

ON TURKEY'S POSSIBLE INVOLVEMENT IN STRENGTHENING CENTRAL ASIAN SECURITY

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During the years of independence, the relations among the Central Asian states at the regional level, as well as with other countries of the world were mostly determined by their geographic location, rich natural energy resources, the post-Soviet geopolitical situation, the changing world order, and the new threats. The Central Asian countries are especially concerned with cooperation in the security sphere, not only at the national and regional levels, but also in the context of the international counter-terrorist campaign in Afghanistan. This is explained by the fact that the 9/11 events and the coalition's military invasion in Afghanistan aroused the interest of the world community, the United States and Russia in particular, in the region,

opened a new stage in the development of cooperation in the security sphere, and increased political rivalry for regional influence.

It was early in the 1990s, immediately after the Soviet Union left the scene, that Turkey, supported by the West, started developing relations with post-Soviet republics. After encountering opposition from Moscow, which returned to the region after a short absence, Ankara failed to establish close relations with the local states. It should be added that, unlike the Southern Caucasus, Central Asia has no common borders with Turkey and cannot, therefore, affect its interests. On top of this, Turkey was too weak economically, while the Central Asian republics did not want its strong influ-

ence in the region: they wanted direct contacts with the West and did not need intermediaries. Their ties with Turkey were mainly limited to culture, education, trade, and economics, the spheres in which Ankara could compete with Moscow.¹ Russia dominated in the security sphere.² After the

series of explosions in Uzbekistan in 1999 and the Batken events in Kyrgyzstan in 1999-2000, the issue of Turkish military-technical assistance was revived together with antiterrorist cooperation between the Central Asian countries and Turkey. When American military bases appeared in the region and the counter-terrorist campaign in Afghanistan launched, it became possible to develop contacts with Turkey on other security-related issues.

¹ See: Z. Chotoev, "The Turkish Factor in the Evolution of the Central Asian Republics," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 2 (20), 2003, pp. 74-77.

² See: *Ibid.*, pp. 77-79.

The Regional Forces and Ankara's Presence

It should be said that China as a newcomer to the geopolitical game in the region has joined the process of strengthening Central Asian security (in cooperation with Russia) within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its Antiterrorist Center. In addition, Beijing has been extending and continues to extend military-technical assistance to the Central Asian countries, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in particular.

Iran, another regional force, has good relations with Russia and China, but is isolated for political reasons by the United States. After suffering defeat in its Afghan policy, Pakistan, until recently an American ally with interests of its own in Central Asia, had to step aside. While developing its relations with the United States, India, a traditional ally of Russia's and a traditional rival of China's, is trying to avoid involvement. Turkey, as a supporter of the counter-terrorist operation in Afghanistan and its direct participant, is prepared to contribute to stronger regional security. The United States, while drawing its Islamic NATO ally into the counter-terrorist operation against the Islamic extremists, has been pursuing aims of its own. Washington wants to use Ankara's political support and Turkish troops in hot spots to neutralize possible conflicts with the local population.

This proved successful in Afghanistan, where Turkey deployed its peacekeeping battalion and assumed command of ISAF after Great Britain.³ In Iraq, however, Turkey's presence did not completely justify American hopes. This was especially evident when it came to securing strategic aims, as well as certain aspects of Turkey's domestic and foreign policies and when events were unfolding in the direct vicinity of its state borders. Still, Ankara's desire to develop its cooperation with the Central Asian countries further and to contribute as much as it can to their security coincides with Washington's intentions in the region. Turkey can join the United States to work together in this sphere.

In December 2003, the U.S. and Uzbekistan signed a treaty on strategic partnership; soon after that Turkey's newly elected prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, arrived in Tashkent on an official visit. It can be described as a successful step and a significant contribution to the relations between the two countries, which five years earlier had worsened and been more or less repaired at the U.N. summit of September 2000 in New York attended by the presidents of both countries. In Tashkent the sides concentrated on the counter-terrorist struggle and Uzbekistan's security.⁴

On the other hand, Ankara is seeking stronger friendly contacts with Beijing, which were first established during an unofficial visit by Erdogan, leader of the Justice and Development Party of Turkey, to China in January 2003.⁵ Ankara resolutely supported Beijing on the issue of Uighur separatism and China's territorial integrity.

After a short period of dispute over the war on Iraq, Washington and Ankara realized that they needed each other. On 19 November, 2003, the NATO Council, which met in Brussels, appointed former Turkish

³ See: Z. Chotoev, "Turkey in the Antiterrorist Campaign," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 3 (21), 2003, p. 94.

⁴ See: G. Kıraç, "Başbakan Erdoğan'ın Özbekistan Ziyareti," *Stratejik Analiz*, Cilt 4, Sayı 46, Şubat 2004, S. 20.

⁵ See: *Radikal*, 14 January, 2003, p. 10.

foreign minister, Hikmet Çetin, NATO Senior Civilian Representative (SCR) on the strength of Turkey's successful performance in the mission of commander of peacekeeping forces in Afghanistan. During his visit to Turkey in December 2003, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Peter Pace discussed with Turkey's leaders the possibility of further military-technical assistance to the peacekeeping forces in Afghanistan that had been moved to the NATO command in August 2003. There were plans in particular to increase their numerical strength from 5,500 to 10,000.⁶ So far, Turkey has agreed to send three Black Hawk helicopters, yet there is no final decision about the numerical strength of its contingent, although its preliminary size amounts to some 1,500 people.⁷ Still, even this number symbolizes Turkey's involvement in strengthening the region's security; it will contribute to its greater cooperation with the Central Asian countries in this sphere.

Turkey's Impact on the Religious Situation

There is one more sphere in which Turkey and the Central Asian republics can cooperate with good results. I have in mind its help in stemming radical Islam in Central Asia. Today, madhabs and other Muslim trends of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran, and other countries (Turkey included) are mostly involved in organizing religious education in the region. Fethullah Gülen's charity, in particular, opens schools and lyceums, builds mosques, and distributes religious literature; meanwhile at home, Gülen and his followers were condemned by the authorities for their propaganda of the principles contradicting the basic tenets of a secular state.⁸ Turkey and Central Asia are supporters of moderate Hanafi Islam. As soon as the crisis in the relations between the two countries was over, Ankara imposed restrictions on teaching religious disciplines at the Turkish educational establishments functioning in Central Asia. The Department of Religious Affairs of the Turkish Republic and the Turkish Religious Society are officially pursuing a policy aimed at proliferating knowledge through modern state and public structures. With this aim in view, they supplied literature, opened new educational establishments, and dispatched state officials, teachers and clerics to the region.⁹

There is another side of the problem: any impartial analysis of the sources and main reasons why radical Islam and religious extremism are spreading in Central Asia pays particular attention to the domestic situation in the regional countries. The transition period and the post-Soviet economic crisis created poverty and unemployment, as well as caused striking property differentiation. The euphoria of the first years of independence was followed by the recognition that the new states were plagued by numerous political problems as well. It was not easy to build a liberal-democratic order—therefore they slowly, or rapidly, slid toward authoritarian regimes. The communist ideology left a void behind it: neither cultural-historical values, nor Western liberal-democratic ideas could fill the ideological vacuum. People turned to religion in search of a beacon. This tilled the soil, to an extent, for the ideas of Hizb ut-Tahrir, a radical Islamic party. The success it scored in the region was made easy by local poverty and local dissatisfaction with the authorities, which made the nations think of different social programs and an alternative political regime.¹⁰ These conclusions have been confirmed by other studies, which explain Hizb ut-Tahrir's success by the systemic crisis, economic problems of the transition period, and the lowered social status of the entire population, especially of the younger generation.¹¹ In addition, the fact that the authoritarian regimes are oppressing

⁶ See: F. Burget, "Turkiye Yeniden Afganistan'da: 'NATO Kıdemli Yüksek Temsilciliği,'" *Stratejik Analiz*, Cilt 4, Sayı 45, Ocak 2004, S. 12-13.

⁷ See: "Türk Askeri Yine Kabil'e Gidiyor," *Radikal*, 22 May, 2004, S. 11.

⁸ For more detail, see: N. Kireev, "Turkey at the Dawn of the 21st Century: Landmarks for Political Islam," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 2 (20), 2003.

⁹ See: M. Erdem, "Orta Asya Güvenliğinde Radikal Dini Hareketler Sorunu," *Stratejik Analiz*, Cilt 4, Sayı 46, Şubat 2004, S. 81.

¹⁰ See: I. Savin, "Hizb ut-Tahrir in Southern Kazakhstan: Social Makeup," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 6 (24), 2003, pp. 68-69.

¹¹ See: Ch. Chotaeva, "Islam in the Social-Political Context of Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 6 (24), 2003, pp. 61-62.

religious activities (this is especially evident in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) makes Islam even more radical. One can say in conclusion that the threats to local security connected with Islam are mainly caused by internal problems rather than by outside influence coming from the regional Muslim countries.¹²

Participation in the Struggle Against Religious Extremism and Terrorism

There are two aspects in the U.S. policies aimed at preventing religious extremism and terrorism in Central Asia. The first is military might used to strengthen security; and the second is American support of the countries' democratic and economic reforms designed to prevent radicalization of Islam and raise the local social and economic standards. There is a fairly common opinion that if Washington acts alone, its help will hardly bring success in the struggle against religious extremism. It will probably produce the same results as those in Saudi Arabia and Iran, the countries where the U.S. is regarded as one of the dictatorial regimes and an enemy of Islam.¹³ The present American support of the authoritarian Central Asian regimes maintained for the sake of antiterrorist struggle and trade and economic contacts cannot last indefinitely. Sooner or later the nature of these contacts will change. Some of the analysts predict that the authoritarian pressure in Uzbekistan and the anti-liberal reforms in this country may cool the relations between Washington and Tashkent.¹⁴ While extending financial and technical assistance to the Central Asian countries, the Bush Administration is increasing its pressure on their leaders and demanding that they comply with international laws related to human rights and step up the democratic reforms.¹⁵ So far no considerable shifts have taken place; Washington will most likely increase its pressure on the Central Asian republics as the situation in Afghanistan stabilizes. The relations between the United States and the Central Asian countries will probably change; the nature of these changes is still unclear.

In any case, Washington will continue insisting on more democratic policies and more loyal treatment of the pro-Islamic parties in Central Asia to create better conditions for coexistence between "moderate Islam" and the secular state and to prevent the spread of religious extremism.¹⁶ Turkey, as an example of a secular democratic state in a Muslim country, can play an important part. Its cooperation with the Central Asian republics is especially important today when a moderate Islamic elite represented by the Justice and Development Party came to power in Turkey. It is headed by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a charismatic leader who has done a lot to re-orientate traditional political Islam toward Western values. After winning the parliamentary elections in the fall of 2002 by wide majority, the party managed to improve its results in the municipal elections as well (from 34.4 percent in 2002 to 41.6 percent in 2004).¹⁷ This is a clear evidence of popular support of the liberal-democratic reforms the government is carrying out (designed, in particular, to join the EU). The pro-Western foreign policy course and domestic changes, which arouse surprise and even doubts among the ruling elite, were approved by the West and inside the country. The current reforms and the political process have revealed the balance of forces between the progressive and conservative elements and pushed back the opposition left-center Republican People's Party. In a very short period of time, the Justice and Development Party has accomplished what previous governments failed to do in several decades.¹⁸

¹² See: M. Laumulin, "Islamic Players on the Central Asian Arena: What Are the Interests of the Neighboring Muslim States in the Region?" *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 2 (20), 2003, p. 55.

¹³ See: S. Atal, "Central Asian Geopolitics and U.S. Policy in the Region: The Post-11 September Era," *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 2, Spring 2003, p.105.

¹⁴ See: L. Kazemi, "Domestic Sources of Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy, 1991 to the Present," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 56, No. 2, Spring 2003, p. 216.

¹⁵ See: "SShA negativno otsenili rabotu po zashchite prav cheloveka v Kyrgyzstane," *Novosti Akipress* [http://www.akipress.org], 2 March, 2004.

¹⁶ E. Ahrari, "The Strategic Future of Central Asia: A View from Washington," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 56, No. 2, Spring 2003, pp. 164-165.

¹⁷ See: *Radikal*, 1 April, 2004, p. 6.

¹⁸ Interview with Prof. Baskyn Oran, *Radikal*, 5 April, 2003, p. 6.

In this way, cooperation between Turkey and the Central Asian republics aimed at stemming religious extremism could be useful for the Central Asian countries and for Turkey (in view of the recent explosions in Istanbul). Investigations carried out by the Turkish security structures showed that the terrorist acts (which killed about 30 and wounded more than 100) were organized by radical Islamists, former members of Hiz-bullah and now members of Abu Hafez Al-Misri Brigade connected with al-Qa'eda. This organization issued several statements that condemned Turkey's support of American policies and its participation in the counter-terrorist operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.¹⁹ American sources point out that Abu Musad al Zar-qawi, Jordanian citizen and founder of the Beyiat el Imam (Union of Imams) organization and one of the al-Qa'eda leaders, is responsible for the blasts.²⁰ These events demonstrated once more that a new threat of Islamic terrorism has appeared in Turkey. Previously, the country was threatened by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), separatist organizations operating in Kurdistan and Armenia. This new threat is forcing Turkey to become more actively involved in the international counter-terrorist coalition. Stronger ties between Turkey and the United States in this sphere will probably affect Turkey's role in Central Asia, where Washington needs Ankara's support both in Afghanistan and in Central Asia proper to help stem religious extremism. We should bear in mind that Turkey relies on its cultural and historical ties to develop bilateral and multilateral contacts with the Central Asian republics. In the wake of the blasts in Tashkent and the Batken events of 1999-2000, Ankara started preparing the ground for wider cooperation in the sphere of regional security.

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Turkey's involvement in strengthening security in Central Asia in the military-technical sphere, in keeping religious extremism within certain limits, and in the antiterrorist struggle is possible only with cooperation from the United States and with its support. This is explained by Ankara's desire to develop closer ties with the regional countries, as well as Washington's desire to demonstrate that a Muslim country can be democratic. Turkey's cooperation with Washington in strengthening regional security will be especially fruitful if Moscow cooperates with Washington and with other regional forces. If the events take a different course, that is, if America and Russia become opponents, a zero-sum game will be possible. This will negatively affect Turkey's relations with Russia and the Central Asian republics. To avoid this, Ankara is developing its contacts with the local countries and with Russia and China. The foreign ministers of Russia and Turkey signed a Plan of Action for Developing Cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Turkey. The document, which envisages in particular a mechanism of consultations in the form of a Joint Workgroup headed by foreign ministers, is an important step in developing relations between Moscow and Ankara. This mechanism is designed to resolve conflicts by political means, maintain stability, and create conditions for the region's sustainable development.²¹ The sides pointed out that the antiterrorist struggle is the international community's main priority and confirmed their readiness to pool efforts²² in order to create favorable conditions for further cooperation in the same sphere.

Possible alternatives of regional cooperation and the possibility of extending Turkey's military presence in Afghanistan, as well as the fact that Ankara and Tashkent have strengthened their ties with Washington in the antiterrorist struggle (in the wake of the recent terrorist acts in Uzbekistan) create favorable conditions for Turkey's involvement in the security-strengthening efforts in Central Asia, but only if Moscow and Beijing give their consent.

¹⁹ See: U. Özdağ, "İstanbul Bombaları," *Stratejik Analiz*, Cilt 4, Sayı 45, Ocak 2004, S. 34.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, S. 37.

²¹ See: F. Moustakis, E. Ackerman, "September 11: A Dynamic for Russo-Turkish Cooperation or Conflict?" *Central Asian Survey*, No. 21 (4), 2002, p. 431.

²² See: F. Moustakis, E. Ackerman, "September 11: A Dynamic for Russo-Turkish Cooperation or Conflict?" *Central Asian Survey*, No. 21 (4), 2002, p. 432.