

The Drug Trade and Armed Conflict: Narcotics as a Threat to Security in Central Asia

Svante E. Cornell

Abstract:

While the academic debate on security has broadened in recent years, it has failed to cohesively include transnational organized crime and drug trafficking as a security issue. However, especially in weak states in developing and post-communist regions, these phenomena are having an increasingly negative effect on security in the military, political, economic and societal sense. Security issues in Central Asia are a prominent example of the links between drug trafficking and military threats to security. This is illustrated most clearly by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which has both been a major actor in the drug trade from Afghanistan to Central Asia, as well as the most serious violent non-state actor in the region. This link is of fundamental importance to understanding Central Asian security.

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Since the end of the Cold War, the concept of security has undergone a gradual shift. From a state-centric approach that defined security mainly in terms of military threats, the concept has been broadened and widened.¹ The academic debate presently affords greater importance to regional, intra-state and transnational issues. These include economic, societal, as well as environmental security issues. This shift has occurred as the collapse of the bipolar world order, coupled with globalization processes in transportation and communication, have increased links across geographic areas. While this has brought a host of beneficial effects, it has also had a dark side: non-traditional and transnational threats to security have risen to prominence globally, with the largest consequences in the developing and post-communist world. As the bipolar confrontation at the global or systemic level no longer dominated world politics, security issues at the regional and state levels began to gain attention. Conflicts that have emerged in the post-cold war era have been dominated by intra-state conflicts over sovereignty itself, rather than inter-state conflicts between sovereign actors.² Much as the rising perception of a globally threatened environment, this diluted the role of the state as the obvious actor and object of security studies.

Attempts to redefine and broaden security have expanded the notion of security threats to several sectors outside the military, including the political, economic,

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¹ For a review of the debate, see Keith Krause, "Broadening the Agenda of Security Studies: Politics and Methods", *Mershon International Studies Review*, Vol. 40 no. 2, October 1996.

² See eg. Peter Wallensteen and Margareta Sollenberg, "The End of International war? Armed Conflict 1989-1995", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 33 no. 3, 1995, pp. 353-370; Kumar Rupesinhe, ed., *Internal Conflict and Governance*, New York: St. Martin's, 1992.

environmental, and societal sectors. Likewise, levels of analysis have been disaggregated, the study of security being structured into the systemic or global level; the subsystem level such as regional security; unit-level, typically state security; as well as subunits or individuals.³ In the past several years, the academic debate has done well in encompassing economic, societal and environmental security, as well as identity-based sub-state challenges.⁴ However, the growing salience of transnational organized crime seems to have been largely bypassed in what Krause calls the “Gordian knot into which contemporary security studies has tied itself”.⁵

Specifically, the interplay between weak states and the rise of transnational organized crime has come to be a growing problem since the mid-1990s.⁶ The trade in illegal narcotics, in particular, arguably carries the largest societal, political, and economic consequences among transnational security threats. In areas as far apart as Southeast Asia and South America, the drug trade has come to affect the security of states, societies, and citizens at several levels of analysis and across sectors of analysis – at the individual, state, regional and international levels of security, and in the societal, environmental, economic, political, and military sectors.⁷

Though increasingly seen as an important problem and securitized by numerous states, most obviously the United States but also countries such as Iran and Turkey, organized crime and the drug trade are still facing difficulties being accepted as security problems. Cable, for instance, begins his tentative discussion on drugs and the criminalization of the global economy in a wider analysis of

³ Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998, pp. 6-7.

⁴ Buzan, *People, States and Fear*, 1983 and revised edition, 1991; Vincent Cable, “What is Economic Security”, *International Affairs*, vol. 71 no. 2, April 1995; Paul Roe, “The Intrastate Security Dilemma: Ethnic Conflict as ‘Tragedy?’”, *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 36 no. 2, 1999, pp. 183-202; Thomas Homer-Dixon, *Environment, Scarcity, and Conflict*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.

⁵ Krause, “Broadening the Agenda of Security Studies...”, p. 247.

⁶ Tamara Makarenko, “Terrorism and Transnational Organised Crime: the Emerging Nexus”, *Transnational Violence and Seams of Lawlessness in the Asia-Pacific: Linkages to Global Terrorism*, Hawaii: Asia Pacific Center for Strategic Studies, forthcoming; Kimberley Thachuk, “Transnational Threats: Falling Through the Cracks?”, *Low Intensity Conflict & Law Enforcement*, vol. 10 no 1, 2001.

⁷ Following the levels of security laid out in Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear*, New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991; and the sectors of security laid out in more detail in Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. See also Niklas Swanström, “Drug Threat as a Threat to Security: the Cases of Central Asia and the Caucasus”, 11th International Conference on Central Asia and the Caucasus, Institute for Political and International Studies, Tehran, Iran, December 8-9, 2003. (www.silkroadstudies.org)

economic security by noting that there are “question marks to be raised against treating the drugs trade, and international crime in general as a ‘security’ problem”. Even then, he concludes that “treating narcotics as a security issue deflects attention from hard political choices which may involve a move to decriminalization”.⁸ By contrast, as will be detailed below, this article argues that it is appropriate to treat transnational organized crime, and the drug trade in particular, as security issues. While this may be less obviously the case in industrialized societies with strong states, it is becoming increasingly clear in developing and post-communist societies; while the changing dynamics of transnational crime, and the connections between it and terrorism would tend to raise the question also for strong industrialized societies and states.

Drug trafficking affects the security of societies and states in a number of ways. Firstly, through increasing levels of addiction, increase in petty crime, and drug-related epidemics including HIV/AIDS, the drug trade affects human and societal security adversely. Indeed, as Phil Williams has noted, “drug trafficking poses one of the most serious challenges to the fabric of society in the US, Western Europe and even many drug producing countries”.⁹ In fact, the challenge has in recent years been the largest in ‘emerging’ consumer markets near producing countries originally serving as transit routes, such as Russia and Iran. Secondly, through its financial strength, the drug trade exacerbates corruption in already weak states and infiltrates government, thereby affecting the economic and political functioning of these states. As corruption incapacitates the state, making it unable to protect and ensure the rights of its citizens, disaffection rises, ultimately leading to a loss of legitimacy: in Buzan’s terms, a questioning of the idea of the state by the population, leading to a higher risk of instability. In this sense, it has a negative effect on both economic and political security.¹⁰ Thirdly, through its linkages to violent non-state actors including ideological and secessionist movements and terrorism, the drug trade is also an increasing threat to both national, regional and international security in a military sense.

⁸ Cable, “What is Economic Security...”, pp. 321 and 323.

⁹ Phil Williams, “Transnational Criminal Organizations and International Security”, *In Athena’s Camp: Preparing for Conflict in the information Age*, eds. John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 1997, p. 329.

¹⁰ Buzan et. al., *Security*, p. 153.

In fact, the drug trade affects both so-called “hard” or military security issues, as well as “soft” security, including economic and societal security.¹¹ In so doing, it practically penetrates the academic security debate: whether security is understood in a traditionalist, state-centered sense focusing on military threats, or in a wider, broader sense encompassing non-state actors and non-military threats, organized crime in general and drug trafficking in particular is an increasingly obvious element of concern in international security – although the political science and international relations debate on security has accorded this phenomenon scant attention, with several notable exceptions.¹² This article focuses on the role of drug trafficking in military threats to security; specifically, the connection between drug trafficking and violent non-state actors and implications for security in the specific context of post-Soviet Central Asia. The article will focus on the role of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the main violent non-state actor in the region in recent years, as a bridge between organized crime and military security.

The article will begin by presenting Central Asia’s drug problem in general, since the ramifications of the drug problem far exceed the solely military sector of security. It will then shortly discuss the linkages between organized crime and national security conceptually, including most notably the existence of a continuum between criminal networks and armed ideological organizations. Subsequently, the article will detail the convergence between Islamic radicalism and organized crime in Central Asia, as well as the implications of this phenomenon for national and regional security in the Central Asian region.

Central Asia’s Drug Problem

One of the regions of the world where the security impact of drug trafficking has been rising most dramatically is in post-Soviet Central Asia. From having been a fairly unknown problem in the early 1990s, drug addiction and smuggling have

¹¹ For the debate on “hard” and “soft security”, see eg. Buzan et. al., *Security*, 1998.

¹² Exceptions to this are Makarenko, “Terrorism and Transnational Organised Crime: the Emerging Nexus”; Thachuk, “Transnational Threats: Falling Through the Cracks?”; Sabrina Adamoli et. al., *Organized Crime Around the World*, Helsinki: HEUNI, 1998; Barbara Harris-White, *Globalization and Insecurity: Political, Economic and Physical Challenges*, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave, 2002; Ian Griffith, “From Cold War geopolitics to post-Cold War Geonarcotics” *International Journal*, vol. 30 no. 2, 1993-1994); R. Matthew & G. Shambaugh, “Sex, Drugs, and Heavy Metal: Transnational Threats and National Vulnerabilities”, *Security Dialogue*, vol. 29, 1998, pp. 163-175).

become rampant in the region.¹³ By the early 2000s, security at all levels in Central Asia has clearly been affected by the rapid increase in drug trafficking. While actual addiction rates are little known due to inadequate measuring mechanisms, the number of drug users in Central Asia and Russia have sky-rocketed. Russia, in fact, has become a major destination market for Afghanistan's heroin smuggled through Central Asia more than a transit country. The country in 2003 had half a million registered drug addicts, mainly heroin users, and an estimated total of 3-4 million drug users – over two per cent of its population.¹⁴ One of the world's fastest-growing HIV epidemics has followed.¹⁵ Central Asia has so far not seen a similar addiction epidemic, though heroin addiction levels are rising rapidly there as well.¹⁶ The societal consequences of high addiction levels in these poor states are gradually emerging, including rapid increases in HIV cases as well as drug-related crime.¹⁷ Concomitantly, the economic and political impact of the drug trade in these states has also been significant, especially in the weakest states of the region, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. In the absence of a strong licit economy – and in the case of Tajikistan, a war-ravaged one – the large turnover and profit margins of drug trafficking have a serious impact on state and society. For example, the value of the drugs estimated to be trafficked through Tajikistan is

¹³ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2003*, New York: United Nations, October 2003; Martha Brill Olcott and Natalia Udalova, *Drug Trafficking on the Great Silk Road*, Working paper 11, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2000; Alexander Seger, *Drugs and Development in the Central Asian Republics*, Bonn: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, 1996; Nancy Lubin, Alex Kaits, and Igor Barsegian, *Narcotics Interdiction in Central Asia and Afghanistan: Challenges for International Donors*, New York: Open Society Institute, 2002; Pierre-Arnaud Chouvy, "Opiate Smuggling Routes from Afghanistan to Europe and Asia", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, March 2003.

¹⁴ John M. Kramer, "Drug Abuse in Russia: Emerging Pandemic or Overhyped Diversion?", *Problems of Post-Communism*, November/December 2003; B. Boev, "Narcotics Abuse in Russia: Analysis and Forecasting of the Demographic Consequences", *Russian Education and Society*, vol. 45 no. 3, March 2003, pp. 43-58.

¹⁵ Tim Rhodes et. al., "HIV Infection Associated with Drug Injecting in the NIS, Eastern Europe: The Social and Economic Context of Epidemics", *Addiction*, vol. 94 no. 9, pp. 1323-1336; Tamara Men et. al., "Russian Mortality Trends for 1991-2001: Analysis by Cause and Region", *British Medical Journal*, vol. 327, October 2003, pp. 964-966.

¹⁶ In 2002-2003, Kazakhstan had an estimated 180,000-250,000 drug users (1,39% of the population), Kyrgyzstan 60,000-75,000 (1,32%); Tajikistan 65,000-90,000 (1,25%); Uzbekistan 45,000-55,000 (0,2%); while Turkmenistan's figures are estimated only at 13,000 (0,27%), though they are highly unreliable. See The Uppsala Silk Road Studies Program, Drug Trade in Eurasia Database, at <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/database.htm>. Most estimates are from the UNODC, as well as Government sources.

¹⁷ In 2000, drug-related crime in Tajikistan grew by 40%, and in 2001 by over 70%. See Konstantin Parshin, "Anti-Drug Trafficking Effort Could Help Fight Terrorism", *Eurasia Insight*, 20 September 2001. On HIV, see Joana Godinha and Laura Shrestha, "HIV/AIDS in Central Asia", World Bank Briefing Note, 12 March 2002.

estimated at least at 30% of the country's GDP.¹⁸ This has created a severe corruption problem across the region at all levels. Low-paid government officials in law enforcement are bribed to look the other way as smugglers take a shipment through. More importantly, high-level government officials have also been known to be involved in the trafficking of drugs, implying not simply passive corruption in the form of bribe-taking, but actual direct involvement of officials, in other words state complicity, in the drug trade. In countries such as Tajikistan and possibly Turkmenistan, voluminous accusations of high-level participation in the drug trade by high government officials raises the question whether these states are infiltrated by criminal interests to an extent that merits the use of the term "narco-state". For example, in May 2000, Tajikistan's ambassador to Kazakhstan was seized with 63 kilograms of heroin in his car.¹⁹ Accusations abound of high-level government officials being implicated in the smuggling of narcotics in both Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.²⁰

The crippling effect of drug addiction, crime and corruption on the functioning of the already weak states in Central Asia is increasing rapidly, and endangering societal and economic security as well as political stability. Yet the effect of drug trafficking is not limited to this. In fact, on a political and military level, both national and regional security in the region has been severely affected by the collusion between avowedly ideological violent non-state actors and drug trafficking.

Far from being separate phenomena, the Islamic radical movements and the narco-trafficking issues are closely related. Evidence from other parts of the world have shown that extremist organizations and organized crime very often live in symbiosis with each other, a symbiosis that occasionally turns into a merger – examples include Marxist guerrillas in Colombia, Kurdish Marxist separatist

¹⁸ Tajikistan's GDP is estimated at US\$1,2 billion. Meanwhile, the production of opiates in neighboring Northeastern Afghanistan, which is mainly smuggled through Tajikistan, stood at 540 metric tons of opium, roughly equivalent to 60 tons of heroin. High-quality heroin was priced \$7,000 in Dushanbe, Tajikistan's capital, hence a value of \$378 million. Of course, all of this income is not generated in Tajikistan, but shows to the value of the drug trafficking business as compared to the economic production in the country.

¹⁹ Interfax Kazakhstan, "Heroin Found in Tajik Ambassador's Car in Kazakhstan", 22 May 2000.

²⁰ "Tajik Leadership Implicated in Drug Smuggling", *RFE/RL Newline*, 20 May 1999; International Crisis Group, *Cracks in the Marble: Turkmenistan's Failing Dictatorship*, Brussels/Osh, January 2003, pp. 27-28; Rustem Safronov, "Turkmenistan's Niyazov Implicated in Drug Smuggling", *Eurasianet*, 29 March 2002; Alec Appelbaum, "Turkmen Dissident Accuses Niyazov of Crimes", *Eurasianet*, 26 April 2002; "Russia Turns its Back on Turkmenbashi", *Gazeta.ru*, 27 May 2003.

groups in Turkey, and ethnic secessionists in Myanmar (Burma). In the case of Central Asia, there is compelling evidence that the main armed anti-state movement in the region – the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which has conducted two separate armed insurgencies affecting three of the regional states – has been a major actor in the drugs trade through Central Asia.

The Nexus of Crime and Conflict

The ideal type of ethnic secessionist, ideological and/or terrorist groups that challenge state authority with violent means is that of a group striving for a higher cause, and therefore disinterested in or even principally opposed to the drug trade and other criminal activities. Transnational criminal networks, on the other hand, have traditionally not been treated as an international security issue. As Phil Williams notes, this is the case mainly because they are seen as “economic rather than political organizations; they do not pose the same kind of overt or obvious challenge to states that terrorist groups do; crime is a domestic problem; and law enforcement and national security are based on very different philosophies, organization structures and legal frameworks”.²¹ This traditional division of these groups into mutually exclusive ideal types – the ideological and the criminal – is nevertheless an increasingly misleading description of the state of affairs of most armed anti-state groups, as well as many criminal enterprises. As Kimberley Thachuk notes, traditionally “organized crime groups rarely co-operated with terrorist groups, or engaged in their activities, as their goals were most often at odds... yet, many of today’s terrorist groups have not only lost some of their more comprehensible ideals, but are increasingly turning to smuggling and other criminal activities to fund their operations.”²² In fact, as Tamara Makarenko has noted, a security continuum can be conceptualized, which places pure traditional organized crime on one end of the spectrum, and armed ideological groups at the other end. Between these two extremes, a “gray area” with all possible variations and combinations of the two exists, including a situation “where organized crime and terrorism are indistinguishable from one another.”²³

The impetus for this nexus between armed ideological groups and crime stems from the rapidly changing security environment in the post-cold war era,

²¹ Phil Williams, “Transnational Criminal Organizations and International Security”, *Survival*, vol. 36 no. 1, 1994, p. 96.

²² Thachuk, “Transnational Threats: Falling Through the Cracks?”, p. 51.

²³ Tamara Makarenko, “Crime, Terror, and the Central Asian Drug Trade”, *Harvard Asia Quarterly*, Spring 2002.

processes of globalization making transportation and communications easier, and the concomitant evolution of transnational organized crime. From having been more geographically circumscribed and specialized, transnational criminal networks now operate across continents, in alliances with similar groups elsewhere, and engage in any form of criminal activity that combines high profit and acceptable risk.²⁴

Violent non-state actors typically venture into organized crime in order to finance their struggle, whether the struggle is intended to carve out an ethnic homeland for a minority group, to overthrow an incumbent regime militarily and take control of an existing state, or to seek to affect a state's domestic or foreign policy through the use of terrorism. These groups encounter organized crime either due to their common underground status or in attempts to buy arms. States typically seek to counter armed challenges partly with force and repression, but also by cutting the finances of the challenger. Already pushed underground, such anti-state armed groups need money to acquire arms. In turn, their need for finances makes involvement in lucrative criminal activities an attractive option. Often, such ideological groups – or parts of them – come to shift their focus increasingly to the criminal sphere, particularly in the case of protracted conflicts. That is, the organization or movement either gradually shifts its nature to a predominantly criminal one, or acquires a criminal nature at the side of its ideological nature. Profit through crime, and often specifically the drug trade, becomes a motivation in its own right for the existence and cohesion of the movement.

Examples of this development exist in as varied parts of the world as Colombia, Turkey, and Myanmar. In Colombia, Marxist rebels of the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), ELN (Ejército Nacional de Liberación) as well as right-wing paramilitary groups of the AUC (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia) gradually engaged in crime in the course of their 40-year conflict with the Colombian state.²⁵ Beginning with abductions and moving into the smuggling and processing of cocaine grown originally in Peru and Bolivia, these groups gained tremendous economic and political strength. This strength increased as the

²⁴ Phil Williams, "Transnational Criminal Networks", in John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, eds., *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime and Militancy*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, pp. 61-97; Melvin Levitzky, "Transnational Criminal Networks and International Security", *Syracuse Journal of International Law and Commerce*, vol. 30, 2003, pp. 227-240.

²⁵ See Angel Rabasa and Peter Chalk, *Colombian Labyrinth: The Synergy of Drugs and Insurgency and Its Implications for Regional Security*, Santa Monica: Rand, 2001.

cultivation of coca moved into Colombian territory outside state control - at present, ca. 40% of the country's territory.²⁶ Experts now assess the cocaine business as one of the primary aims of these groups.²⁷ In the case of Turkey, the militant Marxist and Kurdish nationalist PKK (Partya Kerkeren Kudistan) from 1984 staged an insurgency that denied the Turkish government full control of a number of provinces in the southeastern part of the country.²⁸ The Gulf War and the power vacuum in northern Iraq and external support, especially from the Soviet Union, Syria, and Greece played a large part in the PKK's rise.²⁹ Nevertheless, it managed to assert a dominating role in the trade of heroin along the Balkan route from Afghanistan through Iran and Turkey to western Europe. Laboratories turning morphine base into heroin were located in the unruly southeast of Turkey; Istanbul became a key transshipment point of drugs toward Europe; and Kurdish networks in western European countries played a crucial role in the marketing and distribution of the drugs. Together with extortion of money from Kurdish communities in Europe, heroin trafficking became the PKK's major source of income.³⁰ In Myanmar, the United Wa State Army, an ethnic secessionist armed group, has similarly come to control much of the production, trafficking, and marketing to China of opiates grown in the areas under their control.³¹

A group's involvement in crime, of course, changes the equation of its relationship to the state and to society. Crime enriches the group, making it

²⁶ Richard Millett, *Colombia's Conflicts: The Spillover Effects of a Wider War*, Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, October 2002; Rennselaer W. Lee, "Perverse Effects of Andean Counternarcotics Policy", *Orbis*, Summer 2002, pp. 537-554.

²⁷ See eg. Rabasa and Chalk, *Colombian Labyrinth*.

²⁸ Svante E. Cornell, "The Kurdish Question and Turkish Politics", *Orbis*, vol. 45 no. 1, 2001; Michael Radu, "The Rise and Fall of the PKK", *Orbis*, vol. 45 no. 1, 2001; Kemal Kirisci and Gareth Winrow, *The Kurdish Question and Turkey*, London: Frank Cass, 1997; Nur Bilge Criss, "The Nature of PKK Terrorism in Turkey," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 18. no. 1 1995, pp. 17-38; Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds in Turkey: A Political Dilemma*, Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1990; Henri J. Barkey and Graham E. Fuller, *Turkey's Kurdish Question* Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998.

²⁹ Suha Bolukbasi, "Ankara, Damascus, Baghdad, and the Regionalization of Turkey's Kurdish Secessionism", *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Summer 1991, pp. 15-36.

³⁰ Drug Enforcement Agency Intelligence Unit, "Drugs and Terrorism: A New Perspective", *Drug Intelligence Brief*, September 2002; U.S. Department of State, *International Narcotics Control Strategy*, 1992, 1996, and 1998; Richard Cole, "Terrorism Feeding off Habit of World's Heroin Users", *Salt Lake City Tribune*, 16 December 1996.

³¹ Joshua Kurlantzick, "China's Drug Problem and Looming HIV Epidemic", *World Policy Journal*, vol. 19 no. 2, Summer 2002; Don Pathan, "New Drug Army Rules Atop 'Golden Triangle'", *Seattle Times*, 3 March 1999; Pierre-Arnaud Chouvy, "Géopolitique de la Production et du Trafic de Drogues Illicites en Asie", *Hérodote*, no. 109, 2003, pp. 163-189.

possible to acquire more sophisticated arms, to employ more fighters by paying them, to corrupt state officials, and to propagate its ideology to the population. Hence, crime and its proceeds makes the group a more dangerous adversary to the government, and often results in a further weakening of the state – including through the anti-state group wresting control over parts of the state’s territory from the government. This territory is then used for criminal activities, including the production, processing, and smuggling of narcotics. In this sense, crime and drugs are instrumental in enabling a group to threaten the security of the state at its very foundation – the monopoly on the use of force and control over territory – but also to threaten the security of individuals, since a group with a criminal interest is unlikely to care much about the population in the areas it controls or where it conducts armed operations.

As will be shown below, the development of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in the late 1990s indicates striking similarities with the development of erstwhile ideological groups acquiring a criminal nature, such as the PKK, the FARC, or the Wa State Army. Although the IMU was decimated by the American-led military operations in Afghanistan in the Fall of 2001, an understanding of its nature holds important implications for understanding the security of Central Asia, both in the near past and in the future. Below, the concomitant rise of drug trafficking and radical Islamism in Central Asia are detailed.

The Rise of Radical Islam in Central Asia and the IMU

Since the independence of the Central Asian states, authorities, local analysts and foreign observers alike have perceived a threat of a radical Islamic wave engulfing the region.³² Since before the collapse of the Soviet Union, a religious revival has undoubtedly taken place, which is potentially benign and stabilizing, filling a void created by the collapse of the Communist value system. Governments initially embraced the religious revival, while trying to keep religious activity under state supervision. However, Tajikistan’s descent into a murderous civil war in Spring 1992, pitting the former communist élite against an opposition force that contained strong Islamic elements, changed threat perceptions in the region. This conflict led to desperate efforts in the four other regional states to check the development of political opposition, which was considered disloyal and subversive

³² This paradigm was reflected clearly in the titles of some of the early books on the region: Ahmed Rashid, *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism*, London: Zed, 1994; Dilip Hiro, *Between Marx and Muhammad*, London: Haper Collins, 1995.

by nature. In particular, Islamic currents in the opposition were targeted and outlawed.

Central Asian élites have been battling with fervor the increasingly potent orthodox and politically radical forces in the region, exemplified by the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in the late 1990s. These radical brands of Islam, often terming themselves *Salafi*,³³ have their spiritual influences not chiefly from the traditional moderate Hanafi Islam practiced in Central Asia, but from the Saudi Arabian ‘Wahhabi’ tradition of Hanbali Sunni Islam and the related extremist Deobandi school of Hanafi Sunni Islam.³⁴ Hundreds of young men from Central Asia have been, and are currently enrolled in Deobandi religious seminaries (*Madrassahs*) in Pakistan’s Northwest Frontier Province and similar-minded institutions elsewhere. Sponsored by Saudi Arabia, these seminars are most known for forming the ideological backbone of Afghanistan’s Taliban movement. Ever since the 1970s, however, young men from Central Asia illegally left the Soviet Union to study in the Islamic world, bringing politicized and often radical views of Islam with them home.³⁵

Roots of the IMU

The roots of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan date back to 1990, in the city of Namangan in Uzbekistan’s Fergana valley in 1990. A group of men in their early twenties representing the Islamic Renaissance Party, led by Tohir Yoldash and Juma Namangani, built a new Mosque in the city and tried to enforce Islamic dress code and behavior. They increasingly fervently demanded the declaration of Uzbekistan as an Islamic state – a demand that was rejected by the government of Islam Karimov. The group split off the IRP and formed the Adolat (Justice) Party,

³³ From the Arabic *Salaf*, meaning ancestors, referring to the idealized Islamic state founded by the Prophet Muhammad in Medina, and the immediate successors – the so-called ‘rightly guided Caliphs’.

³⁴ Sunni Islam recognizes four *maddhabs* or schools of jurisprudence: the Hanafi, Shafi’i, Maliki and Hanbali. The Hanafi tradition is the most moderate and tolerant of interpretation, whereas the Hanbali school is severely opposed to ‘folk Islam’, Sufism, the incorporation of non-Islamic customs and traditions. Deobandism, while nominally Hanafi, was founded in the late nineteenth century in British India, with strong influences from the rigorous Wahhabi strain in Saudi Arabia. On Deobandism, see Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*, Princeton University Press, 1982.

³⁵ For a thorough overview of the development of radical Islam in Central Asia, see Vitaly Naumkin, *Militant Islam in Central Asia: The Case of The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan*, Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies Working Paper Series, Spring 2003, pp. 18-24. Also Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.

which managed to gain prominence in the Ferghana valley during 1991, by channeling the political mobilization of the population toward political Islam, restoring order through street militias, and in fact attempting, sometimes successfully, to challenge the local government and law enforcement bodies and taking over their role.³⁶ Adolat also received emissaries from Saudi Arabian religious charities.³⁷ The government, apparently unable to judge the strength of the Islamic feelings in Fergana or to devise a strategy to deal with the mounting challenge, remained passive for several months. Only in March 1992 was Adolat outlawed and a crackdown ensued, forcing its leaders into exile in Tajikistan – where Yoldash and Namangani aligned themselves with radical forces in the Tajik opposition and participated on their side in the civil war. Namangani's military prowess – he had been a Soviet paratrooper fighting in Afghanistan – made him useful there, and he took the Tavildara valley in northeastern Tajikistan as his base. Meanwhile, Yoldash toured the Islamic world, including Chechnya, Turkey, and Pakistan, playing an entirely different role than Namangani: Yoldash was the IMU's ideologue, where Namangani was its guerrilla leader. After the 1997 peace accords, which they opposed, the two decided to break with their former Tajik allies. A serious crackdown on Islamic movements in the Fergana valley was in full strength at this moment, prompting an exodus of militants who ended up with Namangani in Tajikistan.³⁸

With this new strength, Namangani moved to Afghanistan, where the Taliban were now extending their power, and formally founded the IMU in Kabul in 1998. In early 1999, a series of bomb explosions rocked the Uzbek capital Tashkent and almost killed President Karimov. The IMU was blamed for these terrorist attacks, though its culpability has yet to be convincingly determined. At this point, a part of the IMU under Namangani moved back into Tajikistan, asserting its position in the Tavildara valley bordering Kyrgyzstan's section of the Fergana valley.

The IMU Military Operations

In August 1999, the IMU conducted its first military incursion into the Batken region in Kyrgyzstan, catching the Kyrgyz military by complete surprise and prompting a mobilization of the Uzbek army. Namangani, who organized the

³⁶ Naumkin, *Militant Islam in Central Asia*, pp. 20-21.

³⁷ Michael Fredholm, *Uzbekistan and the Threat from Islamic Extremism*, Sandhurst: United Kingdom Royal Military Academy, Conflict Studies Research Centre, Report no. K39, March 2003, p. 4.

³⁸ Rashid, *Jihad*, p. 147.

incursion, managed to secure an informal permission to transit the Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan border. The time was chosen during delicate negotiations between the Tajik opposition and the government on the implementation of the 1997 peace accord; Tajik authorities, under these conditions, were unwilling to confront Namangani.³⁹

The IMU contingents launched an attack that focused on the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan, as well as on the Vorukh and Sokh enclaves in southern Kyrgyzstan. These are small islands of territory belonging to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, respectively, but entirely surrounded by mountainous territory belonging to Kyrgyzstan and with little or no road communication to their respective homeland. These enclaves have been the subject of much discord between the three states, posing difficult questions of transportation, road links to the mainland, administration, etc. These enclaves are also known for their strong Islamic sentiment. Of the enclaves, Sokh is the largest, comparable to the Gaza strip in size (325 km²) and with a population of 43,000, whereas Vorukh has a population of 25,000.⁴⁰

An IMU detachment estimated at 50 members occupied a mountain village in the Batken region in early August 1999. A first IMU action conducted by 21 militants then took a mayor and three government employees hostage on August 9 in a village in the Osh district, also in southwestern Kyrgyzstan. They initially demanded the release of political prisoners in Uzbekistan, however, the Kyrgyz government secured the release of the hostages on August 13 for a \$50,000 ransom and a helicopter to fly them to Afghanistan.⁴¹ A larger group of fighters then moved in on the Batken region, capturing a meteorological station and the commander of the Kyrgyz Interior Ministry Forces.⁴² On August 23, the IMU seized further hostages, including four Japanese geologists. On October 25, the hostages were released, the IMU reportedly managing to extract a sum of between \$2-5 million from Japan in exchange.⁴³ After receiving the ransom, and as increasing snowfall was threatening to close the mountain passes, the IMU

³⁹ Naumkin, *Militant Islam in Central Asia*, p. 39; Rashid, *Jihad*, p. 159-60.

⁴⁰ Alfred Appai and Peter Skorsch, *Report of the EC Rapid Reaction Mechanism Assessment Mission: Central Asia, Border Management*, Brussels: European Commission, June 2002, pp. 24-27.

⁴¹ Makarenko, "Crime, Terror, and the Central Asian Drug Trade"; Naumkin, p. 40; Fredholm, p. 6.

⁴² Naumkin, p. 40.

⁴³ David Leheny, "Tokyo Confronts Terror", *Policy Review*, No. 110 December 2001/January 2002.

detachments retreated to Tavildara, aided by the mediating intervention of the IMU's old ally from the civil war in Tajikistan, now Tajik minister of emergencies, Mirzo Zioev. Uzbek pressure had now built up on Tajikistan so much that the authorities spent significant efforts to convince Namangani to leave the valley for Afghanistan. Hence several Russian army helicopters airlifted the main IMU contingents, including militants' families, from two camps in Hoit and Sangvor into Afghanistan, where Namangani and his men spent winter in camps in Kunduz and Mazar-i-Sharif.⁴⁴

A year later, the IMU stroke again. In August 2000, Namangani arrived back in Tavildara with several hundred men. He launched a series of significantly more sophisticated attacks, mainly into Kyrgyzstan, but this time the scale and geographical spread of the incursions was much larger than the previous year. The southern Surkhandarya district of Uzbekistan was targeted, as were the mountains just North of Tashkent, Uzbekistan's capital. However, the main thrust was in a simultaneous launching of several coordinated diversionary offensives of units of 50-100 men each, across the mountains separating Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, toward Batken and the Sokh and Vorukh enclaves. Several foreign mountain climbers, including four Americans, were taken hostage, but were all able to escape their captors.⁴⁵ As operations ended, Namangani was again flown to Afghanistan by helicopters belonging probably to the Tajik Ministry of emergencies.⁴⁶

Making Sense of the Incursions

These two episodes raise numerous questions regarding the IMU's intentions in staging them. Whereas in 1999, the IMU took the Central Asian militaries by surprise, already in 2000, both the Uzbek and Kyrgyz armies were considerably more prepared. Kyrgyzstan had in fact consistently ignored military reform in the 1990s, but after the Batken incursion of 1999, was forced to invest large resources, including significant amounts of foreign aid, in order to improve its border guard capacity and special operations forces. But as much as they startled the Central Asian region and led to efforts by regional governments to shore up their defense

⁴⁴ Ahmed Rashid, "They're Only Sleeping – Why Militant Islamicists in Central Asia Aren't Going to Go Away", *The New Yorker*, 14 January 2002.

⁴⁵ See an account of the episode that is likely highly 'embellished' in Greg Child, "Fear of Falling", *Outside Magazine*, November 2000. Intelligence sources from the region suggest that the climbers did not heroically flee their captors but were rescued. Also Fredholm, p. 7.

⁴⁶ Rashid, *Jihad*, pp. 176-178.

structures, the IMU incursions were in both cases too small to pose a serious long-term threat to the governments or territories of Central Asian states – shedding doubts on their real motivation, among other since the incursions only woke up the Central Asian militaries and exposed their weaknesses.

One explanation that has been advanced is that the IMU sought to replicate the “Tajik model” – i.e. force the Uzbek government to negotiate with it and share power.⁴⁷ Yet this is implausible, given that the IMU detachments apparently did not want to enter the Ferghana valley. They could easily have moved on into Ferghana in 1999, but chose not to do so, in spite of that being their main and officially stated aim. Kyrgyz National Security Minister Misir Ashirkulov has conceded that “the Uzbek militants could have easily penetrated into Uzbekistan using mountain tracks”.⁴⁸ The self-avowed state of the Kyrgyz army in 1999 was such that it could in no way have stopped the well-armed militants should they have chosen to continue into Uzbekistan instead of occupying Kyrgyz mountains villages for weeks.⁴⁹

As the militants hardly could have expected to take control over the Ferghana valley with their numeric strength, nor tried to do so, makes the argument that the IMU sought to force the Uzbek government into negotiations implausible. The militants did not move into Uzbekistan in 1999, though they conducted high-profile but minor skirmishes in 2000, which had more of a public relations purpose, to embarrass the Karimov government by showing the IMU’s ability of surfacing close to Tashkent. Moreover, had the IMU had serious political intentions, it would likely have kept on to the hostages instead of quickly surrendering them for ransom. It has been advanced that the hostages produced a rift within the IMU, with the more religious parts led by Yoldashev wishing to hold on to them, whereas Namangani was interested only in the ransom.⁵⁰

Another explanation is that the IMU movements were dictated elsewhere – by the Taliban high command, or by Osama Bin Laden. This explanation bears some logic; this was the time when the Taliban were aggressively trying to wipe out the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, which was squeezed back into a small territory near the Tajikistan border. As the Northern Alliance received most of its

⁴⁷ See eg. Alisher Khamidov, *Countering the Call: the U.S., Hizb-ut-Tahrir, and Religious Extremism in Central Asia*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Analysis Paper, no. 4, July 2003.

⁴⁸ See Naumkin, p. 42.

⁴⁹ *Moya Stolitsa*, Bishkek, 30 August 2002. Also discussion in Naumkin, p. 42.

⁵⁰ Naumkin, p. 43.

assistance through Central Asia and specifically Tajikistan, the IMU operations would have been designed to sow unrest there in order for the Taliban and Al Qaeda to finally eliminate the remaining threat to their power over Afghanistan. Yet another possibility is that the IMU had identified the mountainous and impoverished southwestern Kyrgyzstan, around the Batken region in particular, as a most fertile ground to begin their building of an Islamic state in Central Asia. The area has ethnic enclaves as mentioned above, which had been positively disposed to Islamic movements earlier; the IMU may have sought to cut off the area from Kyrgyzstan to create a self-proclaimed Islamic state there, from which they would spread into the Uzbek parts of the Ferghana valley.⁵¹

These reasons are plausible as a part of the puzzle explaining the timing and nature of the IMU actions. Still, had the IMU desired to either destabilize Central Asia and/or establish itself in southwestern Kyrgyzstan, why would it have agreed so easily to accept a ransom for the hostages it had taken, and be flown back to Afghanistan to bide its time to once again come back to the area, with a much higher alert and readiness by local military forces? These questions suggest that there is a missing link in the analysis.

The IMU and the Drug Trade

Several aspects of the modalities of the IMU incursions suggest that they were in fact conditioned to a great extent by the drug trade. These include both the geographical areas targeted, the timing of the attacks, as well as the tactics used. That drugs transit Central Asia is no novel phenomenon, it has in fact been an increasing problem since the mid-1990s, as traffickers increasingly faced efforts by the Iranian government to curtail trafficking through Iran, which had been the chief smuggling route. As trafficking through Iran became dangerous and therefore expensive, Central Asian states, with their porous borders, newly established state authorities and corrupt climate became a major new trafficking route.⁵² The first seizures of heroin and opium came in 1995-96, and quickly grew

⁵¹ See Bakhrom Tursunova and Marina Pikulina, *Severe Lessons of Batken*, Sandhurst: United Kingdom Royal Military Academy, Conflict Studies Research Centre, Report no. K28, November 1999, p. 8.

⁵² Tamara Makarenko, "Traffickers Turn from Balkan Conduit to 'Northern' Route", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, vol. 13 no. 8, August 2001.

in size; in 2002, the five Central Asian states seized 5,5 tons of heroin, mainly in Tajikistan.⁵³

The highway between Khorog on the Tajik-Afghan border and Osh, the largest city in the South of Kyrgyzstan, became known as the major transit route for drugs into Central Asia, very much due to it being the only major highway linking the Afghan border to the population centers of the region. Importantly, Jirgatal and Tavildara, the strongholds of the IMU during the civil war in Tajikistan and from where it launched its two armed incursions, lie along this highway. The Khorog-Osh highway by the late 1990s came under increasing scrutiny by the Kyrgyz government, aided by the United Nations Drug Control Program, who identified Osh as a major drugs transshipment point and sought to limit the smuggling through the highway in a joint project among regional states called the “Osh knot”, beginning in 1997.⁵⁴

Meanwhile, as production of opium in Afghanistan skyrocketed while Turkey, Iran and Pakistan increasingly cracked down on drug trafficking, increasingly large quantities of opiates were being smuggled into Central Asia. The Taliban’s coming to power in 1996 initially led to a minor decrease in opium production, but from 1996, the area under cultivation steadily grew to ca. 2,700 tons in 1997 and 1998 until it reached a record 4,600 tons in 1999, roughly the double of Europe’s estimated yearly consumption of opiates. Afghanistan now accounted for 79% of global opium production.⁵⁵

Concomitantly, traffickers now sought new routes into Central Asia in addition to the Khorog-Osh route. A new important route became the Batken route, whereby drugs crossed the Tajik-Kyrgyz border from Jirgatal and Garm in Tajikistan.⁵⁶

This region was of particular interest to traffickers due to the mountainous character and remoteness of the region, the weakness of Kyrgyz law enforcement there, and most importantly the existence of the Vorukh and Sokh enclaves, and additional, smaller enclaves such as the Qalacha and Khalmion areas in Kyrgyzstan administered by Uzbekistan, as well as Chorku, administered by

⁵³ See the Uppsala Silk Road Studies Drugs database, <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/database.htm>.

⁵⁴ For more information, <http://www.un.org.kg>. The project was discontinued in October 1999. “Conference on Drug Traffic Ends”, RFE/RL Kyrgyz Report, 8 October 1999.

⁵⁵ United Nations Drug Control Program, *Global Illicit Drugs Trends 2001*, p. 39.

⁵⁶ See Maral Madi, “Drug Trafficking in Kyrgyzstan and Implications for Security”, Silk Road Studies Working Paper, January 2004, pp. 12-13.

Tajikistan. The enclaves suffer from a power vacuum, as neither the state they are geographically located in nor the state legally administering them is able to exert strong governmental authority there.⁵⁷ As a result, the enclaves became major hubs of the drug trade, as well as a storage point for heroin.

But the enclaves were also serving as forward bases for IMU militants. Already from 1997, militants were freely crossing from Tajikistan across the Korgon gorge, spreading their message and recruiting locals, across the Batken region but especially the territorial enclaves.⁵⁸ The IMU militants apparently established routes for crossing the border with the help of the major so-called “drug barons” of the Osh region.⁵⁹ Indeed, the major destination for drugs in Kyrgyzstan is the city of Osh, where organized crime networks with well-established international contacts buy the merchandise in order to re-export it toward Russia and Europe.⁶⁰

The geographic juxtaposition of the IMU’s camps and its activities in the late 1990s with the main areas of drug trafficking into Kyrgyzstan point at the very least to a symbiosis between the group and drug trafficking networks. However, as the 1999 events suggested, the IMU has also in all likelihood been a leading actor in its own right in the drug trade.

The timing of the August 1999 events is indicative, as it occurred during the very narrow time frame between the harvesting of the record batch of opium in Afghanistan in June, and the closure of the mountain passes due to snow from late September onward. In fact, in the complex political climate of Afghanistan and Central Asia at the time, the IMU was in a singularly well-placed position to control the drug trade from Afghanistan to Central Asia. The IMU had well-established links with the Taliban government and Al Qaeda, as Bin Laden even likely provided the IMU with funding of several million dollars.⁶¹ The group had obtained bases in Mazar-i-Sharif and Kunduz in northern Afghanistan, as well as offices in the diplomatic sector of Kabul and in Kandahar, the Taliban spiritual capital. In addition, the IMU had close contacts with its old comrades-in-arms in the former Tajikistan opposition, now in government. The Tajik government in

⁵⁷ Madi, p. 10,

⁵⁸ Kozhanov and Avdeeva, “Ekho Batkena”, *Vecherny Bishkek*, 7 September 1999; Otorbayeva, “Batkenskiy Dnevnik”, *Vecherny Bishkek*, 3 September 1999.

⁵⁹ See Mahmamin Mahmaminov, “The Development of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (Turkestan)”, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Johns Hopkins University, 2003.

⁶⁰ See Madi, p. 5; also Kairat Osmanaliev, *Organizovanya Prestupnost' v Kirgizskoi Respublike* (Organized Crime in the Kyrgyz Republic), Bishkek: Mol, 2002.

⁶¹ See eg. Fredholm, *Uzbekistan and the Threat from Islamic Extermism*, pp. 9-10.

turn had extremely close links with the ethnic Tajik-led Northern Alliance under Ahmad Shah Masood. In this sense, in a situation where opposing political forces were controlling the main producing areas of drugs and the transit countries in Central Asia, the network of contacts built up by the IMU enabled it to freely move across Afghanistan and Tajikistan unlike any other known organization.

The 2000 attacks further illustrated this fact: they again occurred in the summer season, roughly a month after the opium harvest in Afghanistan. This allows for the processing of opium into heroin, which is increasingly done in northern Afghanistan, before smuggling it out of the country. Moreover, the launching of simultaneous but small-scale incursions by comparatively small groups of fighters into Kyrgyzstan, but also Uzbekistan, makes the most sense if seen as a diversionary measure intended to create instability, confuse law enforcement and military structures, thereby allowing for the use for trafficking of several mountain passes originally been used by Tajik refugees fleeing the civil war to Kyrgyzstan in the mid-1990s, and have since been taken up by traffickers of drugs, arms and humans.⁶² The IMU had made a practice of staging August incursions, but this did not take place in 2001. While other factors may have been at work, it is an interesting coincidence that 2001 was the year in which the Taliban ban on opium had gone into effect: there was simply no harvest in Taliban-held Afghanistan that the IMU could smuggle out to Central Asia. This further points to a criminal connection to the previous incursions.

An increasing consensus has indeed developed that the IMU was strongly involved in the drug trafficking from Afghanistan toward Osh in Kyrgyzstan, where the opiates were likely handed to trafficking networks that could ship them further north and west. Bolot Januzakov, Head of the Kyrgyz Security Council, asserted in 2000 that the IMU controlled the majority, perhaps up to 70%, of the heroin entering Kyrgyzstan.⁶³ Drug control experts concurred with this figure.⁶⁴ Ralf Mutschke of the Criminal Intelligence Directorate of Interpol labeled the IMU “a hybrid organization in which criminal interests often take priority over ‘political’ goals”, adding that “IMU leaders have a vested interest in ongoing unrest and instability in their area in order to secure the routes they use for the

⁶² Makarenko, “Traffickers Turn from Balkan Conduit to ‘Northern’ Route”; Madi, p. 7.

⁶³ “Narcotic Flood Threatens to Wash Away Central Asian Stability”, *Times of Central Asia*, 30 December 2000.

⁶⁴ Personal communications from international drug control officials, Washington, May 2001; Tamara Makarenko, ‘Crime and Terrorism in Central Asia’, *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, July 2000.

transportation of drugs.”⁶⁵ During and after the 1999 incursion, law enforcement officials noted a threefold increase in trafficking attempts. Januzakov in late 2001 noted that the volume of drugs trafficked into Kyrgyzstan increased significantly after the 1999 incursion.⁶⁶ Regional crime expert Tamara Makarenko has noted that

All the events perpetrated by the IMU prior to September 11 indicate that the primary motivation of the IMU, under the leadership of military commander Juma Namangani, were criminal. Since 1999 the IMU was predominantly under the control of Namangani. Although he has been described as a ‘born again’ Muslim, there are no indications that he was a strict Muslim with any associated allegiances. On the contrary, prior to dedicating his life to the IMU it is believed that Namangani was involved in the drugs trade. As such, under his leadership, it is not surprising that the IMU was focused on securing its role as a leading trafficker of opiates into Central Asia.⁶⁷

It should be noted that the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan never lived up to the reputation of a monolithic, hierarchically structured organization. Most studies of the movement seem to indicate at least two focal points coexisting, not without friction, within the IMU: the more guerrilla-oriented and criminal part of the organization led by Namangani, and the more religious part controlled by Yoldash.⁶⁸ As such, a set of different motivations likely were behind the IMU’s actions. As Frederick Starr has termed it, the IMU is best understood as an “amalgam of personal vendetta, Islamism, drugs, geopolitics, and terrorism”.⁶⁹

Conclusions: Don’t Count the IMU out

The IMU was heavily cut down to size at the battle for Kunduz in November 2001, as they defended the last Taliban stronghold in the North of the country. Its

⁶⁵ Ralf Mutschke, “The Threat Posed by the Convergence of Organized Crime, Drugs Trafficking and Terrorism”, Testimony to the Subcommittee on Crime of the Judiciary Committee, U.S. House of Representatives, 13 December 2000. Also testimony to the same hearing of Donnie R. Marshall, Drug Enforcement Administration administrator, at <http://usinfo.state.gov/topical/pol/terror/00121301.htm>.

⁶⁶ Bolot Januzakov, quoted in Glenn E. Curtis, “Involvement of Russian Organized Crime Syndicates, Criminal Elements in the Russian Military, and Regional Terrorist Groupings in Narcotics Trafficking in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Chechnya”, Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, October 2002, p. 14.

⁶⁷ Makarenko, “Crime, Terror, and the Central Asian Drug Trade”.

⁶⁸ Makarenko, “Crime, Terror, and the Central Asian Drug Trade”.

⁶⁹ Personal communication; also *Bloomberg News*, 12 March 2002.

military leader, Juma Namangani, was in all likelihood killed by U.S. forces in the battle for Kunduz (though unconfirmed rumors that he remains alive have circulated) while the majority of its fighting force was eliminated. Nevertheless, much of the IMU's infrastructure inside Central Asia remained unscathed by the war in Afghanistan. In fact, recent reports suggest that two detachments of the IMU remain in Afghanistan: one group in the Paktia and Kunar provinces, areas where the anti-U.S. forces of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar are influential. Secondly, the IMU also maintains a presence in several mountain passes of the Badakhshan province, bordering Tajikistan. Another group is reportedly in the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Province of China, while intelligence reports and observers in the region suggest that minor armed groups and sleeper cells remain in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.⁷⁰ Its religious leader Yoldash is thought to be in Peshawar, Pakistan, a guest of the Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam, a Deobandi Pakistani extremist party.⁷¹

This information suggests that while the IMU is not dead, neither is it at present a military threat to the regimes of Central Asian states. Had the IMU been a simply ideological group, this would have been reassuring news. Devoid of its military leader, without Al Qaeda funding, and scattered, the public support that the IMU once enjoyed has also evaporated somewhat, given its violent approach that most even radical Muslims in Central Asia disapprove of. Instead, the Hizb-ut-Tahrir group, which shares the IMU's aim of establishing an Islamic Caliphate in Central Asia but advocates a peaceful path to this aim, has been gaining strength, at the expense of the IMU.⁷²

But other factors work in favor of the IMU. Even if, as Central Asian security services estimate, the movement only consists of some 300 scattered fighters at present,⁷³ the continuing and increasing production of opium in Afghanistan implies that the IMU may acquire access to funds that could help it rebuild military strength. The inability or unwillingness of western powers to invest significant efforts to stem opium production in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban makes such a scenario possible.

⁷⁰ Mahmaminov, p. 8.

⁷¹ James Purcell Smith, "The IMU: Alive and Kicking", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 24 September 2003.

⁷² Alisher Khamidov, *Countering the Call*, pp. 8-10; International Crisis Group, *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb-ut-Tahrir*, 30 Asia Report no. 58, June 2003.

⁷³ Khamidov, *Countering the Call*, p. 9.

In fact, as far as Central Asia is concerned, the opium situation is only worsening. If Afghanistan's opium production grew by only 6% in 2003, a significant redistribution of producing areas is taking place. Poppy is now produced in 28 out of 32 provinces, and is continuously moving northward. From having been concentrated in the two southern provinces of Helmand and Nangarhar only three years ago, the Badakhshan province is gradually replacing falling production in the South. From 1996 to 2000, its production area gradually decreased from 3,200 to 2,500 hectares. It then jumped to 6,300 ha in 2001; 8,300 ha in 2002, and 12,800 ha in 2003, increasingly cultivated on higher-yielding irrigated land.⁷⁴ This implies that the opium production neighboring the Central Asian Republics has increased at least six-fold since 2000, to an estimated total of 544 tons.⁷⁵

Though suffering the death of its erstwhile military leader, the IMU lower-level commanders still have the experience and network that would enable them to take up the drug trafficking business in Central Asia. The risk is apparent that the IMU will acquire the financial wherewithal of survival and even possibly strengthen in the coming years. At a time when the regimes in Central Asian states are facing increasing economic and political difficulties, this implies a continuing threat to the political and military security of the region.

In Latin America, the U.S. government seems to have clearly identified the drug trade as a primary financial source of terrorism, as evidence by anti-drug efforts in Colombia, including the forcible eradication of coca plantations. In Afghanistan and Central Asia, the U.S. has so far shown little interest in the drug trade, mostly because only a very small amount (ca. 7%) of the drugs that reach the U.S. come from this region. Although over 80% of the heroin consumed in Europe comes from Afghanistan, the EU and individual European countries, with the possible exception of the United Kingdom, have so far failed to bring the issue to the top of the political agenda regarding Afghanistan. The link between the drug trade and terrorist groups that target the U.S. or U.S. interests, which is becoming increasingly apparent, could well change that.⁷⁶ The IMU's links to the Al Qaeda network, which appear even stronger than was suspected before September 11, have driven home the point that the international drug trade is a global

⁷⁴ See UNODC, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2003*, New York: United Nations, October 2003, p. 42.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁷⁶ Eg. "U.S. 'Seizes Al-Qaeda Drugs Ship'", *BBC News*, 19 December 2003.

phenomenon, a threat not only to the countries directly affected but in many ways also to states further away.

The situation in Afghanistan hence remains the key to the developments in the rest of Central Asia. If Afghanistan fails to stabilize, opium cultivation there and drug trafficking through Central Asia is likely to keep increasing the way it did in the past decade, compounding the societal, political, and military threats to Central Asian security. Given the lack of international commitment to the drug problem in Afghanistan and the deep involvement of most of the political elite of the country in the drug business (for no other reason than that it is the main source of capital in the country), it is highly unlikely that meaningful eradication of opium will be possible in the next few years.

Some of the factors that led to the emergence of radical Islam in Central were and are based in legitimate political and economic grievances.⁷⁷ However, the most overt representative of this political tendency is to a significant extent directed by greed. While officially claiming to seek the re-establishment of a political order that existed 1400 years ago, the IMU is, as one of the most prominent examples of the integration of transnational organized crime and violent anti-state movements, paradoxically a decidedly post-modern phenomenon.

The IMU's development illustrates the dangers of ignoring the security ramifications of the international production and trafficking in narcotics. Treating the drug trade as a domestic law enforcement issue and thereby rejecting its implications for national, regional and international security has only allowed the situation in Central Asia, just as in the Andean region or in Southeast Asia, to deteriorate. Transnational organized crime has in the past decade become far more sophisticated and multi-faceted than it once was. It is a rising threat to the security especially of weak states; yet the financial power it possesses, and its links to human trafficking and terrorism clearly make it an issue that deserves attention in the security debate also of industrialized countries.

⁷⁷ See Svante E. Cornell and Regine A. Spector, "Central Asia: More than Islamic Extremists", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 25 no. 1, 2002.