with former IMU fighters in Iran, these were dissidents who were deeply critical of that movement, claiming they had joined to fight Karimov, not work for al-Qaeda. Saipov, the former IMU fighters said, helped them obtain official refugee status and move to Turkey.¹⁰ The special commission set up to investigate the murder, meanwhile, faded out of sight. A senior police officer remarked that it had been established "just to calm the press".¹¹

¹ For previous reporting on Uzbekistan, including policy recommendations, see Crisis Group Asia Briefings N°67, *Uzbekistan: Stagnation and Uncertainty*, 22 August 2007; N°54, *Uzbekistan: Europe's Sanctions Matter*, 6 November 2006; N°45, *Uzbekistan: In for the Long Haul*, 16 February 2006; and N°38, *Uzbekistan: The Andijon Uprising*, 25 May 2005; and Crisis Group Asia Reports N°76, *The Failure of Reform in Uzbekistan: Ways Forward for the International Community*, 11 March 2004; N°46, *Uzbekistan's Reform Program: Illusion or Reality*, 18 February 2003; and N°21, *Central Asia: Uzbekistan at Ten – Repression and Instability*, 21 August 2001.

² Crisis Group interview, Kyrgyz police colonel, Osh, 15 January 2008.

³ Crisis Group telephone interview, 27 October 2007; and Crisis Group interviews, Istanbul, December 2007.

⁴ Novosti News Agency, 25 October 2007, cited inter alia on www.rg.ru/2007/10/25/reg-asia/saipov-bakiev-anons.html.

⁵ Crisis Group interview, witness, 15 January 2008.

⁶ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, 5 December 2007.

⁷ Crisis Group interview, Karasuu, 12 January 2008.

⁸ Crisis Group researcher's conversation in a former capacity.

⁹ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, 5 December 2007.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Turkey, December 2007.

¹¹ Crisis Group interview, Kyrgyz police colonel, Osh, 15 January 2008.

A close adviser to the Kyrgyzstan president offered a sinister defence of the neighbouring country's special services. They have very "refined" techniques for eliminating their adversaries, he said. "If they wanted him gone, they would have kidnapped him, and he would have disappeared without trace, forever".¹² Other officials claimed that killing opponents is not part of Uzbekistan's modus operandi in Kyrgyzstan. There are, however, several documented cases of apparent Kyrgyz and Uzbek security officer killings of alleged terrorists in joint operations. In August 2006, for example, Kyrgyzstan's National Security Service announced that Rafiq Qori Kamoluddin, a popular imam in the Kyrgyz border town of Karasu, was among three alleged IMU terrorists killed in a firefight.¹³ Kamoluddin's son said there had been no firefight, and his father was murdered for "declaring publicly that Karimov oppressed his people".¹⁴

B. POLITICAL ACTIVISM AND PRESSURES

Saipov was a practicing Muslim and indeed active in Uzbekistan's opposition politics. But he was working with the Erk (Freedom) Democratic Party of Uzbekistan, a secular pluralist organisation headed from exile in Istanbul by Muhammad Salih, the country's best known poet and a major political player in the tumultuous early 1990s following the Soviet Union's disintegration. Saipov had discovered Salih's poetry at university, later sought him out through the internet and visited him several times a year in Istanbul. "He adored Salih, worshipped him", said a close friend.¹⁵ Opposition leaders said that despite his youth, Saipov played a leading role in Erk activities for several years prior to his death.¹⁶ Salih is at best a reluctant political leader, and young anti-Karimov activists sometimes express frustration with his hesitancy. Saipov was energetic and dynamic. With his death, the Erk presence in Kyrgyzstan essentially ceased.

Uzbekistan officials allegedly had been trying to intimidate Saipov into political inactivity for much of the year. The Kyrgyz security services had also been involved, according to opposition sources. In March 2007, Saipov told Erk leaders they had warned him not to criticise the Uzbek regime or distribute Erk literature.¹⁷ Later he began to talk about going to Turkey for a few months, in the hope

that the pressure would die down, but he seems to have abandoned those plans after his first child was born in mid-year,¹⁸ and the pressure intensified in the months leading to his death. Initially Saipov had shrugged off the threats. Later, friends said, he became increasingly concerned.¹⁹ On 16 September, a family member accompanied him to a meeting with visitors from Uzbekistan. One urged Saipov to abandon his criticism of Tashkent, "and the persecution will stop".²⁰

Shortly afterwards, Saipov confided to a close friend that a leading ethnic Uzbek politician in Kyrgyzstan, widely believed to have close links with the Uzbek government, warned that Tashkent wanted to kill him and advised him to lie low for a few months. Saipov seemed "depressed" by the warning, the friend said.²¹ Other calls followed, and Saipov took steps to insulate *Siyosat* workers, telling them to say they knew nothing about his political activities. A few days before his death, two men, one with an accent identifying him as from the town of Kokand in Uzbekistan, began frequenting the small yard outside his office. Police say openly they were probably the murderers.

C. "OPERATIONAL ELIMINATION"

Kyrgyzstan officials continue to deny publicly and vehemently any involvement from Uzbekistan in Saipov's death.²² However, a senior official with direct knowledge of cross-border covert operations told Crisis Group Uzbek counterparts had confirmed the week after the killing that the murder was an "operational elimination", carried out by Uzbek security officers.²³ The Kyrgyz source, who has intimate knowledge of Uzbekistan's security activities, dismissed suggestions the killing was a local initiative.

¹² Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, 3 December 2007.

¹³ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), 7 August 2006. Kyrgyz security and police officials insisted to Crisis Group that Kyrgyz operatives carried out the attack, working on Uzbek information.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, 13 January 2008.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Osh, 14 January 2008.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, December 2007.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, December 2007.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Osh, 14-15 January 2008.

²⁰ Crisis Group interview, Saipov family member, Osh, 12 January 2008.

²¹ Crisis Group interview, Saipov friend, Osh, 14 January 2008.

²² The tightly-controlled Uzbek media denied its country was involved in the murder. "Gentlemen who accuse our country of murdering Alisher Saipov are our enemies, who hate the serenity and happiness of our country and nation", said one typical article in the regional *Namangan Haqiqati* newspaper, 7 November 2007. The article dismissed Saipov as "just a person with malicious intentions, who, from a secluded location, poured dirt on Uzbekistan, which is steadily progressing along its own path of development". Uzbek law enforcement agencies "paid very little attention to provocations by people like Saipov", the paper concluded.

²³ Crisis Group interview, southern Kyrgyzstan, January 2008. Most special forces (*spetsnaz*) in the states formerly republics of the Soviet Union have special units trained in the physical elimination of what are considered terrorists or dangerous criminals.

The order, he maintained, came from the highest echelons of the Uzbek security service, and the gunmen were almost certainly officers; it would have been too risky to hire local killers, who have a reputation for incompetence. The proximate cause of the murder was probably Saipov's "open agitation" in the build-up to the 23 December 2007 presidential elections in Uzbekistan.²⁴

Another Kyrgyz source, a former intelligence and security officer with wide contacts in state security circles, said the killing was widely described within this milieu as an official Uzbek hit. Saipov's political activism had "pissed them [the Uzbeks] off".²⁵ They certainly knew about his work with Salih, the source said, and "if Saipov had lived longer, he would have become a serious threat" to the regime. If the brazenness of the killing was intended to demoralise and intimidate opposition activists, it seems to have worked, at least temporarily. Some key activists have gone to ground, while normally outspoken journalists in Osh admit to writing more circumspectly.

III. UNEASY NEIGHBOURS

Despite smiles and photo-ops, there is little love lost between the leaders of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Asked Karimov's outstanding characteristics, a former Kyrgyz and Soviet intelligence officer who had worked with him singled out "arrogance and conceit". Well-placed Kyrgyz sources said the Kyrgyz president's less detail-oriented approach to governance exasperates his punctilious, demanding Uzbek opposite number. Despite the much criticised cooperation that followed the May 2005 Andijon crisis, when popular unrest in that city was crushed with possibly as many as 750 deaths,²⁶ Uzbekistan seems to view its southern neighbour as the weak link in its security cordon.

More security cooperation – "simply telling [our] people 'work with Karimov'" – is an easy way for Kyrgyzstan's government to smooth relations with its larger and more powerful neighbour, a former chief of the Kyrgyz security service remarked.²⁷ Nevertheless, top Kyrgyz officials are increasingly angered and concerned by developments in Uzbekistan. One of the president's closest advisers likened Karimov to a plane that no longer has enough fuel to turn back and is flying on with no idea where or how to land. Obtuse repression of Islamic movements had exacerbated the situation in Uzbekistan, he added;

Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan's other neighbours are deeply concerned that a wave of unrest after Karimov's departure could have serious consequences for them. "When there is unrest in Uzbekistan, we suffer", he said, referring to the thousands of refugees who swept across the border after the Andijon massacre. "That was local unrest. Just think what would happen if the whole country rose up".²⁸

Another official described the Uzbekistan administration as "a horrible regime", adding that Karimov has offended so many of his own officials that he no longer knows whom to trust. "The only thing you can do is wait for his physical end. He's afraid to appoint a successor for fear that his successor will shorten his own term".²⁹

Kyrgyz intelligence officers are impressed, however, by the equipment, pay and discipline of the Uzbek security and military structures, which, one said, have everything to lose if Karimov goes, so are unlikely to revolt against him. The majority of the country, he added, lives in increasing misery, and 60 per cent, he estimated, are opposed to Karimov. Kyrgyz officials said that even they were surprised by the security measures put in place by their Uzbek counterparts as the December 2007 presidential elections drew near, including the stationing of armoured personnel carriers at border posts.³⁰

Security cooperation between the two countries takes a multitude of forms, both official and unofficial. The official guidelines were established most recently on 9 August 2007, during a meeting in Osh between the interior ministers, which discussed improving cooperation against "terrorism, extremism and separatism, organised crime and drug trafficking and illegal migration".³¹ No text of any agreements was published, a police spokesperson said, and all decisions were classified.³²

Though Uzbek security has long been active in Kyrgyzstan, the tempo and size of operations increased significantly after the Andijon events, a former senior officer of the Kyrgyz security service told Crisis Group. "The Uzbeks saw after Andijon that they had not done enough work in the border zones, and they have started to work more intensively". Until then, he added, we "tried to keep the relationship with our Uzbek opposite numbers within a certain framework. We did not reveal all we had. Now the Kyrgyz state has opened up and allows them *carte blanche*".³³ Though the bulk of the security penetration is in the south, the Uzbek security services are also well

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, Osh, 12 January 2008.

²⁶ See Crisis Group Briefings, *Uzbekistan: The Andijon Uprising*; and N°45, *Uzbekistan: In for the Long Haul*, both op. cit.

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, November 2007.

²⁸ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, 3 December 2007.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, 14 December 2007.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Osh region, 14-15 January 2008.

³¹ Kyrgyzstan interior ministry press release, undated, made available to Crisis Group, 18 January 2008.

³² Crisis Group interview, Osh, 18 January 2008.

³³ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, November 2007.

represented in the capital. The Uzbek embassy in Bishkek is overwhelmingly staffed by state security officers, the former Kyrgyz officer continued. "Their ambassador is sometimes a diplomat, but not always", and in the south, "they feel quite at home".³⁴

Operatives are believed to function under a variety of covers, including cab drivers, but make little effort to hide their activities. Local journalists and human rights activists report being approached by individuals who either identify themselves as Uzbek security agents or do not deny it when challenged.³⁵ Businessmen with interests on both sides of the border are encouraged or forced to help Uzbek state security, officials say, and a number of former members of the Soviet KGB, who joined the Uzbek equivalent on independence and then returned to Osh at retirement, form what a Kyrgyz officer called a reliable reserve.³⁶ Uzbek operatives even cross into Kyrgyzstan to shop at the bazaar in Karasuu, one of Central Asia's biggest, where prices are better than in their own country. A Hizb ut-Tahrir activist in Karasuu told Crisis Group that party members sometimes stake out the border, videoing Uzbek security men as they cross and then complaining to the Kyrgyz police. Their complaints are ignored, he said.³⁷

A crude quid pro quo operates in Kyrgyz-Uzbek collaboration on political and criminal operations. After the Andijon uprising, some from that city who sought refuge in Kyrgyzstan were extradited to Uzbekistan or "stolen", the local term for kidnapping by special services, and returned unofficially. Once back in their own country, some received long prison sentences.³⁸ The practice continues, though less frequently. "They want someone, we put them in a sack and hand them over; we want someone, they do the same", said a Kyrgyz intelligence officer.³⁹ The reference to a sack was probably not a figure of speech. An Islamic activist who was "stolen", served a prison sentence and then returned to Osh, succinctly summed up the policy. "Those they need, they steal; those they don't need, they kill".⁴⁰

But the security relationship is deeply ambiguous. Some elements of the two countries' security structures cooperate intimately. Others spy on each other. The Uzbeks collect covert political, economic and military data, a Kyrgyz intelligence officer said. Many of their operatives are well known, but it would be more trouble than it is worth to roll

up their operations: "We would have to start all over again trying to identify the new agents". Besides, he added, Kyrgyz intelligence does the same in Uzbekistan.

If Kyrgyz officials find a certain humour in mutual spying, they express deep anger at what many claim is Tashkent's blatant interference in the internal politics of southern Kyrgyzstan, where ethnic Uzbeks are a sizeable minority – about one third of the population in Osh, for example.⁴¹ There in particular, officials alleged, Uzbekistan has recently stepped up efforts to make use of local Uzbeks and organisations representing the diaspora like the Jalalabad Uzbek National Cultural Centre and the Osh Regional Association of Uzbeks, as well as Rodina (Motherland), an overwhelmingly ethnic Uzbek political party. A senior presidential adviser claimed that the latter was infiltrated by the Russian FSB as well as Tashkent's services.⁴²

A Kyrgyz government analyst and strategist said that during the build-up to the October 2007 Osh city election, "specific individuals" – a euphemism for Uzbek government agents – presented the mayor with a list of demands amounting to ethnic Uzbek control over the local executive branch and legislature. He said the authorities "took steps" to make sure this did not happen, and the elections ended in a surprising defeat for parties representing ethnic Uzbeks. Soon afterwards Rodina was one of several opposition parties taken off the ballot for the 16 December parliamentary elections on what are widely viewed as specious grounds. "Local Uzbeks have gone way out of line", the analyst claimed, summarising the official view of the situation in the south. "They are pushing too hard. One day they are going to get it on the head".⁴³

IV. THE UZBEK OPPOSITION: DISILLUSION AND MOBILISATION⁴⁴

A. THE ERK (FREEDOM) DEMOCRATIC PARTY

By 2007 the anti-Karimov opposition seemed firmly silenced by the sweeping arrests, trials and long prison terms that followed Andijon.⁴⁵ Erk, one of the most

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Osh, 12-19 January 2008.

³⁶ Crisis Group interview, mid-January 2008.

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, Karasuu, 12 January 2008.

³⁸ See Crisis Group Briefing, *Uzbekistan: Europe's Sanctions Matter*, op. cit.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, south Kyrgyzstan, January 2008.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, Osh, January 2008.

⁴¹ *Demograficheski Ezhegodnik Kyrgyzskoy Respubliki [Demographic Yearbook of the Kyrgyz Republic]* (Bishkek, 2007).

⁴² Crisis Group interview, 3 December 2007.

⁴³ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, 14 December 2007.

⁴⁴ Unless otherwise stated, this section is based on interviews conducted in Turkey with representatives of various tendencies of the Uzbek opposition in December 2007.

⁴⁵ For details, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Stagnation and Uncertainty*, op. cit.

prominent exile opposition movements, however, decided it had to act. Members say the decision was driven by a number of factors, including frustration at the lack of support from the West and intriguing signs that Moscow was not fully behind Karimov.

An approach in early 2007 by Russians with close links to the Putin administration was a catalyst. The ensuing "dialogue" – Erk's description of the contacts – ended in failure but left party leaders feeling that Karimov's support base was less solid than it seemed. The initiator on the Russian side is said to have been Yevgeny Primakov, one of Russia's few elder statesmen. A former head of the External Intelligence Service, foreign minister and premier, he hails from the Caucasus and is a lifelong specialist in the Middle East. He is also known as a very cautious figure, who would never undertake a sensitive initiative without explicit Kremlin support or subsequently discuss details in public.

Sources close to the talks said the Russians expressed frustration with Karimov, their desire to find a viable alternative and doubts that Erk had the capacity to seriously challenge the regime.⁴⁶ Neither Salih nor Primakov was directly involved. An Erk representative in Moscow relayed questions to Turkey and received replies by email. After initial highly positive signals, the exchange withered in late summer, sources said. The Russians had apparently decided that Erk was not up to the task.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Foreign visitors report typically acerbic Karimov barbs directed at the Russian leadership. "I never liked Putin, but I used to respect him", a foreign minister in the region recalled Karimov remarking during a private chat in Tashkent. "Now I don't respect him either", personal communication to Crisis Group, January 2008.

⁴⁷ Late in 2007, the Russians seemed to be making a new push to be friends with the Karimov regime. One example was a roundtable discussion organised in Uzbekistan by leading pro-Kremlin political consultants. The key Russian organiser, Gleb Pavlovsky, often described as the Kremlin's image-maker, was lavish in his praise, declaring Karimov's construction of "solid social institutions is a unique experiment which can be applied not only in other regional states but even on other continents", "Документ, В Самарканде завершился российско-узбекский круглый стол" ["A Round Table has ended in Samarkand"], 15 November 2006, at www.regnum.ru/news/739764.html. Another participant, the pro-government Duma member and think-tank director Sergei Markov, also poured praise on Karimov and stressed the country's role as a "centre for the assurance of the security and stability of Central Asia", which was why Uzbekistan "must become a Russian ally", "Узбекистан – центр обеспечения безопасности в Центральной Азии" ["Uzbekistan – the centre for ensuring security in Central Asia"], Kreml.org. Those last words, however, also indicated some differences remain between the two governments.

Around this time, Erk leaders decided to take the fight to Karimov. They planned a mass peaceful demonstration in Tashkent, collected undertakings from a couple of thousand supporters who were ready to participate and assembled modest funds to support the families of those who inevitably would be arrested. The minimum objective was to signal that an organised opposition to Karimov really did exist. The maximum hope was that the demonstration would spread to other cities and regions and become a nationwide peaceful uprising. The demonstration was to have been held before the 23 December presidential elections. The organisers were encouraged by reports of demonstrations and protests in Uzbekistan in late summer over sharp increases in the prices of staples like flour and cooking oil.⁴⁸

In the past Erk would have sounded out the U.S. before planning a major action, opposition sources said. By 2007, however, it no longer had any faith in Western support in general, and U.S. support in particular. The last straw may have come soon after the May 2005 Andijon uprising. Well-placed members of the Tashkent political elite had urged Erk to act while the regime was still in shock, assuring the exiles they would be supported by elements of the state structure. But Erk efforts to obtain U.S. advice, opposition leaders said, were met with silence. Recalling the incident, an Erk leader remarked that the Russians "are cynical, but at least they are consistent".

Osh, through Saipov and perhaps one other colleague, would have played an important role in the 2007 demonstration. Saipov, several opposition sources said, was in charge of smuggling anti-Karimov literature into Uzbekistan; the several thousand leaflets found in his office after his murder were intended to be used in the build-up. A senior opposition figure said Saipov spoke openly of plans for "another revolution" in the region and was rebuked for his indiscretion. The planned demonstration was shelved after his murder.

B. A NEW ARMED MOVEMENT?

Also apparently affecting Erk's thinking were indications that a new insurgent movement, with ambitions to replace the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), was taking shape. Long the main source of armed opposition to the Karimov regime, the IMU is believed to be a shadow of its former self since suffering heavy losses, including its military commander, Juma Namangani, in the opening stages of the U.S. attack on Afghanistan in 2001. The bulk (perhaps rump) of the fighting force is now in Pakistan's South Waziristan territory and is usually described as an

⁴⁸ See, inter alia, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), 3 September 2007.

al-Qaeda auxiliary. Tahir Yuldashev, IMU's overall leader, keeps his name known in Central Asia through occasional DVDs distributed in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere, but while Kyrgyz and Uzbek security forces continue to report clashes with IMU fighters, these seem to be small scale, and defectors claimed the fighting force has dwindled to a few hundred.⁴⁹

Opposition activists outside the region and well-placed political observers in southern Kyrgyzstan asserted, however, that a hitherto unknown insurgent organisation is emerging. Initial reports give its name as National Movement for the Liberation of Uzbekistan. Sources in Turkey and Southern Kyrgyzstan, unaffiliated and with sharply different political affinities, said it is slowly taking shape in Tajikistan and Afghanistan and is less Islamist in motivation than the IMU, with membership drawn from some IMU breakaways and survivors of the Andijon uprising. Sketchy reports from Kyrgyzstan claimed that it also has a substantial component of veterans of the Uzbek security agencies.

U.S. officials say they have heard rumours of new movements but have no details.⁵⁰ The reference to former Uzbek security officers leaves open the possibility of a government-fabricated movement.⁵¹ The Karimov regime regularly cites its own war against what it calls Islamic terrorism to justify draconian measures against its own people and continues to claim that the IMU is a serious threat. Crisis Group sources, however, are convinced that the new movement is genuine, although they are uncertain about its long-term potential.

V. THE U.S. AND EU RESPONSE

While the Uzbek regime may be playing even rougher than before, the EU and the U.S. seem to be softening their stance. In the wave of indignation following the Andijon events, Washington and Brussels announced sanctions

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, Turkey, December 2007.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group inquiries, Washington DC, 28 -29 January 2008.

⁵¹ The fact that the IMU had close contacts with Russian intelligence in the 1990s further complicates the issue of Islamic movements' allegiances. A former GRU (Russian military intelligence) officer recently recalled his contacts with IMU leaders, noting that its military commander, Namangani, a former trooper in the elite Russian Airborne (VDV), was a "militarily literate" interlocutor. An IMU defector told Crisis Group that he was among a large group of IMU fighters who regrouped from Tajikistan to Afghanistan in the late 1990s. The fighters, he said, were accompanied to the Afghan border by Russian and Tajik forces, while their families were taken by Russian helicopter to their new Afghan base. Crisis Group interviews, southern Kyrgyzstan and Turkey, December 2007-January 2008.

aimed at punishing and isolating the regime. These led to a sharp downturn in relations, marked notably by Uzbekistan's demand in July 2005 that the U.S. vacate the Karsi-Khanabad (K2) airbase, which it was using to support Afghanistan operations. The ice now seems to be melting. Pierre Morel, the EU's Special Representative for Central Asia, met with Karimov in Tashkent the day after his inauguration and was followed a week later by Admiral William Fallon, head of U.S. Central Command. After the Fallon visit, the U.S. embassy noted that he had discussed "a broad range of issues, including regional security, democratic reforms, human rights, and reconstruction in Afghanistan"; Karimov's press service provided little more information.⁵²

The Fallon visit coincided with increased speculation across Central Asia that both the U.S. and the EU are pulling back from a policy of isolating Tashkent. Some observers date a new tone to the arrival of U.S. Ambassador Richard Norland in September 2007 and attribute the change to a mix of belief in the need for bases in the region (in the EU case, the one Germany has retained in Uzbekistan), ongoing debates within the EU about the utility of sanctions and a perceived desire, particularly by the U.S., to counter a resurgence of Russian influence.⁵³

⁵² *The New York Times* later reported that Admiral Fallon told its reporter "he had no grand plan for Uzbekistan. He was not seeking restored access to the air base or even rights for military planes to fly through Uzbek airspace. His visit, he said by telephone, marked a renewal of dialogue and the possibility of a thaw", C.J. Chivers, "Seeking a Path in Democracy's Dead End", 3 February 2008. Several persons said they do not believe the K2 base was raised, at least not in a direct manner, during the Fallon visit, Crisis Group interviews, Washington DC, 11 February 2008. There is some belief in Washington that the Pentagon wants to establish a better relationship with Uzbekistan, ideally including access to K2, and broader interest in parts of the executive branch to explore whether re-engagement might be more productive than the critical post-Andijon policy. But there would need to be meaningful movement by Uzbekistan on other issues of interest to the U.S., including human rights, and no part of the executive branch appears to consider this a realistic present prospect. The omnibus funding bill signed into law in late December 2007 retained restrictions on U.S. military or economic aid to Uzbekistan that the Congress has linked to the Andijon massacre and human rights abuses. To restart the assistance, the secretary of state must make a finding with respect to the internal situation in Uzbekistan that would conflict with reality and would have political repercussions within the U.S. The restrictions do not necessarily prevent possible use by the U.S. military of a base in Uzbekistan, but the Congress could be expected to look critically at such an eventuality in present circumstances.

⁵³ See, for example, "U.S.-Uzbekistan relations: another step toward rapprochement?", EurasiaNet, 23 January 2008; and A. Dubnov, "США активизирует борьбу за сохранение влияния в Центральной Азии" ["The US is stepping up its struggle to maintain influence in Central Asia"], 19:00 CA-NEWS.org, 28 January 2008.

A. BASE MOTIVES

The Pentagon appears to strongly desire to regain K2 access, ostensibly as a fallback should a further deterioration of the situation in Pakistan deprive the U.S. of bases there which are used to support its Afghanistan operations. Indeed, there are persistent rumours, officially denied, that the U.S. has already regained some form of access. Defense Department contracts awarded recently to Presidential Airways, Inc., an Aviation Worldwide Services Company and part of the Blackwater Group, a major Pentagon private contractor, suggest that some U.S. personnel may operate from Uzbekistan – if not K2, then the German base in Termez.

A 14 January 2008 Pentagon contract describes the company as providing “heavy lift fixed-wing aircraft, personnel, equipment, tools, material, maintenance, and supervision necessary to perform passenger and cargo (combi) Short Take-Off and Landing air transportation services. Work will be performed between locations in Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan and Uzbekistan and is expected to be completed Jun. 2011”. Blackwater’s own website says with respect to Presidential Airways, “we currently operate CASA 212s in support of military freefall and static-line parachute operations, and cargo/personnel lift requirements for the U.S. Special Operations Command”.⁵⁴

Germany, meanwhile, is anxious to retain the military base at Termez, along the border, as a major support installation for its troops in Afghanistan. German officials profess serious doubts about the viability of sanctions and favour engagement to prevent Uzbekistan slipping further into the Russian or Chinese orbit. They assert that Karimov has made serious concessions over the past year, including an agreement to hold a dialogue on human rights and acceptance of an EU seminar on civil society and media freedom.⁵⁵

B. ONE-WAY ENGAGEMENT

The problem for supporters of engagement is that the Karimov government seems to be waiting for the terms of Western surrender rather than offering reciprocal concessions. In May 2007, the EU removed some top Uzbek officials from its visa ban list. No improvements in human rights followed. In October it tried again, announcing that “with a view to encouraging the Uzbek

authorities to take positive steps to improve the human rights situation, the Council decided that the visa restrictions would not apply for a period of six months, at which point the Council will review if the Uzbek authorities have made progress towards meeting a series of conditions in the field of human rights, including full unimpeded access to prisoners, the operation of NGOs without constraints and the release of human rights defenders”.⁵⁶ No progress has ensued (the Saipov murder was nine days later), and the suspension is not expected to be renewed when the six-months expire in May 2008.

There have been other mixed signals from the West, as well. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and other bodies sharply criticised the conduct of the Uzbek presidential election, noting the lack of any real choice in candidates, restrictions on outside monitors and tight control of the press. Nevertheless, the OSCE secretary general congratulated Karimov on his re-election,⁵⁷ and on 17 January 2008, the U.S. OSCE ambassador, Julie Finley, said in a statement to the OSCE Permanent Council, “it is nonetheless clear that President Karimov will remain in office, and we in the OSCE should now turn our attention to what happens in Uzbekistan following the elections”.⁵⁸ Although the rest of the ambassador’s remarks were in the context of the need for human rights improvements, largely repeating EU concerns, her words reinforced the belief in the region that both Washington and at least some European capitals were seeking to reopen communications with Karimov.

VI. CONCLUSION

Genuine communications presuppose dialogue and ultimately at least mutual accommodation. President Karimov seems disposed to neither. If his regime was indeed behind the killing of Alisher Saipov, who felt that a degree of international exposure and connections with VOA, a U.S. government broadcaster, offered him some protection, there has even been an escalation in its repressive activities: a willingness to risk negative international publicity and condemnation in return for a demonstrative murder that sowed fear and a sense of vulnerability among the regime’s enemies. This would fit the image that is growing within Central Asian elites of Karimov as a tough

⁵⁴ See contracts for 17 January 2008, U.S. Department for Defense, at www.defenselink.mil/contracts/contract.aspx?contractid=3689; and www.blackwaterusa.com/aviation. The CASA 212 is a short take-off and landing aircraft.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, Berlin, 30 January 2008.

⁵⁶ Press release, Council of European Union, 15-16 October 2007, at www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/press_data/en/gena/96535.pdf.

⁵⁷ See www.press-service.uz/ru/content.scm?contentId=36549.

⁵⁸ “Statement on the Elections in Uzbekistan”, U.S. Mission to the OSCE, 17 January 2008, at http://osce.usmission.gov/archive/2008/01/Uzbekistanelections_01_17_08.pdf.

and ruthless leader who is increasingly single minded about staying in power.

The Western attempt at engagement – though officially the U.S. and EU continue to stress human rights as a cornerstone of their policies – is riddled with inconsistencies. Talk of negotiating with Uzbek “moderates”, a term used occasionally by Western diplomats, is unrealistic. Such persons are in prison or dead. The new body language from Washington, Berlin and Brussels comes across embarrassingly like rewarding repression and electoral fraud. The interpretation Karimov is likely to draw from it is “hang tough and they will buckle”.

The argument that a loss for the U.S. or the EU in Uzbekistan automatically equals a Russian gain ignores the country's demonstrated determination to manoeuvre between Russia and the West. A treaty calling for increased military cooperation between Tashkent and Moscow was signed in November 2005, a few months after the U.S. finally left K2,⁵⁹ but despite intense speculation that Russia would then take over the base, this has not happened. The “dialogue” with Moscow described by Erk leaders, as well as the language of Russian visitors who still seem to be trying to persuade Uzbekistan to come onside,⁶⁰ suggest that even now Karimov's relations with Russia are far from comfortable.

Western interest in accommodation with Karimov may be misplaced for another important reason. If the Uzbek regime is indeed prepared to kill a high-profile adversary in a foreign land, as the Saipov case indicates is likely, President Karimov and his security services must be very worried about their political survival. Food prices are rising; anger is reportedly growing in the always simmering Ferghana Valley; the foreign-based opposition is seeking ways to demonstrate its relevance; and insurgent groups may possibly be reforming and rearming. The murder of Alisher Saipov may prove to be a sign of regime desperation. In other words, placing bets on the president of Uzbekistan at this time could at least in the medium term cost the West's regional position dearly.

Bishkek/Osh/Brussels, 14 February 2008

⁵⁹ “Ташкент возвращается в коллективный договор в узбекистане может быть открыта российская военная база” [“Tashkent is returning to the collective agreement. A Russian base may be opened in Uzbekistan”], at http://nvo.ng.ru/printed/wars/2005-11-18/2_tashkent.html.

⁶⁰ See fn. 47 above.

APPENDIX A

MAP OF UZBEKISTAN



This map is adapted by the International Crisis Group from Map No. 3777 Rev. 6 (January 2004) by the Cartographic Section of the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations. The additional locations Osh, Jalalabad and Karashuu have been added. The location of all additional features is approximate.