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WHAT FUTURE FOR THE FETHULLAH GÜLEN MOVEMENT IN CENTRAL ASIA AND THE CAUCASUS?

Bayram Balci

Following the end of the Soviet Union, the Gülen movement developed a dynamic educational network in Central Asia and the Caucasus, with that region offering Turkey its strongest base of soft power. The AKP government's support for these schools, and the informal alliance between Gülen and the AKP since 2002, was beneficial to both parties. The collapse of this mutual cooperation last December and the war Erdoğan has declared on what he calls the "parallel structure" raise the question of the movement's future in Turkey and abroad, but most importantly in Central Asia and the Caucasus, which have played a crucial role in the Gülen movement's international strategy.

BACKGROUND: When the Soviet bloc collapsed in 1990 and Turkey wanted to take advantage of this opportunity to create strong relations with the new republics of the former Soviet Union as well as with the Balkan countries, the Gülen movement was the first organization to adapt itself to this new situation. In the Caucasus (especially in Azerbaijan and Georgia) and in all Central Asian republics, the Gülen movement, supported by various Turkish business associations, opened dozens of schools. The priority of these schools has been to provide a modern and secular education in accordance with local norms, while also providing religious education as extracurricular activities. Nevertheless, having noted the hostility of local authorities to any kind of Islamic proselytism, the Gülen movement followers ended any kind of religious activism and adhered to the official curricula in every country.

Except in Uzbekistan, where all schools were closed in 2000 – more because of

the general deterioration of Turkish-Uzbek relations than because of the schools' activities, and in Turkmenistan – where in 2011 the majority of schools were seized by Turkmen state – there are currently many educational and business establishments across the Caucasus and Central Asia managed by people known for their adhesion to or sympathies with Fethullah Gülen. In Georgia, there are five schools and one university, in Azerbaijan one university and several schools, in Kazakhstan one university and thirty schools, in Kyrgyzstan one university and ten schools and in Tajikistan around five schools.



(HizmetNews)

Between 1991 and 2002, the attitude of Turkish diplomacy toward these schools was ambiguous. Some ardent Kemalist Turkish ambassadors were embarrassed by the activism of the Gülen movement in the post-Soviet area where Turkey sought to establish a strong influence. But despite this sentiment, the general Turkish line was pragmatic. Indeed, encouraged by Turgut Özal's liberal views, Turkish diplomacy offered symbolic support for the activities of the schools, by attending the schools' social events or graduation ceremonies. When the AKP came to power, support from the Turkish state became more visible, for both ideological and strategic reasons. At the same time, the AKP's ascent to power in Turkey and its alliance with Gülen initially gave rise to concerns among the secular former Soviet elites, who worried about the possible emergence in their countries of a similar conservative power for which the Gülen schools could be the catalyst. However, the quality education offered by these schools convinced local authorities to allow the Gülen schools, with the exception of Turkmenistan where the government has gradually limited the number of schools.

IMPLICATIONS: The AKP and the Gülen movement have promoted the same ideas and objectives in Turkey for many years. They had the same social base and used to defend the same values. Yet the minor differences that existed gradually became more important and provoked a split between them. The real reasons for the split are still unclear, but it seems that the Gülen movement increased its distance

to the Turkish Prime Minister in order not to be compromised by his increasing authoritarianism, and even went on to criticize him. In turn, Erdogan has accused the Gülen movement of posing an obstacle to his "reign" as its members became a political force in the country. This divorce looks like a natural and inevitable separation between two groups that were unified through their opposition to a common enemy: the Kemalist establishment and its supporters in the Turkish military. Indeed, the Turkish Army's gradual retreat from politics thanks to the efforts of the Gülen-Erdogan alliance has removed the *raison d'être* of the alliance. Whatever the reasons for the split, the ruling elites in Central Asia and the Caucasus have noted the political fight between these two major forces in Turkey, and the Turkish Prime Minister's determination to eradicate this "parallel structure" entrenched in the state.

Turning talk into action, the Prime Minister paid a visit to Azerbaijan less than one week after the Turkish local elections won by his party and started his attack on the Gülen movement. Thanks not only to his pressure but also because Azerbaijani authorities had their own interest in doing so, the schools were placed under the control of SOCAR, the Azerbaijani State Oil Company. At the same time, some important movement figures were deported from Azerbaijan to Turkey.

In Central Asia, the campaign against the Gülen movement has not yet begun. It will be interesting to see if the

Turkish government will seek to export the witch-hunt used against the movement in Turkey to Central Asia. It is still too early to assess the precise impact of the war between Gülen and Erdoğan in Central Asia. However, what happened in Turkey will constitute a turning point for the movement abroad as well.

Undoubtedly, Erdoğan's authoritarian ways since the beginning of his third term are evident to observers in Central Asia and all these regimes know that what happened in Turkey is most of all a Turkish domestic issue. Hence, few Central Asian regimes have commented on the struggle between the government and its former ally. However, a new period of fear and anxiety likely awaits the Gülen movement in the entire region. First of all, the Gülen movement is losing one of its key allies. The cooperation between the schools and Turkish diplomacy contributed to the movement's positive image. In these countries, it is always reassuring to have a state guarantee behind every civil society movement. In other words, the good relations between the government and the Gülen movement in Turkey had provided the movement with a respectable image in Central Asia.

Secondly, and most worrisome for the future of Gülen schools worldwide, the events in Turkey revealed some hidden aspects of the *hizmet* movement. For years, the movement's promoters have portrayed themselves as a non-political organization, working for better education and for peace and dialogue

among cultures and faiths around the world. After what happened in Turkey, it will be difficult for them to continue claiming apolitical intentions.

Last but not least, although vehemently denied by its representatives, the political crisis in Turkey showed that the Gülen movement has resorted to infiltration of the state structures, the justice system and police, in order to defend itself. In Central Asia and the Caucasus, local authorities will inevitably ask if the Gülen movement will not resort to similar infiltration to reinforce its power in their countries. Yet it is unlikely that the movement will be capable of attaining the same power and influence in those countries for at least one reason. In Turkey, representatives of the Gülen movement managed to infiltrate the police and judiciary because they obtained help and encouragement to do so from the AKP government. In Central Asia and the Caucasus, no regime is likely to allow them a similar influence in the structure of the state. Moreover, whereas in Turkey the movement is rooted in society, in the former Soviet Union it still is to a large extent a Turkish diaspora phenomenon, though it has over time recruited many locals.

CONCLUSIONS: The end of the coalition between Erdoğan and Gülen is a turning point in Turkish politics and Turkish soft power in post-Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus. Whether the movement should be conceived as an opponent to corruption and authoritarianism in Turkey, as it members profess, or a parallel organization infiltrating state structures

and working according to its own agenda, as the Turkish Prime Minister claims, Erdogan's declaration of war on the Gülen movement will have a serious impact on the image and credibility of both parties in Central Asia and the Caucasus. However, although weakened in this region, the Gülen movement has until now limited the damage. The quality of its educational institutions and the fact that many local elites have their children in these schools helps the Gülen movement maintain its position in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Moreover, until now, some of the current regimes have worried about the alliance between these two Turkish Islamic forces, fearing that the Gülen movement could in the long term encourage the development of conservative governments similar to the AKP in the region. Although the split between Erdoğan and Gülen will reconcile these concerns, they will at the same time strengthen their control of the movement in Central Asia to prevent state infiltration.

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SPLIT AMONG NORTH CAUCASIAN FIGHTERS IN SYRIA

Emil Souleimanov

News has recently resurfaced in media outlets across the world referring to Omar al-Shishani, an ethnic Chechen leader of the north-Syrian sector of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), as one of the presently most influential and reputed jihadist leaders. Indeed, since around 2012, when fighters of North Caucasian origin appeared at the forefront of international jihadists engaged in the Syrian civil war, they have become a significant component of the anti-Assad force. They have grouped into various, increasingly divergent, mujahideen armies and their prospective return to the North Caucasus holds significant security implications.

BACKGROUND: Estimated at around a thousand men, the North Caucasians are part of an international force of *mujahideen*, whose numbers are currently assessed to around 10,000 fighters. As such, they are by far less than a decisive force in absolute numbers, yet their influence in Syria has been on the rise due to their commitment, fighting spirit, and last but not least, their gifted military commanders. Most North Caucasian units are composed of Dagestanis and Chechens, though members of other North Caucasian ethnic groups have also volunteered to the Syrian war along with Muslims from other post-Soviet areas.

Jihadist websites in the North Caucasus and elsewhere have frequently quoted individual volunteers to the Syrian war, revealing a number of key motivations among North Caucasians. Resolve to continue fighting the Russians, the quintessential “infidel,” and their allies in the form of al-Assad’s “apostate”

regime, have been among the most quoted. In this regard, Chechen émigré and old diaspora communities scattered around the world have been particularly important sources of recruits. A crucial motivation for members of the former subgroup, though many were born outside Chechnya, has been deprivation of their homeland and often a loss of relatives as a result of Russia’s controversial military campaigns in Chechnya.

Many influential Chechen jihadists have stemmed from northern Georgia’s Kist community, a subethnic group of Chechens located in Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge. Among Kist Chechens, a tiny community of around seven thousand, anti-Russian and jihadist sentiments have increased due to the two subsequent wars in Chechnya, exposure to an explosive mixture of jihadist ideology and Chechen nationalism emanating from neighboring Chechnya, and the presence in the Pankisi area of thousands of Chechen refugees, whose suffering has

motivated many locals to volunteer to the Chechnya wars. By contrast, due to the enormous control exercised by Ramzan Kadyrov's forces in Chechnya, volunteering from Chechnya proper has been rather rare. Dagestanis volunteering to the Syrian war have predominantly stemmed from their native republic, where the jihadist insurgency has recently been on the rise.



(Wikimedia Commons)

Importantly, as indicated in statements by various Chechen and North Caucasian insurgent leaders from Syria, their desire to establish ties with the global jihadist movement has also played a role in North Caucasians' motivations to wage jihad in Syria. Last but not least, interviews delivered by ordinary volunteers from the North Caucasus have revealed the immense appeal of the Syrian jihad; in fact, the extent of jihadist euphoria produced by the feelings of solidarity, resolve, and devotion to the cause among international mujahedeen and their supporters can only be compared to the Soviet-Afghanistan War of the 1980s.

IMPLICATIONS: In Syria, North Caucasian jihadists have chiefly been deployed in the country's northern areas along Turkey's borders. Initially, most North Caucasian volunteers were

part of the *Jaish al-Muhajireen wa'l-Ansar* (Army of Emigrants and Supporters, JMA), commanded by the charismatic Kist Chechen Tarkan Batirashvili, aka Abu Omar ash-Shishani. While fighting alongside ISIS, JMA retained its formal independence until the end of 2013. Omar Shishani then swore an oath to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, currently the most influential jihadist leader. Subsequently, most of the JMA's North Caucasian-manned units merged with ISIS, remaining under Omar Shishani's formal command as the newly appointed leader of ISIS' northern sector in Syria.

Another jihadist group composed of North Caucasians was *Jaish Khilafah al-Islamiyya* (Army of the Islamic Caliphate, JKI), initially part of Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani's *Jabhat an-Nusra li Ahl ash-Sham* (The Support Front for the People of the Levant, JN) until JKI's merger with JMA in late 2013. Until his death in early 2014, this group was commanded by another ethnic Chechen from the Pankisi Gorge, Ruslan Machalikashvili, known as *amir* Sayfullah ash-Shishani.

Aside from these factions, now integrated with large international jihadist armies, other separate groups comprised of, *inter alia*, Chechens and other North Caucasians have co-existed simultaneously in Syria. Most important among them are *Jund al-Sham* (Soldiers of the Levant, JSh) and the remnants of JMA after Shishani's departure to ISIS. JSh is currently under the command of another ethnic Chechen from Georgia, Muslim

Margoshvili, known as Muslim Abu Walid ash-Shishani. Based in the northwestern part of Syria, JSh, comprised of a large contingent of Lebanese Sunnis and North Caucasians, has chiefly fought alongside JN. Led by Salahuddin ash-Shishani, a Chechnya-born Chechen and Omar Shishani's former deputy, JMA has fought in northern Syria along with local jihadist leaders, for instance with the Syrian brigades. While Salahuddin's units have sworn an oath to the Caucasus Emirate, *amir* Muslim has sought to remain independent from any group, even though his units have closely coordinated their activities with JMA.

In 2013, frictions began to occur among various factions of the North Caucasian jihadists. The first sign of internal conflict appeared in mid-2013, when *amir* Omar expelled a group of Sayfullah-led North Caucasian fighters for their "bad manners." It soon appeared that the split was caused by *amir* Omar's desire to join ISIS and his pledge of allegiance to al-Baghdadi, which Sayfullah strongly objected to. Sayfullah instead joined the forces of *amir* Muslim and *amir* Abu Musa Shishani, another prominent Chechen jihadist. Months later, a larger rift occurred when Omar did join ISIS, after which several North Caucasians disapproved of Omar's move and chose to remain in JMA, now under *amir* Salahuddin's command. From then on, both groups have regularly accused each other of various sins: while ISIS-based North Caucasians have decried their JMA-based fellows and "non-aligned" North Caucasian units led by *amir*

Muslim and *amir* Abu Musa for their alleged indecisiveness and nationalism, the latter have accused the former of excessive use of violence against civilians.

CONCLUSIONS: In the upcoming months, the mounting split between various factions of North Caucasian-manned units, closely followed by their North Caucasian sympathizers across the world, will most likely slash the appeal of the Syrian jihad for many prospective jihadists. Against this background, the numbers of Chechen and North Caucasian volunteers willing to participate in the Syrian civil war will most likely decline accordingly. Moreover, some sources suggest that the split within the North Caucasian ranks in Syria may prompt some of them to return to their homeland, a move that a number of jihadist leaders in the North Caucasus and even Syria have approved of. The security repercussions for Russia could be enormous.

In fact, it is unlikely that all of the North Caucasian *mujahedeen* will eventually return home, and the high lethality rate in the Syrian war is just one reason. Some influential and well-known North Caucasian jihadists, for instance *amir* Omar, may choose to remain in the Middle East, aspiring to high-ranking positions in the global jihadist movement instead of isolating themselves in the North Caucasus. Over the course of the war, dozens of North Caucasian jihadists have married Syrian women, and will therefore likely prefer to remain in the area. Others, driven by the jihadist ideology, may

after their Syrian anabasis seek to continue waging the “holy war” in other parts of the Muslim world, not necessarily in their homeland. But even if only part of the “Syrian North Caucasians” eventually manage to return to the North Caucasus, they would help revive the local insurgency movement, now weakened in the aftermath of the counterinsurgency operations related to the Sochi Olympics. Moreover, after the liquidation of the veterans of the two Chechen wars, the insurgency now lacks a new generation of strong leaders. Constituting a force of highly experienced, reputed, and devoted fighters, the “Syrians” could take command of the local insurgent groups, and take advantage of their extensive networks with jihadists both in the Middle East and in various areas of the post-Soviet world.

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AFGHANISTAN'S POST-TALIBAN TELECOMMUNICATIONS REVOLUTION WILL INCLUDE SATELLITE ACCESS

John C.K. Daly

The turmoil that has devastated Afghanistan since the 1979 Soviet invasion and subsequent 2001 Western campaign against the ruling Taliban has left the country in a fragile political state, but its telecommunications sector has thrived. The Afghan government is leasing a telecommunications satellite, which will provide nationwide coverage. Currently all communications in Afghanistan are connected through other countries' satellites. In 2001 when the Western campaign against the Taliban began, the country had a primordial land-based copper wire telephone network.

BACKGROUND: In 2012, the Afghan government announced a tender for satellite services; in April Afghanistan's Communication and Information Technology Minister Amirzai Sangin stated, "We will start the development process of the satellite very soon. It is our priority to solve broadcasting issues and bring all our districts under coverage." Kabul's interest has been driven by the explosive growth in communication services since the overthrow of the Taliban in late 2001. According to Sangin, "Afghanistan... in the last 12 years has already seen mobile telephone coverage of 88 percent and penetration has grown from zero to 75 percent through the licensing of six operators." Internet access currently is largely via satellite, but it is slow and expensive and fewer than one in 10 Afghans are online.

In January 2014, satellite fleet operator Eutelsat began moving the satellite to an orbital slot covering Afghanistan, renaming it Afghansat 1 after signing a contract on January 29 with the Afghan government. Launched in 2008, the satellite has been providing a wide range of services via eight Ku-band transponders. At the signing ceremony in Kabul, Eutelsat chairman and CEO Michel de Rosen said, "This MOU represents the fastest and most effective route to accessing infrastructure configured to deliver full coverage of Afghanistan and surrounding regions. It enables Afghanistan to scale up capacity as and when needed and to offer broadcasters, telcos and ISPs the immediate benefit of resources providing exceptional reach and performance. We are honored to be Afghanistan's chosen partner for this important initiative."

IMPLICATIONS: The satellite, formerly designated W3M, will cover the whole of Afghanistan and beam down upon a larger footprint in the Middle East and Central Asia. Financial terms of the Afghansat 1 lease have not been made public. The Afghan government hopes that Afghansat 1 will improve television coverage in rural areas and increase Internet access countrywide, a potent symbol of progress as insurgents and the government vie for influence and support. Afghansat 1 became operational on May 10.

Afghansat 1 is overseen by Afghanistan's Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT), founded in 1955, before the political turmoil which began in 1979, with the mission of bringing Afghanistan into the information society while preserving the country's cultural heritage. For the past 11 years MCIT has pursued policies of broadening telecommunications liberalization and licensing and has been responsible for the creation of a framework under the Telecommunications Services Regulation Act of Afghanistan to provide affordable and world class telecommunications services via partnerships with the private sector, and foreign and domestic telecommunications sector investors and operators. MCIT's mission is to create and further develop and implement a solid and transparent framework in Afghanistan to bolster development of the country's telecommunications sector.

Television stations in Afghanistan are currently paying massive amounts of money to globalize their telecasts, so the Afghansat 1 satellite could reduce their fees. Furthermore, as most of the country's TV channels are inaccessible in many of the country's villages, access will also improve with the Afghansat 1 satellite. Sangin noted, "Now Afghans can install a small dish antenna to get access to all TV and radio channels across Afghanistan and central Asian countries."

The satellite will also be used for research and monitoring. Afghansat 1 will support a wide range of services including broadcasting, mobile telephone backhaul and IP connectivity. Afghansat 1 has an expected service life of at least seven years in Afghanistan, after which the Afghan government plans to launch or lease Afghansat 2.

The Afghansat 1 satellite will also have a military component. Afghan Ministry of Defense General Zahir Azimi believes that confidentiality of this information is key to using satellite technology, telling reporters, "The first is confidentiality of the data – it is different to have a satellite under your control or one which is in the control of others."

The Afghan government is looking eventually to have its own dedicated satellite launched into orbit. Abdul Malak Nazari, a board member on Afghanistan's telecoms regulator recently noted, "We would like to make a partnership with an international satellite company to launch an Afghan satellite. The company will be selected

through a process of procurement ... they will surely pay for the satellite.” Nazari declined to say how much investment would be needed.



(World Bank)

The question remains if Afghanistan’s incipient satellite potential will become yet another area of struggle between Kabul and the insurgents. In 2007 Sri Lanka’s Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) hijacked an Intelsat-12 geosynchronous “bent-pipe” satellite, whose “dumb” transponders rebroadcast anything that they received within their frequency band to retransmit their message through Intelsat-12 30 main transponders, of which eight were dedicated to the Indian subcontinent, and 11 backup transponders. Intelsat-12 subsequently beamed down LTTE messages to the satellite’s footprint, located by utilizing a spectrum analyzer in conjunction with a satellite-receiving dish at a cost of only a few hundred dollars for hardware and software to identify the Intelsat-12 transponders’ “empty” space. As the Eutelsat 28B was launched the following year in 2008, it is unlikely that the satellite’s eight Ku-band transponders are equipped with onboard processing technology, as a decade ago the technology for blocking

pirate signals roughly doubled the cost of satellites.

The U.S. also intends to use satellites to monitor events in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the bulk of its military forces by December 2014, with USAID officials finalizing a US\$ 200 million project to use smart phones, GPS-enabled cameras and satellite imagery to monitor relief projects that will continue in areas deemed too remote or unsafe for Americans to visit after the withdrawal.

CONCLUSIONS: Technology in Afghanistan is a double-edged sword, as the Taliban increasingly use cell phones to detonate IEDs. The development of a cellular telephone network, boosted by satellite relays, is a technological advancement that all except the most conservative Afghans can appreciate.

The unprecedented growth of Afghanistan’s electronic media is a major governmental achievement during the last decade, which includes the Internet, social media such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, along with 89 television and 220 radio stations. In the sphere of television, besides Afghansat 1, the government has also converted its analog TV system into digital. Under the Taliban regime, Afghans had to go to Pakistan to make international phone calls, but today almost 90 percent of the population has access to mobile services countrywide.

As the LTTE’s experience in Sri Lanka proves, all modern technology can potentially be diverted to insurgent ends, and the development of an

indigenous Afghan satellite capability is not necessarily beyond the reach of those hostile to the present administration. It is unclear as to what the political landscape of Afghanistan will look like following the drawdown of the majority of ISAF and U.S. troops from Afghanistan in December 2014, given the current uncertainty of the signing of a bilateral U.S.-Afghan Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). But what has changed since 2001 is the evident embrace to a limited extent by both the Taliban and its affiliates of certain aspects of telecommunications advances. What is beyond doubt is that whatever Afghan faction ultimately prevails in the post-Karzai, post-U.S. military presence, the utility and ubiquity of satellite-based telecommunications is both too pervasive and too alluring to ignore.

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IRAN AND AFGHANISTAN: MORE OF THE SAME

Richard Weitz

Iran's growing role in Iraq to counter the Sunni militants there has attracted increasing attention in recent weeks, but Tehran looks likely to assume a more prominent role in Afghanistan as well. Iranians see challenges as well as opportunities in both countries, where actors hostile to Iranian interests are active. The civil strife in Iraq and Afghanistan easily spills over into Iran, and their governments turn primarily to Washington for military support despite their growing ties with Tehran. In Afghanistan, Iran has pursued a complex multi-layer strategy designed to pursue its diverse and competing objectives.

BACKGROUND: Iran and Afghanistan share a 582-mile (936 km) border, as well as significant cultural and historical ties. The Dari language is similar to Iranian Farsi. Iranians have maintained close relations with Afghanistan's Dari-speaking communities, its Shi'a groups (predominantly the Hazaras), and the Tajiks in Afghanistan for decades. Most of these groups live in western Afghanistan, which Iran has historically viewed as falling within its sphere of influence. Tehran's goals in Afghanistan have been to stabilize the Afghan-Iranian border areas, minimize the influence of unfriendly governments in Afghanistan, and have an Afghan government in Kabul that cooperates with Tehran.

Despite these connections, Afghanistan's complexity has traditionally limited the influence of the country's more powerful neighbors. Afghanistan has suffered greatly throughout its history from predatory neighbors, widespread poverty,

narcotics dependency, weak central governments dominated by regional warlords, and recurring ethnic and sectarian strife. From the 16th century until the early 20th century, Iran and Afghanistan engaged in numerous military conflicts and ideological battles. Afghanistan's internal problems have regularly harmed Iran's national security and socio-economic conditions, such as forcing Iran to house vast numbers of Afghan refugees. Afghanistan has also been a breeding ground for Sunni fundamentalists, who regard Iranian Shias as heretics.



(Embassy of Afghanistan in Iran)

Since Afghan Shiites comprise only about 19 percent of the population, Tehran has not tried to promote an Iranian-type Islamic regime in

Afghanistan or explicitly align the country's foreign policy with that of Tehran. Instead, Iranian officials have called for a multi-ethnic federal government in Afghanistan that pursues a neutral foreign policy independent of Pakistan, the U.S., or other governments. A major Iranian goal has been to enhance security along the Afghan-Iranian border. The Iranian provinces bordering Afghanistan suffer from Sunni extremism, Balochi separatism, disputed water access, drug trafficking, terrorist attacks, and other criminal activities.

Iran has suffered heavily from the export of Afghan narcotics into and through Iran. In addition to Iran's role as a transit state, the county has more than one million drug addicts who consume Afghan opiates, including heroin and other narcotics. Iranian border forces regularly engage in firefights with Afghan narcotics traffickers, whose bribing of Iranian officials contributes to local corruption. In its anti-narcotics policies, Iran has collaborated most closely with the Afghanistan and Pakistan governments since Western sanctions limit opportunities to work directly with NATO.

Iran believes that the instability in Afghanistan contributes to the insurgency in Iran's Baluchistan province. It is the poorest and most neglected of province and is predominantly inhabited by Baluchis, an ethnic group whose population lives in Afghanistan and Pakistan as well. They mainly adhere to Sunni Islam and have traditionally refused to accept

central authority, especially in Iran and Pakistan.

Iran has also had to support a large Afghan refugee population. Many Afghans sought refuge in Iran during the Soviet invasion, the civil war and the Taliban's reign. Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent invasion by the U.S.-led coalition forces, more Afghans fled the country, with many of them ending up in refugee camps in Iran. UNHCR's latest figures put the number of registered Afghans inside Iran at over a million. Although generally considered a burden, Tehran has exploited the refugee situation as a tool of influence in Afghanistan. For example its periodic deportations of refugees back to Afghanistan have reminded Kabul that it needs Tehran to keep hosting most refugees until the Afghanistan economy recovers sufficiently to absorb a larger refugee return. There has been recent evidence that some Iranians have been recruiting Afghan refugees to fight for pro-Iranian groups in Syria.

IMPLICATIONS: After 9/11, Tehran welcomed the U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan for eliminating the Taliban-led government in Kabul. The Afghan Taliban had aligned with extremist Sunni movements and governments hostile to Iran and engaged in a protracted ideological confrontation with Iran's regime. Yet, Iran feared U.S. domination in the region and U.S. aspirations to see regime change in Tehran. Furthermore, Iranian leaders have worried that an alternative, competing and pro-Western political

model in Afghanistan might trigger unrest among Iranians seeking a less oppressive political system. While the U.S. and Iran have common regional interests such as preventing the Taliban from returning to power and promoting a stable Afghanistan, their enmity has led Iran to pursue an Afghanistan policy designed to counter U.S. influence in the country.

Iran has sought to promote Afghanistan's economic, political, and security recovery in order to reduce the role of the U.S. in Afghanistan. Since 2001, Iran has provided almost US\$ 1 billion worth of foreign assistance to Afghanistan. Although some of these funds support humanitarian projects, they still aim to increase Iranian influence in Afghanistan. Iran has worked to transform Herat – a major city in Afghanistan that serves as a gateway to Iran – into an economic buffer zone and also cultivated local proxies independent of the Kabul government. While Iranian economic influence is most visible in western Afghanistan, Iran has also established economic projects in other provinces, laying the option for a more comprehensive connection between the two economies.

Just as Iran has sought to unite the various Iraqi Shiite groups under its control, Iran has been supporting, empowering, and uniting Afghanistan's various Dari-speaking minority communities (the Shiite Hazaras, Tajiks and Uzbeks) that have been Tehran's traditional allies. In addition to supporting their development of independent local power centers, Iran

has promoted the teaching and study of the Persian language to help raise cultural awareness of the shared linguistic traditions of the Iranian and Afghan peoples. Furthermore, Iran has pushed to have its allies well represented in the Afghan federal government. But political and religious divisions among these groups, including over the question of how closely to align with Iran, have prevented them from forming a united front on Tehran's behalf.

According to various sources, just as the Iranian Revolutionary Guards supported the anti-U.S. insurgents in Iraq before all U.S. forces' withdrew from that country in December 2011, some Iranians have allegedly assisted Taliban fighters, warlords such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and other groups fighting the U.S. military in Afghanistan. Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates accused Tehran of playing a "double game" of "offering friendship to the Afghan government" while at the same time giving "low-level support" and money to the Taliban. Yet, this support has been on a much smaller scale than Iran has provided its military allies in Iraq and of a considerably lower magnitude than that provided by Pakistanis to the Afghan Taliban.

Furthermore, Iran has also sought to develop ties with Russia, China, and Central Asian countries whose influence in Afghanistan might dilute that of the U.S. Iranian diplomats have pursued such diplomatic campaigns bilaterally as well as through multilateral structures, such as the

United Nations, the Shanghai Cooperation Council and more recently the CICA.

Tehran has also been cultivating relations with Afghan government leaders, including President Hamid Karzai. In October 2010, Karzai stated that Iran has been providing approximately US\$ 2 million per year for his government's budget. Karzai initially sought to develop ties with Tehran to reduce Iranian interference against his government, such as by curtailing its backing of independent regional power brokers, but more recently Karzai has seemed to woo Iran to balance and even antagonize Washington. It is unclear if Karzai's successor will continue this provocative policy.

CONCLUSIONS: Despite the declining Western military presence in Afghanistan, Iranian officials continue to encourage the Kabul government and Iran's local Afghan allies to limit U.S. influence in Afghanistan. Iran has been one of the few Eurasian states whose government has explicitly opposed a continued U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan. Iranian diplomats lobbied Afghan leaders not to ratify the U.S.-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement, which was adopted in 2012, or the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA), which awaits Afghan ratification. The BAS would enable U.S. troops to remain in Afghanistan beyond 2014. Yet, whereas Iran is now considering intervening militarily in Iraq, the continued deployment of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, along with the country's smaller Shiite population and

the concerns of Russia and other governments, has excluded that option for now.

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AZERBAIJAN STRUGGLES TO REMAIN UNALIGNED IN WAKE OF UKRAINE CRISIS

Mina Muradova

The ongoing crisis in Ukraine has pushed several post-Soviet countries to decide whether they are primarily oriented toward the West or Russia. On June 27, Azerbaijan's neighbor Georgia, along with Ukraine and Moldova, signed landmark partnership agreements with the European Union, which establish closer economic ties between these economically weak states and the EU. They obligate the countries to observe EU regulations governing customs, exports, and economic competition, and will allow them access to European markets.

At the same time, Azerbaijan's other neighbor, Armenia, has committed to joining the Russia-dominated Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus signed an agreement on the establishment of the EEU in Astana on May 29. The summit was also attended by Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan, who nevertheless did not sign the agreement but asked for additional time.

Yet Baku has stuck to a pragmatic approach and has publicly rejected the Kremlin's invitation to join the EEU, while being in no apparent hurry to enter any other agreement. Azerbaijan's broader foreign policy of regional balance, favoring Euro-Atlantic integration while at the same time seeking to maintain good relations with Russia, allow Baku to reap benefits from all possible partnerships.

In June 2014, Russian ministers and high-level officials visited Azerbaijan to persuade Baku to enter closer cooperation with Moscow. Russia's Economy Minister Alexei Ulyukayev visited Baku in early June to discuss economic cooperation and invite Azerbaijan to join the EEU. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov then arrived on June 18-19 for a continuation of what he described as "a most active dialogue." In addition, Azerbaijan hosted visits by Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, Duma Speaker Sergei Naryshkin, and Development Minister Igor Slyunayev.

"Azerbaijan is our strategic partner ... Our cooperation is being actively developed not only in a two-side format, but also in multi-side directions, including issues of stability and security in the Southern Caucasus and Caspian region," Lavrov said at a news conference in Baku on June 18. The two sides discussed the situation in Ukraine, and Lavrov said that Azerbaijan has not been formally invited to join either the Customs Union or the EEU, but added that Moscow would welcome any partner interested in collaboration with those organizations.

Baku has indicated that it has no plans to join those blocs. "Azerbaijan yet has no intentions and doesn't think about joining the Eurasian Union," the Deputy Head (and Director of the

Foreign Relations Department) of Azerbaijan's Presidential Administration, Novruz Mammadov, told reporters on June 11.

According to Lavrov, the frozen conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh will not affect the Eurasian integration processes: "it is a subject of other international negotiations." Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev previously remarked that "the treaty with Yerevan must have a special provision about Armenia's internationally recognized borders that do not encompass Nagorno-Karabakh."

Commenting on Armenia's accession to the Eurasian Union, Mammadov stressed that Azerbaijan has no reason to express any concern on this issue. Referring to an appeal from Baku to the presidents of Russia, Kazakhstan and Belorussia, that Armenia can join any organization under the same conditions as outlined in the treaty with the World Trade Organization, meaning within its internationally-recognized borders, Mammadov stressed that "this is our demand and it will be fulfilled." Yet it is still unclear how this will be controlled.

Armenia's ruling party insists that Karabakh will not join the EEU *de jure*, but Gagik Minasyan, the head of the committee on financial and budgetary affairs at the Armenian parliament, said that Armenia's membership in the EEU will open new economic opportunities for Nagorno-Karabakh. Minasyan stressed that "Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh are a single economic area and there can be no customs point between them."

It appears that Azerbaijan's refusal to join the EEU will not prevent continued arms sales from Russia. Dmitry Rogozin, who is overseeing the Russian defense industry and heading the Azerbaijan-Russia intergovernmental commission for cooperation also visited Baku in June.

According to the Atlas Analytical Research Centre, "The arms deals are beneficial for both Moscow and Baku. Moscow will get more money from arms sales and will keep Azerbaijan as a traditional market for Russian arms, while Baku will keep a strategic partnership on a high level and insure itself from serious problems with its Northern neighbor." According to Atlas, Russian weapons sales makes up 80 percent of all Azerbaijan's arms deals, which totaled about US\$ 4 billion in the last four years and has included the transfer of many advanced systems to Azerbaijan.

In addition, Azerbaijan is willing to enhance its economic and humanitarian cooperation with Russia. Eleven commercial agreements were signed at a big Azerbaijan-Russia economic forum held in Gabala, with the participation of over 200 representatives from 25 regions of the Russian Federation. The sides discussed the expansion of transit traffic for all types of transport and agreed to ease border crossing procedures, particularly for automobile traffic.

Andrey Kazantsev, Director of the Analytical Center at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, noted that the visits of Moscow's emissaries to Baku constitute an

attempt to maintain Russia's sphere of influence in post-Soviet countries: "the competition for influence in post-Soviet countries has increased. While some of them have already determined who they are going to be with, there are still countries which continue to keep multi-direction policies and here either Russia or the West increases their efforts to attract them."

According to Kazantsev, the U.S. is seeking to isolate Russia diplomatically due to its position on the Ukrainian crisis, and Russia is in turn trying to counteract these moves through the post-Soviet countries. Another key reason for Moscow's activities is to brief Baku regarding Armenia's accession to the EEU to avoid harming its strategic partnership with Azerbaijan, which is justified by arms sales and other economic agreements.

GEORGIA TAKES A STEP CLOSER TO THE EU

Eka Janashia

On June 27, Georgia's Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, the European Council's President Herman van Rompuy, and the European Commission's President José Manuel Barroso signed the Association Agreement (AA) including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), which was initialed at the EU's Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius in November 2013. At the same ceremony, the EU inked the AA with Ukraine and Moldova. The AA sets priorities for the period of 2014-2016 to achieve closer political association and economic integration between Tbilisi and the EU.

"It is very difficult to express in words the feelings I am experiencing now. June 27 will be remembered as a historic and special day. Today a new big date is being written in the history of my homeland, which gives hope and which our future generations will be proud of," PM Garibashvili said at the signing ceremony. In his speech, Garibashvili also addressed Abkhazians and South Ossetians, pledging that a step towards the EU will bring benefits for them too.

The signature of the AA was initially planned for the end of this year but developments in Ukraine induced Brussels to accelerate the process. The AA has replaced the EU-Georgia European Neighborhood Policy Action Plan of 2006 and involves both political and economic components. It envisages

reforms aimed at enhancing the quality of democracy by strengthening the rule of law, independence of the judiciary, respect for human rights, as well as peaceful conflict resolution, and cooperation on justice, freedom, and security. The economic component includes the DCFTA and stipulations on cooperation in the energy, transport, employment and social policy sectors.

To this end, Georgia should establish an adequate institutional framework comprising an Association Council, committees, subcommittees and trade-related working groups as well as monitoring mechanisms which will ensure Georgia's gradual approximation to EU standards and regulations in trade, customs procedures and quality controls. Although the process of approximation does not imply eventual integration with the EU, it paves the way for potential membership at some point in the future.

Georgia is supposed to ratify the agreement in the second half of July. Whereas the process of ratification by the parliaments of EU member states might take several years, the treaty foresees provisional application that could start tentatively in October 2014.

The EU will support the process of implementing the AA through providing financial, technical, information sharing and capacity building support. In July, Brussels envisages the adoption of new

assistance programs worth 101 million Euros to advance Georgia's justice sector and the potential of small and medium business.

After signing the AA, PM Garibashvili welcomed Russia's "constructive" approach. In his words, Moscow pledged not to obstruct the process and it kept the promise. However, on June 25, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that if the DCFTA between the EU, Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova harms the free trade regime of the Commonwealth of Independent States' (CIS), Moscow will apply "protective measures in complete accordance with the WTO rules." In response, European Commission President José Manuel Barroso stated that "these Agreements are for something, not against anyone" and that the EU does not seek exclusive relationship with these partners.

The Trade Sustainability Impact Assessment 2012 report, commissioned by the EU, examined the DCFTA's potential impact on Georgia's economy. It suggests that the DCFTA might increase Georgia's GDP by 4.3 percent in the long-term. Tentatively, full implementation of the trade-related reforms will increase Georgia's exports to the EU by 12 percent and its imports by 7.5 percent, which will improve the country's long-lasting trade deficit.

While these estimations are based on a long-term perspective, it is unclear what the immediate consequences would be of the "protective measures" that Moscow may impose on Georgia due to the alleged negative implications of DCFTAs between the EU, Georgia,

Ukraine and Moldova for the CIS free trade zone. Georgian and Russian experts have even arranged technical consultations to examine the potential effects of the DCFTA on trade between Russia and Georgia.

According to Georgia's state statistics office, Georgia's export to CIS member countries in January-May 2014 reached US\$ 627.6 million, compared to US\$ 253 million to the EU. Moreover, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia constituted Georgia's largest export markets at US\$ 240.4 million, 129.7 million, and 108.3 million, respectively.

However, the DCFTA does not restrict the existence of FTAs between Georgia and other countries. Georgia has bilateral free trade agreements (FTA) with major trading partners including Russia and Turkey, and penetration into the EU market will not necessarily take place at the detriment of those of post-Soviet countries.

Although the AA has both political and economic components, the latter has attracted more attention from the public and observers. Most Georgians seemingly assess the agreement in light of the opportunities the AA may provide in terms of improving welfare and the country's overall economic performance rather than as an instrument for enhancing the quality of democracy.

NEW TENSIONS BETWEEN KYRGYZSTAN AND UZBEKISTAN

Arslan Sabyrbekov

In response to Uzbekistan's decision to stop supplying gas to southern Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek considers blocking the water coming to the Grand Namangan Canal under the guise of making long awaited reparations. This, according to many experts, is not a constructive decision and will simply further worsen bilateral relations. But Bishkek's efforts to establish contacts with Uzbek colleagues did not bring any results. Silence from Tashkent is generating speculations and a spread of rumors from both sides about the deterioration of relations between the two neighbors.

On April 14, 2014, Uzbekistan stopped supplying gas to southern Kyrgyzstan. In Osh city, over 60,000 people remain without gas. The reason for the plight of Osh residents is the fact that in early April 2014, the Kyrgyz government reached an agreement with Russia's state company Gazprom to sell its 100 percent share of Kyrgyzgaz Company, in exchange for investments and an uninterrupted supply of gas. Formally, Tashkent did not violate the terms of its contract with the Kyrgyz side, according to which the Uzbek gas monopoly has the right to terminate the supply of natural gas to Kyrgyzstan in case of a Company ownership change. This, according to Kyrgyz economist Dzhumakadyr Akeneyev, "should have been foreseen by the Kyrgyz authorities during the long negotiation process

with the Russian side over the transfer of Kyrgyzgaz ownership to them."

According to Kyrgyzstan's Prime Minister Djoomart Otorbaev, Bishkek's efforts to establish contact with Uzbek authorities did not bring any results. His letter to his Uzbek counterpart to resume gas supply to Kyrgyzstan's southern residents did not bring any reaction. "Gazprom took upon itself obligations to uninterruptedly supply gas to Kyrgyzstan, and is currently holding talks with Tashkent," stated Otorbaev. Gazprom, which is often considered as an instrument of Russia's foreign policy, is also active in Uzbekistan, but mainly in its western part, close to the Aral Sea. Theoretically, Gazprom's operation in Uzbekistan could sell Uzbek gas to a Gazprom subsidiary in Kyrgyzstan, and according to experts, the price would be cheaper. For Uzbekistan, this seems to be a bad deal since its gas will be sold to its former customer at a relatively lower price. But to deliver Uzbek gas to Kyrgyzstan, Gazprom still needs to use the pipelines of Uztransgas, the company in charge of transporting gas and liquid hydrocarbons produced in Uzbekistan to domestic consumers and for export. Building a pipeline across southern Kazakhstan is not an option since it will take many years and is too costly. Thus, negotiations will be intense and their outcome remains unclear.

From the very first days when Uzbekistan stopped supplying natural gas to southern Kyrgyzstan, heavy discussions have taken place in Bishkek over conducting reparation works in the Grand Namangan Canal, located in the country's southern Jalal-Abad region. Kyrgyzstan's Deputy Prime Minister Abdrakhman Mamataliev stated, "Since the Canal's construction in 1957, reparation works took place only twice, and we might have to close it temporarily and carry out all the needed works." Indeed, no one questions that the Grand Namangan Canal must be repaired, but taking into account the fact that it is summer and the water is crucial for Uzbekistan's harvest, the decision is not constructive and will massively damage ordinary Uzbek citizens working in agricultural sector. Fortunately, not all key figures in the Kyrgyz government support this idea.

Kyrgyzstan's First Vice-Prime Minister Tayirbek Sarpashev said that Kyrgyzstan should not take such a step and revert to provocations. In his words, "Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are brotherly nations, with cultural, economic and political ties. Ups and downs are common between neighbors and it is simply wrong to intimidate someone."

In the meantime, Kyrgyzstan's opposition leaders were quick to use the situation to criticize the authorities. According to them, this demonstrates the government's inability to carry out its functions, despite its assurances to the population of uninterrupted gas supply. The government is also being

criticized for its inability to conduct an independent foreign policy, i.e. to establish direct contact with the authorities of the neighboring state and involving Gazprom in the negotiations is only further complicating the state of bilateral relations.

The author writes in his personal capacity. The views expressed are his own and do not represent the views of the organization for which he works.

FREE MEDIA STRUGGLES IN TAJIKISTAN

Oleg Salimov

The fact that free media in Tajikistan is subjected to persecution was once again confirmed earlier this spring by a Tajik court ruling against the local media outlet Asia-Plus. In June 2014, Asia-Plus submitted a supervisory complaint to Tajikistan's Supreme Court after its appeal was rejected by the city court of Dushanbe. The Supreme Court is the last authority to decide on the Asia-Plus case. There is little hope that the Supreme Court will annul the previous decrees.

The case, which became known as "Intelligentsia vs Asia-Plus," was initiated by a group of Tajik intellectual organizations in the summer 2013 and was intended to protect them from a supposed insult published in one of Asia-Plus's articles. In her editorial column, the author, Olga Tutubalina, criticized the country's public figures of fawning upon President Rakhmon. However, the intelligentsia was insulted not by the accusation of fawning but by Tutubalina's citation of Vladimir Lenin, who infamously compared the intelligentsia to waste products. Avoiding expressing her disgust for Rakhmon and his entourage directly, Tutubalina veiled her antipathy to the country's elite with a metaphor borrowed from the Bolshevik leader. Tutubalina's article denounced the Tajik intelligentsia as serving as a trumpet of authoritarianism. According to her, the Tajik intelligentsia has abandoned its primary mission of

constituting an intellectual driving force of democracy in favor of personal gain.

The central theme of Tutubalina's article discussed the poet Bozor Sobir's return to Tajikistan from exile in the U.S.. Sobir was one of the founders of the Democratic Party of Tajikistan and a member of the now non-existing opposition movement "Rastokhez" (the Renaissance), and was personally invited to return by Rakhmon. Tutubalina was indignant with Sobir's first public statement after his arrival on the superfluous and harmful number of political parties in Tajikistan, including the largest opposition party Islamic Renaissance. To the surprise of many, Sobir openly attacked his former political companions. Previously a vocal proponent of democracy in Tajikistan, Sobir revived himself as Rakhmon's personal eulogist, autocracy advocate, and the highest appointed leader of Tajikistan's intelligentsia. Sobir appealed to the Tajik intelligentsia to unite around Rakhmon and provide him with unreserved support.

Although the freedom of expression guaranteed by the Tajik Constitution allows Tutubalina and Asia-Plus to deliver their interpretation of political realities in the country, the government restricts this right through censorship and control of all published materials. In the Asia-Plus case, Rakhmon, acting through the intelligentsia, signals that

negative information with reference to the president or government in Tajikistan is unacceptable.

Notably, on the initiative of Tajik National Communication Council in 2012, the government authorized a special unit within Tajikistan's security services which censors all information about Tajikistan flowing in and out of the country with the purpose of creating a positive image of the current regime. The unit filters online publications, monitors social networking websites, and controls the national mass media. Tajikistan's public is fed only materials deemed appropriate. The Asia-Plus case is a clear example of the authorities' information filtering and image-building activities.

The use of influential public figures is the latest invention designed to reinvigorate Rakhmon's withering image of the country's "savior" and the current authoritarian style of governing as the only way to ensuring prosperity and stability for Tajikistan. The intelligentsia, including the representatives of four social, scientific, and professional organizations – though not including Sobir, the only intelligentsia representative directly named and addressed in the article – quickly rebounded with a lawsuit against Asia-Plus and Olga Tutubalina. The intelligentsia refrained from protesting their alleged behavior but instead quoted the crude quotation of Vladimir Lenin as an insult.

In February 2014, the district court ruled in favor of the intelligentsia and obliged Asia-Plus and Tutubalina to

publish a disclaimer and pay around US\$ 6,000 compensation to the plaintiffs. Later, the city court of Dushanbe contended this decision. Concerns regarding the Asia-Plus and Tutubalina case were expressed by Human Rights Watch, the chairman of the guild of Tajik journalists, Tajik human rights and social activists, and the U.S. embassy in Tajikistan. However, none had any apparent effect on the protection of press freedom and freedom of expression. Instead, Tajikistan's government works zealously to improve and maintain the "appropriate" image of the country's president and regime.