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Afghanistan: Connections to Islamic Movements in Central and South Asia and Southern Russia

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Summary

After several years of relative peace in Central Asia and southern Russia, Islamic extremist movements have become more active in Russia and in Central and South Asia, threatening stability in the region. Although numerous factors might account for the upsurge in activity, several of these movements appear to have connections to the Islamic fundamentalist Taliban regime in Afghanistan. These linkages raise questions about whether the United States, as part of a broader effort to promote peace and stability in the region, should continue to engage the Taliban regime, or strongly confront it. This report will be updated as events warrant. See also CRS Report RS20358, *Chechnya Conflict: Recent Developments*; CRS Report RL30294, *Central Asia's Security: Issues and Implications for U.S. Interests*; CRS Report 98-106, *Afghanistan: Current Issues and U.S. Policy Concerns*; and CRS Issue Brief 94041, *Pakistan-U.S. Relations*.

Introduction

A number of recent events have triggered concern in the United States about the degree of threat to U.S. interests posed by Islamic fundamentalist movements in the northern Caucasus region of Russia, and in Central and South Asia. U.S. concern is heightened by credible open source information that some of these movements have connections to the Islamic regime of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan, and to the Taliban's "guest," as the movement refers to the exiled Saudi dissident Usama bin Ladin. In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on November 2, 1999, State Department Coordinator for Counterterrorism Michael Sheehan stated that Afghanistan "has become a new safehaven for...a number of militant organizations from Central Asia, including terrorists from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan." On the other hand, some believe that each Islamic movement in the region operates within its own context, and that any connections to the Taliban are inconsequential for U.S. policy.

The events, discussed below, have prompted debate over the Taliban's role in promoting regional instability. These events began on February 16, 1999, when the

relatively stable government of Uzbekistan was rocked by six simultaneous explosions at several government buildings. One bomb exploded just prior to Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov's arrival at a government meeting. In early August 1999, anti-Russian Islamists in Chechnya broke three years of uneasy peace with Russia by launching an incursion into the province of Dagestan. In late August 1999, Uzbek Islamist rebels seized several villages in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, taking several foreigners hostage in the process. On October 12, 1999, Pakistan's army under General Pervez Musharraf deposed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in a bloodless coup. Although all the factors contributing to the coup are beyond the scope of this paper, many experts believe that Pakistan's Islamic factions -- which have close links to the Taliban -- contributed to the civil-military tensions that led to the coup.¹

The Chechnya/Dagestan Conflict

Islamist forces have been fighting Russian control of the northern Caucasus periodically since the 18th century. An earlier Chechen war against Russia began in 1994, a full two years before the Taliban movement took over control in Kabul (September 1996). In the current round of fighting in Chechnya, any assistance provided to the rebels by bin Ladin or the Taliban leadership could provide the rebels with greater capabilities to fight Russia and, in turn, provoke more intense and indiscriminate tactics on the part of the Russian military. Afghan assistance could also contribute to an expansion of the war to other parts of the Caucasus where Islamic extremists might join with others to take up arms against established governments, including in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and elsewhere in the Russian federation.

Many of the allegations of Afghan assistance to Chechen rebels come from Russian officials. U.S. government statements and documents appear to support at least some of the Russian assertions, although U.S. officials have not publicly assessed the degree to which this Afghan-based assistance is facilitating the Chechen war effort. The State Department's review of international terrorism for 1998 states that insurgents led by a Chechen guerrilla commander of Jordanian origin, who goes by the name *Khattab*, is receiving equipment and training assistance from Islamic guerrillas from throughout the Middle East and South Asia.² *Khattab* has links to Usama bin Ladin, according to the report, which also asserts that bin Ladin's Al-Qaida (military base) organization has sent "trainers" to Chechnya,³ presumably to terrorist training camps reportedly operated by *Khattab*. The Taliban regime itself has given credence to Russian and U.S. assertions by issuing a statement in November 1999 that "it is the obligation of the world's Moslems to support Chechnya..." and by offering the Taliban's internal opponents a truce to jointly aid the Chechen rebels.

¹ Rashid, Ahmed. The Taliban: Exporting Extremism. *Foreign Affairs*, November -December 1999.

² U.S. Department of State. *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1998*. Publication Number 10610, April 1999. P.14. *Khattab* is also referred to in press reports and U.S. government documents as *Hattab*, *Ibn al-Khattab*, or by his given name of *Habib Abdul Rahman*.

³ *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1998*, p.28

By openly inviting support from Afghan-based elements, Khattab's own statements appear to corroborate U.S. assertions. He has publicly acknowledged participating in the Afghan war against the Soviet Union (1979-1989) and in the failed 1992-1997 rebellion by Islamists and other oppositionists against Communist leadership in Tajikistan. In an early October 1999 interview with Reuters, Khattab denied links with bin Ladin but in an interview with a Qatari television station later in October he called the Chechen conflict "an issue for all Moslems, including bin Ladin, who has made great efforts in previous Moslem issues."⁴ Khattab has publicly admitted knowing bin Ladin during Khattab's volunteer service in the Afghan war, where bin Ladin helped recruit Arab volunteers for the anti-Soviet war.⁵ In other interviews, Khattab has equated the war against Russian forces to the Afghan war, calling the new conflict an Islamic "jihad" (holy war) against non-Muslim oppressors. He has called for Arab and other Islamic fighters to join the Chechen fight against Russia, as happened in the Afghan case, to help the Chechens form an Islamic state that would reach the oil-rich Caspian Sea.

In the Chechen conflict, Khattab is cooperating with another commander, Shamil Basayev, who places less emphasis than does Khattab on transforming the Chechen conflict into an Islamic anti-Russian "jihad." Press reports differ about whether or not Basayev fought in the Afghan war, but Basayev acknowledges having led an Islamic contingent in Abkhazia, where oppositionists battled the government of Georgia during 1992-93. Basayev was a key commander in the 1994-96 Chechen conflict with Russia.

Uzbekistan/Kyrgyzstan

As noted above, the February 1999 bombings in Tashkent shattered the relative calm that had prevailed since Uzbekistan's independence in 1991. Many experts believed that it was only a matter of time before underground radical Islamic movements would surface there, with or without outside help. The government immediately termed the bombings an "assassination plot" by Islamic rebels, and has since arrested numerous alleged conspirators and sentenced at least six to death in the bombings. Uzbekistan says that some of the ringleaders of the plot fled to neighboring countries, including Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

Among the alleged plotters, according to Uzbek officials, were Islamist guerrilla leaders Tahir Yuldashev and Juma Namagani, who are co-leaders of a group called the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Independent confirmation of these allegations is lacking, but press reports indicate that Yuldashev has been in Afghanistan since the bombings.⁶ These reports, if true, would appear to confirm that the Taliban regime is willing to host Uzbek Islamic dissidents, although this would not necessarily mean that the Taliban or bin Ladin supported the Tashkent bomb plot. Another interpretation is that the Taliban is acting defensively – responding to Uzbekistan's support for anti-Taliban Uzbek militias in northern Afghanistan.

⁴ Chechen Guerrilla Leader Calls for Moslem Support. Reuters, October 23, 1999.

⁵ Gall, Carlotta. Muslim Fighter Embraces Warrior Mystique. *New York Times*, October 17, 1999.

⁶ Kyrgyz Lawmaker To Extend Stay in Kabul to Push Talks. Reuters, September 29, 1999.

Yuldashev's cohort, Namangani, also appears to enjoy a close relationship with Kabul. Namangani's paramilitary group was allied with the United Tajik Opposition during that group's 1992-97 insurgency against the government of Tajikistan, and Namangani reportedly helped the Taliban during its climb to power in Afghanistan.⁷ In August 1999, Namangani led about 800 Islamist guerrillas – mostly Uzbeks but reportedly also including some Arab and Afghans – in a cross-border raid from bases in Tajikistan to Kyrgyzstan. The insurgents seized several villages near the Uzbek border and took seven hostages, including four Japanese geologists. Most press reporting suggests the insurgents were trying to establish a base in Kyrgyzstan from which to launch attacks into neighboring Uzbekistan. According to at least one press report, bin Ladin helped fund the insurgents.⁸ In resolving the conflict, Kyrgyz lawmakers visited Kabul to negotiate with Yuldashev for the release of the hostages, and Kyrgyz and Uzbek troops jointly drove the guerrillas back into Tajikistan. In early November, Tajikistan allowed the anti-Uzbek Islamist forces, including Namangani, to move peacefully into Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.⁹ The move into Afghanistan, which occurred despite Uzbekistan's demands for the guerrillas' extradition, would certainly have required approval from the Taliban leadership.

Pakistan

Some experts believe that the Taliban's radical Islamic ideology is increasingly influencing Pakistani politics and policy. The government of Pakistan, by all accounts, was the chief backer of the Taliban's rise to power in neighboring Afghanistan, and it was the first to recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan when the movement took Kabul in September 1996. A Pakistani Islamist group called the Harakat ul-Mujahedin (HUM), was placed on the State Department's list of foreign terrorist organizations in October 1997. According to the Department's terrorism report for 1998, the HUM operates terrorist training camps in eastern Afghanistan, and its leader, Fazlur Rehman Khalil, has been linked to bin Ladin. Khalil signed bin Ladin's February 1998 pronouncement calling for attacks on U.S. and Western interests. The State Department report adds that some HUM fighters were killed in the August 20, 1998 U.S. missile strikes on terrorist training camps in Afghanistan; the strikes were in retaliation for the alleged involvement of bin Ladin's organization in the August 7, 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

Several other Islamist groups in Pakistan appear to be closely allied with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. According to the State Department's terrorism report, the leader of the Islamist group called Lashkar-e-Taiba has declared a "jihad" against the United States, and the leader of a similar group, the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, vowed to kill U.S. citizens and offered his support to bin Ladin. The policy significance of these groups is that, in conjunction with the HUM, they have conducted operations to challenge Indian control of the disputed territory of Kashmir (divided between India and Pakistan), most recently during the summer of 1999. In doing so, the Islamist groups apparently enlisted the

⁷ Davis, Anthony. Tensions in Central Asia. *Jane's Defence Weekly*, September 1, 1999. P. 20.

⁸ Kinzer, Stephen. Islamic Militants With Japanese Hostages Hold Kyrgyz at Bay. *New York Times*, October 18, 1999.

⁹ Tajiks Deport Radical Islamist Gunmen. Reuters, November 9, 1999.

support of the Pakistani military, which wants to challenge India primarily on nationalist grounds.

The Islamist groups blamed Sharif for abandoning the struggle for Kashmir when, following a request from President Clinton on July 4, 1999, he ordered Pakistani military elements to cease their efforts in the Indian portion of Kashmir. The military, for its part, considered the withdrawal a national humiliation. The Pakistani Islamist groups hailed the October 1999 military coup against Sharif, as did many other Pakistani factions. The coup came five days after Sharif called on the Taliban to close training camps in Afghanistan which were hosting Pakistani Islamic militants. This move, which came amid clear tensions between Sharif and the military, suggests that he saw the Islamists as allied with the military against him.

Pakistan's new leader, General Pervez Musharraf, is not considered an Islamist and is believed not to want further confrontation with India over Kashmir. The U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan said on October 18, 1999 that there were positive signs that Musharraf might work with the United States to pressure the Taliban to yield bin Ladin to justice and to stop hosting Pakistani and Central Asian radical Islamic groups.¹⁰ Musharraf's government was strongly critical of November 12, 1999 rocket attacks on the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad, which some alleged were conducted by pro-Taliban and pro-bin Ladin elements on the eve of the imposition of U.N. sanctions on the Taliban regime. On November 25, 1999, Pakistani police arrested eight Lashkar-e-Jhangvi members who had allegedly received training in Afghanistan. Some are concerned, however, that in order to maintain the support of more pro-Islamic military officers under his command, Musharraf might continue Pakistan's generally pro-Taliban policies.

Implications for U.S. Policy

Depending on the scale and effectiveness of Taliban assistance to these various movements, U.S. policy toward the Taliban regime could continue to harden. The United States established a political dialogue with the Taliban in 1994, shortly after it organized as an Afghan political force and well before it took Kabul. Although the Administration initially viewed the Taliban as a force that could end two decades of civil war in Afghanistan, it has become progressively more critical of the movement, especially over its refusal to yield bin Ladin to justice for the August 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Because of this refusal, the Administration, by Executive order (13129 of July 4, 1999), imposed sanctions on the Taliban, and led the U.N. effort to sanction the Taliban (Resolution 1267 of October 15, 1999).¹¹ The Administration has kept up some contact with the Taliban, apparently believing that engagement, coupled with sanctions, could persuade the Taliban to turn over bin Ladin. Turkmenistan, where Islamist movements have not been strong, also has chosen engagement with the Taliban to facilitate regional trade and economic development.

¹⁰ U.S. Envoy Sees Good Sign in Pakistan Over Afghan Policy. Reuters, October 18, 1999.

¹¹ U.S. sanctions included a ban on U.S. trade with Taliban-controlled Afghanistan and froze U.S.-based Taliban assets. The U.N. sanctions include a ban on international operations of the national airline, Ariana, and a freeze on Taliban assets abroad. These sanctions distinguish the Taliban from Afghanistan because the Taliban do not hold Afghanistan's U.N. seat, and the United States does not recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.

Some maintain that, as long as the Taliban rules in Kabul, regional radical Islamic movements will find safe haven and the Islamist threat will not automatically recede. Some who subscribe to this view maintain that United States should move toward a policy of overthrowing the Taliban by assisting the anti-Taliban factions in Afghanistan. That policy, they argue, although potentially difficult to implement, offers the hope that a successor government in Kabul would end support for regional Islamist movements. A new regime, if it achieves power with U.S. help, would presumably also help the United States bring bin Ladin to justice.

Others criticize this approach, maintaining that additional arms flows into Afghanistan will prolong civil war there and cause additional human suffering. They also worry that a U.S. role in the Afghan conflict might tend to rally domestic and regional support for the Taliban. Some believe that the United States could work with the new government in Pakistan to pressure the Taliban to end its support for regional Islamic movements. Others believe that Pakistan, always looking for potential allies against neighboring India, would be unwilling to curb the Taliban's foreign policy behavior.

