

# Will Kazakh Authorities Avoid Extremist Pitfalls?

*Marat Yermukanov\**

The Kazakh security service does not miss out on demonstrating its capabilities to the international anti-terrorist alliance. The latest report in a series of asserted crack-downs on terrorist networks came on April 24. The Kazakh Security Services announced that: “in close cooperation with foreign security services” the National Security Committee had thwarted a terrorist plot to blow up law-enforcement offices, government buildings, and public safety facilities in Almaty. The detained, including 10 Kazakh nationals were charged with propagating religious extremism and possession of firearms. Sergei Mishenkov, the head of the Department for Combating of International Terrorism of the National Committee, said, without disclosing a name or country of origin, the detained terrorists were operating in Kazakhstan on instructions from abroad.<sup>1</sup>

The growing Kazakh engagement in the global war on terror is driven partly by international obligations and need to demonstrate resolve, but also by striving to maintain a favorable investment climate. Prospects of hosting the presidency of OSCE in 2009 have also impacted the Kazakh counter-terror efforts. Simultaneously, the Kazakh leadership has to consider growing anti-Americanism and anti-Western sentiments among the predominant Moslem population. These groups view allegations of “Islamic terrorism” as part of an American propaganda campaign invented to justify the war in Iraq and to demonize the Moslem world. Torn apart by these controversies, Astana tries to persuade the outside world that they remain committed to the international anti-terrorist alliance, while still maintaining that terrorism and extremism have no breeding ground in Kazakh society.

## **Imaginary Foes or Real Threat? The “International Dimension”**

The credibility of the report issued on April 24 can be strongly doubted for at least two reasons. Both because the National Security Committee, as skeptics assume, tries to restore its tarnished image in the public eye.

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<sup>1</sup> *Central Asia Monitor*, April 28 2006.

This image has been stained after a series of failures to unravel scandalous murders of opposition leaders over the last two years, with the latest being Altynbek Sarsenbayev in February. But also because the arrests took place just ahead of the arrival in Astana of the U.S. Vice President Richard Cheney. Most likely, the much-trumpeted crackdown on alleged terrorist cells was designed to produce a propaganda effect. President Nursultan Nazarbayev in his public speeches invariably depict Kazakhstan as politically the most stable and economically prospering part of Central Asia. Kazakh authorities find it however increasingly difficult to project this image of Kazakhstan as an oasis of calm and peace, while simultaneously demonstrating resolve against terrorism.

The political establishment in Kazakhstan has always denied the existence of home-grown terrorists and religious extremists, maintaining however that some radical groups operating in the southern regions of the country have infiltrated from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Russia. For example, in April this year, in the town of Taraz (South Kazakhstan), Kazakh security services detained an alleged member of the Islamic radical party Hizb ut-Tahrir, reportedly wanted by Uzbekistan for organizing a criminal group in Qoqon and extradited him to the Uzbek police. Last December Rustam Chagilov, one of the suspected Chechen fighters, was also handed over to Russian security services.<sup>2</sup>

In October, 2004, the Supreme Court of Kazakhstan banned activities of Al-Qaeda, the Islamic Party of East Turkistan, the Kurdish People's Congress and the IMU. The decision was largely motivated on grounds not related to the actual threat to the state power that these organizations posed, but on fostering good relations with Uzbekistan, China and Turkey. The list of extremist organizations banned by the Supreme Court of Kazakhstan was also later extended to include Asbat-al-Ansar, the Moslem Brotherhood, the Taliban, Grey Wolves, Jamaat of Mojaheds of Central Asia, the Society of Social Reforms, Istlah and Followers of Pure Islam. Some of these decisions were highly controversial. The Islamic Party of East Turkistan, for example, is regarded by Kazakh and Uighur nationalists as the symbol of resistance to Chinese reprisals against Moslem minorities. Uighurs in the Almaty region on numerous occasions sought to draw attention from the Kazakh government to the Chinese persecutions of Uighur intellectuals. But Astana seems to put long-term economic partnership with China in front of the protection of ethnic minorities in the neighboring country. The waning interest of Kazakh authorities in the plight of Chinese Uighurs gives Beijing leeway to deal with ethnic nationalists under the pretext of fighting extremism. Despite sharp criticism from nationalists, the Chinese policy towards Uighur separatists does not contradict the

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<sup>2</sup> *Megapolis*, April 28 2006.

strategy of Astana in maintaining peace and political stability in the booming Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region and along the Atasu-Alashankou pipeline route. Beijing skillfully uses the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to strengthen its influence and security in the oil-rich region and as a way to internationalize the problem of Uighur separatism.

In his address to the nation delivered on March 1 this year, President Nursultan Nazarbayev underlined the key role of cooperation within the framework of Eurasian Economic Community, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, as well as with the United States. For the first time in his address to the nation he sent a clear message to the West that Kazakhstan would promote “bilateral ties with the majority of Islamic states and countries of Arab East.” The cooperation with neighboring states is however disappointing up until now despite these initiatives, and the geo-politics and rhetoric involved are hindering responses to the real challenge.

### **Coping With Domestic Challenges and Spill-Over from Neighbors**

In a country with a 70 percent Moslem population, according to Spiritual Board of Moslems of Kazakhstan, the government faces an extremely delicate task of reconciling traditionally moderate Islam and the pro-Moscow Russian Orthodox Church with new religious trends and more than 40 denominations and sects. Last April, the police in Almay region tried to evict Hare Krishna followers from their leased land. At the recent sitting of the Committee for Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Justice the chairman of the Spiritual Board of Kazakhstan Absattar Derbisali announced that he received numerous letters from Moslem believers in the regions who complained that the missionary work conducted by members of the Jehovah’s Witnesses led to breakup of families in some villages. A second dilemma for government officials is the fragmentation of the moderate Islamic community of Kazakhstan into competing factions. Following independence more than two thousand mosques were opened all over the country, particularly in the predominantly Kazakh-populated southern regions. The Committee of Religious issues of the Justice Ministry of Kazakhstan lost control over mushrooming religious sects. Absattar Derbisali, the chairman of the Spiritual Board of Moslems of Kazakhstan, demanded the revision of the law “On liberty of religious faith and religious associations”, arguing that the document, “hastily adopted”, leaves loopholes for subversive activities of foreign missionaries and religious extremism.<sup>3</sup> Moslem clerics went as far as to depict foreign missionaries as potential sources of extremist threat

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<sup>3</sup> *Islam Orkenieti* [‘Islamic Civilization’], December 17 2005.

towards Kazakhstan's stability. But they also seem to target rival Islamic trends from Moslem countries.

Leaders of orthodox Islam in Kazakhstan publicly voiced alarms at the "bad influence" of unconventional trends from Pakistan, Turkey and Arabic countries, and launched media attacks on followers of Ismatullah, Akhmadia, the pro-Turkish Nurshilar ("Enlighteners") sect and Hizb-ut-Tahrir. Although all of these religious groups distort the teachings of Islam, only Hizb ut-Tahrir is usually singled out as the main extremist force. Hizb ut-Tahrir made its first appearance in Kazakhstan in the autumn of 2000 during the celebrations in the ancient city Turkistan, South Kazakhstan. At the time, four members of the militant group were detained with leaflets calling for the overthrow of Uzbek president Islam Karimov, together with extremist literature and videocassettes. The anti-Karimov nature of the seized material aroused the suspicion that the group was affiliated with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). But the security services of Kazakhstan found no evidence to confirm that the members of Hizb ut-Tahrir had any links to the IMU. That was a small consolation for Islam Karimov's regime. Tashkent continued to rebuke Astana for lacking the will to cooperate against terrorists. After shoot-outs and terrorist attacks in the regions of Tashkent and Bukhara Uzbekistan openly accused Astana of providing training camps to terrorists in South Kazakhstan and passage for militants of the IMU. Kazakh authorities denied these allegations outright. Uzbeks also voiced concern that some Kazakh nationals were involved in the Tashkent blasts. A few days later, an Uzbek detective who arrived to Kazakh city of Shymkent to investigate the case, was killed in mysterious circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

Since then, Hizb ut-Tahrir members have been active in the cities of Kentau and Taraz in South Kazakhstan. In March last year, the Taraz city court staged a spectacular trial and sentenced 16 members of the extremist organization Jamaat of Mojahedeens of Central Asia to various prison terms. In November 2004, Kazakh security services reported the detention of 12 members of Al-Qaeda who allegedly perpetrated subversive activities in Russia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. That was the first evidence of the presence of Al-Qaeda members in Kazakhstan who up till then were believed to operate exclusively in Afghanistan.

Shortly after the American invasion of Iraq, Hizb ut-Tahrir extremists expanded activities to the northern parts of Kazakhstan, dropping extremist literature and anti-American leaflets into mailboxes of residents of Pavlodar and Kokshetau with the eloquent titles "An open letter to French President Jacques Chirac", "Evil schemes of America",

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<sup>4</sup> Khabar TV, August 4 2004.

and “Who is responsible for Tashkent blasts?” In February, 2004, the five members of Hizb ut-Tahrir were sentenced from two to five years in jail.<sup>5</sup> This cross-border nature of terrorism and Islamic radicalism in Central Asia requires an orchestrated Central Asian regional response beyond rhetoric alone.

### **Unresolved Dilemmas of Regional Security**

Not long ago, the Kazakh ruling elite cherished the illusion that terrorism and religious extremism cannot be rooted in a country with high rates of economic growth and better standard of living. Recent events refute this theory. Kazakhstan, like any other country of the region is vulnerable to extremist attacks. Reliance on Chinese, American and Russian military and technical assistance and their security umbrella is not a panacea for the extremist and terrorist threat. To effectively ward off religious extremism and terrorism, Kazakhstan must adopt a clear policy of regional cooperation with the Central Asian states. Regrettably, the relations between the states of Central Asia are still strained and overshadowed by the pursuit of self-interests and egoism. The Kazakh border authorities have reported 27 shootings along the Kazakh-Uzbek border over the last twelve years. In this situation, it is hardly surprising that Kazakhstan has not ratified border agreements with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to this day. It would certainly be in the best interests of NATO, OSCE as well as other international institutions to promote greater interaction among Central Asian countries to prevent these threats.

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<sup>5</sup> *Islam Orkenieti*, September 19 2005. One of the leaders, Uzbek-born Anuar Sadykov, who had strong links to terrorist networks in Russia and Uzbekistan, escaped the trial in mysterious circumstances.