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The Potential for Mass Unrest in Soviet Central Asia

A Research Paper

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The Potential for Mass Unrest in Soviet Central Asia

A Research Paper

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The Potential for Mass Unrest in Soviet Central Asia

Summary

Information available as of 1 August 1990 was used in this report.

Central Asia faces what is likely to be a prolonged period of unrest. Underlying the sporadic but intense violence that has erupted since last year are deteriorating economic and ecological conditions, the rising expectations of a predominantly youthful population, and emerging grassroots protest and nationalist movements. These factors are likely to fuel continued sporadic outbreaks of violence into the 1990s—both against the presence of Russians and other nonnative nationalities and between native populations.

Over the next two to three years, Moscow's challenge in Central Asia is likely to evolve from policing outbreaks of violence to dealing with outright defiance of its policies by republic regimes and, in the region's poorest and most Islamic areas, insurrectionist and secessionist movements. Unwilling and unable to expend the resources necessary to address the area's problems, Moscow is, for now, assuming a passive posture, leaving implementation of political and economic reform to the republic regimes. For their part, the local regimes have both adopted aspects of the nationalist agenda themselves and largely repressed the growth of nationalist, Islamic, and reform movements capable of mounting a political challenge to them. This strategy—aided by the still traditional, paternalistic political culture of Central Asia—has bought them some time. This success in blocking popular challenges, however, may itself provoke violence as social tensions build up and legal outlets of expression are denied to opposition forces

Moscow's response to mass upheaval or separatist pressures in the region will vary depending upon the demographic and economic character of the area involved. If the Russian population in industrialized northern Kazakhstan or along the Caspian coast, for example, were faced with mass interethnic violence or a separatist challenge from a militantly nationalist regime, Moscow would almost certainly defend Russian lives, property, and right to remain in the Soviet Union. If confronted, however, with long-term police problems or a separatist challenge in areas where Muslims predominate and which are already estranged from the center—for example, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kirghiziya—Moscow would be much more likely to consider cutting its losses and repatriate the Russian settler population.

A happy ending for Moscow in the region would require a restoration of economic growth at the national level and a political environment in which Moscow could reach agreement with republic governments on measures to help solve Central Asia's massive problems. Avoiding ecological and economic catastrophe would require considerably reduced cotton production and costly measures to deal with the water crisis—most likely including a diversion of waters from northern rivers, which is opposed by environmentalists and Russian nationalists. Even then, poverty would remain widespread and instability would be chronic. For the foreseeable future, the authorities will face explosive divisions over such issues as the role of Islam, the place of the nonnative settlers, unemployment, shortages of land and water, population control, and outmigration, as well as the continuing potential for the emergence of a strong secessionist movement.

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Figure 1
Unrest in Soviet Central Asia, 1 January 1989–30 June 1990

The Potential for Mass Unrest in Soviet Central Asia

Growing Unrest: A Portent for Central Asia's Future

Central Asian history has alternated between long periods of quietude and bursts of intense turmoil. After the Russian conquest was largely completed by the late 1880s, the Central Asians made sporadic violent efforts to throw off Moscow's rule from 1916 to the early 1930s. This unrest culminated in the Basmachi revolt, which at its height in 1922-23 controlled substantial territory. Decades of repression, forced calm, and a degree of economic progress followed until 1986, when riots broke out in Alma-Ata and other cities in Kazakhstan over the appointment of a Russian party secretary. Since then, the area has reentered what is likely to be a prolonged period of unrest.

By 1989 sporadic violence had become widespread throughout the region. Initially, the incidents seemed to be spontaneous interethnic brawls among youths, but increasingly they have taken on a political character. Demonstrations whose themes were Islamic and antiforeign (that is, against nationalities that had come to the region in modern times) occurred in Tashkent. Riots largely directed against outside nationalities broke out in Ashkhabad and Nebit-Dag in Turkmeniya, Dushanbe in Tajikistan, and Novyy Uzen' in Kazakhstan, culminating in June with the Fergana Valley riots in Uzbekistan. Over a three-week period, the Fergana disturbances—the bloodiest since the Russian civil war—resulted in 115 fatalities and the military evacuation of 18,000 nonnative Meskhetian Turk refugees.

With the general increase in social tension, clashes took place among the Central Asian nationalities themselves—either across borders or in areas of mixed population. In July 1989, when Tajik and Kirghiz villagers engaged in battles across the border in the Isfara Valley, a thousand Interior Ministry (MVD) Internal Troops were needed to restore order. Similar disputes erupted along the Kirghiz-Kazakh and Uzbek-Turkmen borders and in a district of Tajikistan with a large Uzbek minority.

Even political activism that remained largely in peaceful channels emphasized anti-Soviet and anti-Russian themes. In Tashkent, for example, tens of thousands of students and intellectuals repeatedly protested the use of the Russian language instead of Uzbek in public business, demanding that Uzbek officials toughen the republic draft law requiring greater use of Uzbek. Similar campaigns resulted in language laws in Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kirghiziya. Ecological concerns prompted demonstrations by "Greens" against the Rogun power dam in Tajikistan and by activists against nuclear testing at Semipalatinsk in Kazakhstan. Religious concerns spurred a Tashkent protest in March 1989 that forced the regional Islamic leader—long regarded by Soviet Muslims as a tool of Moscow—to resign.

Following a general calming in late 1989, disorders resumed in the spring of this year, becoming even more violent, spreading to previously quiet areas, and involving increasing attacks on governmental facilities and the political leadership of the republics. Overall—although previous riot areas have retained a surface calm—a high level of general social tension and interethnic hostility exists throughout the region, as attested in reports from residents and travelers. For example, a [redacted] visiting the Fergana Valley in late 1989 found Uzbeks still in a belligerent mood toward nonnatives, and the last remaining Meskhetians were trying to sell their belongings and emigrate. In Tashkent and Dushanbe, high anxiety among European settlers was evidenced by the unavailability of departing train tickets and shipping crates for months to come.

In February the Tajik SSR's capital, Dushanbe—which had been relatively calm—exploded in several days of rioting in which 22 people were killed and hundreds injured. Muslim extremists played a major part in organizing the disturbances and were supported to some degree by Mujahidin agents from Afghanistan, according to local accounts [redacted]

Figure 2. Militant youths lead protests with a strong Muslim element in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, in February.

A group of high-ranking party and government officials used the protests in an unsuccessful attempt to oust the leadership of the Tajikistan Communist Party.

In June in the Kirghiz SSR—the quietest republic to this point—the most violent disorders to date exploded in Osh at the eastern end of the Fergana Valley. Beginning as a clash between young Kirghiz trying to seize land to build houses and ethnic Uzbeks who were farming the same land, the riots spread throughout the oblast as ethnic bands hunted each other and crowds burned police and public buildings. Some 3,000 troops were required to restore order and seal off the Uzbekistan border, preventing a crowd of 15,000 Uzbeks from seeking revenge in Kirghiziya. In Frunze, the Kirghiz SSR capital, nationalist groups led 5,000 students in several days of demonstrations, prompting the republic leadership to declare a state of emergency. In the week of disorders at least 200 persons were killed and over a thousand were injured.

Factors Shaping the Unrest

Economic and Ecological Squeeze

Central Asia is caught in an economic and ecological squeeze: population growth (2.1 percent per year) is outstripping economic growth, resulting in increasing unemployment and poverty. The problem has reached crisis proportions in the Aral Sea basin forming the southern half of the region. At current rates of growth, this already highly populated belt will add about 12 million people by the year 2000. Dense population combined with excessive cultivation of cotton, the region's chief export and largest employer of non-Russians, is straining ecological limits, in particular water resources. The Aral Sea is threatened with virtual disappearance because the rivers that feed it are almost totally used for irrigation. Expansion of agriculture has nearly ended, and a major cutback may be required in the future. The republic regimes have recently begun to grapple with

Unrest and the Aral Sea Crisis

The Aral Sea crisis highlights the interrelatedness of ecological deterioration, economic problems, and unrest in Central Asia. If the sea continues to dry up in the next 20 years, the blowing salt and sand from the old sea bottom, combined with associated climatic changes, may progressively destroy the fragile oases to the south and to the east and merge them with the surrounding deserts. Already tens of thousands of people have been displaced along the former coastline; another 3.5 million people live nearby in agricultural areas extending about 300 kilometers down the Amu Darya and Syrdar'ya. These areas could be threatened by "desertification" in the next five to 10 years. If so, a large portion of these people would be forced to move to other overcrowded areas whose inhabitants are already resentful of outsiders in their midst. Stabilizing the sea at its current reduced level could retard this process but would require restoration of about two-thirds of the previous inflow from the Amu Darya and Syrdar'ya (about 35 cubic kilometers of water per year). Current efforts to restore the flow into the sea through more efficient water use and some substitution of food crops for cotton production are likely to produce only about half the water needed (10 to 20 km³), according to Soviet and Western experts. One alternative to save the Aral is to substantially reduce agricultural activity. This would require a major relocation of rural population—a task so likely to raise opposition that no political leader has raised it as a serious possibility. Another alternative would be to obtain water from Siberia, a project that would be fiercely fought by Russian ecology activists and officials.

these problems by such measures as cutting cotton production and forming a regional council for joint action. In their initial declaration in June, the five republic leaders called for a revival of the controversial plan to provide additional water to the region by a diversion from the rivers of Siberia. However, continued deterioration and ecological disaster are probably unavoidable.

The rural employment problem reached an acute stage in the mid-1980s, when the capacity to absorb additional agricultural labor approached its limits: the expansion of irrigated land slowed, and cotton production encroached on the land available for labor-intensive private food production. Other safety valves for absorbing excess labor also closed: economic reform required collective farms to stop adding new workers, and the anticorruption campaign attacked the thriving black market. As a result, masses of young people reaching maturity were prevented from establishing a household by unemployment and by the lack of housing and new private agricultural plots.

Employment in the industrial sector has also failed to absorb substantial numbers of excess labor force entrants. In general, as the whole Soviet economy stagnated in the late 1970s, industrial investment in Central Asia began to fall, first on a per capita basis, and then, by the end of the decade, in absolute terms as well. Moscow's central planners found the region an inhospitable place for new plants proposed by Central Asian leaders because of the remoteness of final markets and a combination of factors leading to high costs and a low rate of return. Central Asian leaders argued for expansion of light industry projects in the region to soak up surplus labor, but Moscow continued to ship 95 percent of cotton and silk fiber to plants in the European USSR and to concentrate on large-scale energy projects in the region. Republic leaders also fought unsuccessfully for increased training of local workers for the area's coal and natural gas industry, which is now manned largely by temporary workers flown in from the Caucasus and the Russian Republic.

Under the circumstances, living standards are likely to continue to fall. Recently the chairman of the Soviet Labor Committee admitted that there are now probably over 2 million unemployed in Central Asia with a million unemployed in the Uzbek countryside alone. According to an official Soviet indicator, Central Asia has the highest proportion of poverty-income

families in the USSR, ranging from 16 percent in Kazakhstan to 42 percent in Uzbekistan and to 59 percent in Tajikistan (as compared with about 6.3 percent in the Russian Republic). Central Asia is generally far below the average in nearly every Soviet welfare indicator from food consumption to housing supply. Nevertheless, the substantial survival of a traditional way of life in rural areas and a few other mitigating elements of Central Asian life—such as the relatively large supply of private housing suitable for large families—make people reluctant to leave this overpopulated region for better employment and consumption prospects elsewhere.

Geography and Demography

Economic and ethnic problems in the region are most intense in its southern sector—roughly, south of an east-west line drawn from the northern tip of the Aral Sea to Lake Balkhash—where Muslims predominate. The irrigated oases and large cities of this area, islands in the region's vast deserts, are among the most densely populated areas in the world. With their growing unemployment, religious militancy, and explosive mixtures of nationalities, many of these areas, such as the Fergana Valley, are tinderboxes of unrest.

Above the line, in north Kazakhstan, Europeans form a majority. Across a huge band of territory, large mining and energy production complexes with mixed populations are interspersed in the broad steppes, which are sparsely inhabited by pastoral Kazakhs. Farther north, in the "Virgin Lands" area, European farmers grow grain on the cold, dry plains.

The region's capital cities are the centers of republic politics and agitation against the existing order but also, paradoxically, the strongholds of Russian influence. Here popular movements have sprung up among the native intellectual leadership working in the republic educational and research institutions and have gathered adherents among the students and low-level government employees of the capital. In disorders, their limited numerical strength is often reinforced by busloads of disaffected youths from the surrounding countryside. On the other hand, Europeans are at least 40 percent of the population of all the capitals and are a preponderant majority in Alma-Ata and Frunze. Continuing interethnic strife and militant demonstrations are likely in the future

Several unique geographic and demographic characteristics have set the stage for continuing unrest in the region:

- *Dominance of native republic nationalities.* In a reversal of demographic patterns prior to World War II, native Muslim nationalities now predominate in their "titular" republics. Increasing their population at an average annual rate of 2.9 percent and also migrating into their respective titular republics from the surrounding area, the native nationalities are becoming a larger share of the population in those republics and an expanding political force within them. The Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Turkmens have become two-thirds of their republic populations or more; the Kirghiz and Kazakhs have a widening plurality in their more evenly divided republics.

- *Mixed native populations.* Over 4.5 million members of the native nationalities live as minorities outside their "home" republic. Most of these live in several zones in which the population is highly mixed and which extend across republic lines (see figure 3). However, no native titular nationality is a majority in an oblast outside its "home" republic (as the Armenians are in Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh Oblast). With the overall rise in tensions in the region, conflicts between native nationalities have grown from easily defused border skirmishes over water and grazing rights to the full-scale communal riots between Uzbeks and Kirghiz that exploded in June. While more such disorders are possible in the future, there is no disputed territorial claim with deep emotional roots likely to move two peoples and their republic governments to an irreconcilable conflict.

- *The European presence.* The 12.2 million Europeans—9.5 million of whom are Russians—are a quarter of the region's population. About 70 percent of these live as a majority in northern Kazakhstan; the other 3.6 million live among the Muslim majority of the south. There was a net migration of 1.6 million Europeans from the region in the 1980s, and the rate of population growth for those remaining is very slow (0.5 percent per year). Nevertheless,

Figure 3
Hotbeds of Unrest in Soviet Central Asia

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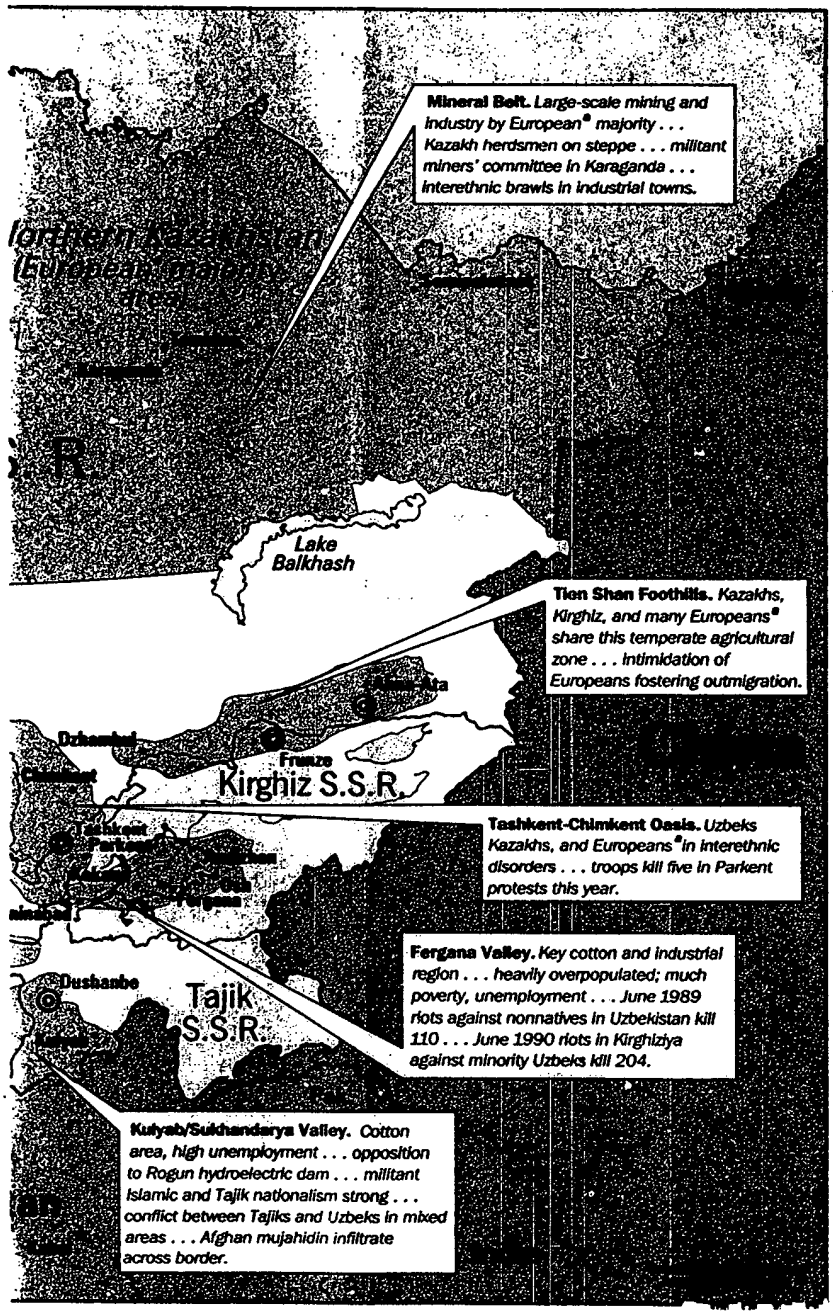

Capital City Hotspots

- **Tashkent, Uzbek SSR.** *Regional center for industry, religious, military, and Uzbek cultural institutions . . . frequent disorders in 1989 . . . city population: 40 percent Uzbek, 40 percent Russian.*
- **Dushanbe, Tajik SSR.** *Major riots in February 1990 with 22 killed . . . strongest organization of militant Muslims . . .city population: 40 percent Russian, 25 percent Tajik, but many Europeans* departing after riots.*
- **Alma-Ata, Kazakh SSR.** *Major riot in 1986, first of this era . . . quiet since . . . Kazakhs less than 20 percent of city population.*
- **Frunze, Kirghiz SSR.** *Quiet until demonstrations in June 1990 . . . Kirghiz less than 15 percent of city population.*
- **Ashkhabad, Turkmen SSR.** *Turkmen youth: riot in 1989 . . . political activity sputtering . . . city population: 40 percent Turkmen, 40 percent Russian.*

* European includes Russian, Ukrainian Belorussian, German, and European Jewish nationalities.

Table 1
Central Asia: Ethnic Composition, 1989

	Total Population	Titular Nationality in Republic *(percent)*	Other Native Nationalities *(percent)*	Russians *(percent)*	Other European Nationalities *(percent)*	Nonnative Muslim Nationalities *(percent)*	Other Minor Nationalities *(percent)*
Central Asia	49,130,730	58.2	10.5	19.4	5.5	3.9	2.5
Kazakh SSR	16,463,115	39.7	2.3	37.8	12.5	4.2	3.5
Uzbek SSR	19,808,077	71.3	12.4	8.3	1.5	4.4	2.1
Tajik SSR	5,089,593	62.2	25.4	7.6	1.8	1.8	1.2
Kirghiz SSR	4,257,755	52.3	14.6	21.5	5.3	3.5	2.8
Turkmen SSR	3,512,190	71.9	11.7	9.5	1.5	2.2	3.2

Notes: ***Titular native nationality***: The population of the Central Asian nationality for which the republic is named who are living within their "home" republic (for example, the Uzbeks in Uzbek SSR but not the Uzbeks in Kazakh SSR). Of the "titular" Central Asian nationalities, 75 to 92 percent reside in their "home" republic.
Other native nationalities: The Central Asian "titular" nationalities residing as minorities outside their home republics, plus the Karakalpakians, a large native nationality without a republic.
Other European nationalities: Includes Ukrainians, Belorussians, Germans, and European Jews (not Central Asian native Jews). It does not include minor European nationalists such as Poles, Latvians, and so forth.
Nonnative Muslim nationalities: Includes Crimean Tatars, Volga Tatars, Bashkirs, Meskhetian Turks, Azerbaijanis, and Uighurs. Data does not include minor nonnative Muslims.
Other minor nationalities: All other miscellaneous small nationalities including natives, Caucasians, and Europeans—both Muslim and non-Muslim.

Source: 1989 census, USSR State Committee for Statistics, Moscow, 1989.

should the Europeans be forced into precipitate flight, it would add to the major housing problems in the Russian Republic and perhaps create sentiment in the core of the USSR for a crackdown in Central Asia.

- *Nonnative Muslim populations.* A small minority of nonnative Muslim peoples (2.0 million), many of whom came as deportees in World War II, have remained in the region. They have not assimilated with the Central Asian native Muslims and are now subject to physical attack for their higher standard of living and their purported collaboration with the ruling Russians. A third of the 177,000 Meskhetian Turks have fled the region as refugees since the riots in the Fergana Valley last summer. In 1989 there were still over 200,000 Crimean Tatars in the region, but—as conditions worsen—as many as 25,000 per year are returning to the Crimea, creating increased tension in that area of the Ukraine.
- *Youthful populations.* The rapidly growing native populations have large proportions (over 20 percent) of young adults, whose needs for housing, jobs, and educational opportunities stress weak government capabilities and who provide a large pool of recruits for political agitators.[1]

[1] Past CIA research indicates that, when the proportion of the population in the 15- to 24-year-old group rises above 20 percent of the total, social unrest often increases sharply, partly because of intensified competition for available education, jobs, and land, and partly because of higher levels of emotional volatility among young adults.

Table 2
Central Asia: Ethnic Composition of Republic Capitals

	1989 Total Population (*millions*)	1970 Percent of Population	
		Titular Nationalities	Russians
Total republic capitals	4.8		
Alma-Ata, Kazakh SSR	1.1	12	70
Tashkent, Uzbek SSR	2.1	37	41
Dushanbe, Tajik SSR	0.6	26	42
Frunze, Kirghiz SSR	0.6	12	66
Ashkhabad, Turkmen SSR	0.4	38	43

Note: The percent of population by nationalities is from the 1970 USSR census, the most recent data available.

Table 3
Central Asia: Change in Republic Ethnic Composition

Percent

	Titular Nationality		Russian	
	1989	Change 1979-89	1989	Change 1979-89
Central Asia	58.2	4.2	19.4	−3.7
Kazakh SSR	39.7	3.7	37.8	−3.0
Uzbek SSR	71.3	2.6	8.3	−2.5
Tajik SSR	62.2	3.4	7.6	−2.8
Kirghiz SSR	52.3	4.4	21.5	−4.4
Turkmen SSR	71.9	3.5	9.5	−3.1

Ethnic and Other Factors

Nativism. Interethnic violence is endemic in the region, a product of the frustrations of unemployed and underemployed youths. Many feel their personal problems could be solved if Russians, Germans, Armenians, and other Caucasians as well as Tatars, Meskhetians, and other nonnative Muslims were driven from the region. Many of the violent events of 1989 were planned attacks by the native Central Asian nationalities against these nonnative residents. The raw xenophobia of the rioters, according to Soviet press and [redacted] is often exploited by political, religious, and criminal forces for their own purposes.

Antiregime Violence. In the major riots, mobs have increasingly turned on police and party facilities and personnel, burning a number of headquarters buildings and attempting to seize arms from personnel and storage areas. For their part, security forces have shown an increasing inclination to fire on rioters, increasing total casualties and perhaps popular resentment.

Settler Backlash. Russians and other nonnative settlers have become increasingly apprehensive in the past two years over their declining standard of living and physical security. In addition, they now are discriminated against in hiring and education and eventually will face the need to master the native language as a result of the new language laws. Outmigration is on the rise, and those who remain are becoming a more direct force both as national and local political activists and as vigilante self-defense forces.

Islamic Militancy. Native Central Asians of all classes identify themselves culturally as Muslims—overwhelmingly Sunni with only a small minority of Shiites. Rural life continues to be organized around Islamic belief and rituals, and the native elite is rediscovering its interest in Islam. Clandestine Sufi religious brotherhoods, which were active during the Basmachi revolt of the 1920s and continue to exist today, provide potential precedents for an antiregime network. Recent Islam-oriented demonstrations testify to the successful proselytizing of Wahabbite and other militant sects, particularly in Tajikistan but also in Uzbekistan and Turkmeniya. In the stressful and unstable environment prevailing in Central Asia, charismatic Islamic leaders have begun to emerge and find a following. Periodic demonstrations in the city of Tashkent and in Turkmeniya have demanded the return to the shariat or Koranic law, including the cloistering of women and the supremacy of religious over secular law.

Table 4
Central Asia and the USSR: Population Increase and Outmigration, 1979-89

	Population Census (*millions*)		Increase 1979-89 (*percent*)	Natural Increase		Outmigration From Republic [a]	
	January 1979	January 1989		Population (*millions*)	Share of USSR (*percent*)	Population (*thousands*)	Percent of 1979
USSR	262.4	286.7	9	24.4	100.0	NA	
Central Asia	40.2	49.4	23	10.9	44.4	1,633	4.1
Kazakh SSR	14.7	16.5	13	2.6	10.8	784	5.3
Uzbek SSR	15.4	19.9	29	5.0	20.5	507	3.3
Tajik SSR	3.8	5.1	34	1.4	5.8	102	2.7
Kirghiz SSR	3.5	4.3	22	0.9	3.8	156	4.4
Turkmen SSR	2.8	3.5	28	0.9	3.5	84	3.0

[a] Net migration is the difference between people permanently entering and leaving the republic. It is determined by calculating the natural increase of the population on the basis of its ethnic composition and comparing this with the actual population census. Central Asia shows both a rapid population growth and a substantial outmigration from the region.

Source: Adapted from *Radio Liberty Report*, 10 November 1989, which was based on data from the Lithuanian publication *Atgimimas*, No. 37/50, 20-27 October 1989. Census totals used here are slightly different from those in table 1, probably reflecting preliminary Soviet census reports.

Nationalism. To date, nationalists in the region have focused on limited objectives, such as expanded use of the titular nationality language, rather than radical autonomy or secession proposals. In the future, the appeal of autonomy will continue to grow, but the political elites of Central Asia will probably not be quick to embrace secession. They are anxious to be free of Moscow's supervision, but they also want the center's support for their political survival and help for the region's severe problems. Finally, most probably fear the religious extremism and violence that would be associated with a separatist movement.

Pan-Turkism: Regional Unity Against Moscow. Traditionally, Central Asians regarded themselves as primarily "Muslims," united by Islam, and to some degree as "Turks" or "Turkestani"; the Czars and the early Bolsheviks ruled the area as a more or less unified entity called Turkestan. In 1924 the Soviets launched a policy of "divide and rule" by dividing the region into ethnically based republics, and for over 50 years efforts at regional cooperation or leadership were repressed as "Pan-Turkism." During that time, the republics as political units and the current boundaries between them took on strong legitimacy, but the idea of Central Asian unity remains attractive to intellectuals nostalgic for the greatness of the old Central Asian empires and aware of the potential strength of a unified front to resist Moscow. Regional unity showed strong signs of revival in June 1990, when a series of cooperative agreements were signed among the republics and an interrepublic secretariat was established in Alma-Ata.

Interrepublic, Native-Versus-Native Conflicts. The lethal battle between ethnic Uzbeks and Kirghiz at Osh in June opened what will probably be a prolonged period of interethnic conflict in the troubled Fergana Valley. While republic officials have traditionally cooperated to defuse conflicts between their respective nationalities, the intensity and size of these riots temporarily overwhelmed them and security forces.

Figure 4. Popular demands have forced the Kirghiz regime to grant sites for private house building around republic cities, but rioting exploded at Osh when land farmed by the Uzbek minority was granted to Kirghiz.

Mobs of Uzbeks and the nationalist movement Birlik put intense pressure on Uzbekistan officials to intervene on behalf of the Uzbek minority and raised an inflammatory call for the formation of an Uzbek autonomous region in Kirghiziya. Demonstrations in the Kirghiz capital of Frunze called for the resignation of the republic leadership. While general cooperation between the republics was maintained until the crisis cooled, the seeds of future interrepublic conflict may have been planted by the Uzbek Premier's criticism of Kirghiz officials and the efforts of nationalist groups on both sides to focus local passions on republic officials. Since the underlying social conflicts remain, it will be difficult to avoid further trouble.

There is also potential for conflict in a number of valleys where Tajiks and Uzbeks are ancient neighbors. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan each have approximately 1 million conationals living inside the other's republic boundaries. Tajik nationalists have claimed—as recently as the February Dushanbe disorders—that the Samarkand area is rightfully part of Tajikistan because of the former dominance of Tajik culture and a purported—but unproven—Tajik majority there. Conversely, Uzbeks make up as much as 30 percent of the population in some oblasts of Tajikistan. In 1987, minority protests over discrimination flared in both republics but were defused by concessions of the republic governments.

In the long run, Uzbek nationalism may be the most serious threat to interrepublic peace. Uzbeks are by far the largest Central Asian nationality, and 2.4 million Uzbeks live as minorities in other republics. Nationalists are pressing the Uzbekistan regime to become a greater advocate for Uzbeks outside the republic. Should regional turmoil intensify or independence seem near, Uzbekistan might be drawn into aggressive expansion that would gather in the large Uzbek minorities just beyond its borders and perhaps revive pretentions to the inheritance of the past empires centered on its territory

External Political Forces. Although limited until recently by political and cultural factors, the catalyzing effect of outside influences on the region (from Turkey, Afghanistan, Iran, and Azerbaijan) is likely to grow. Evidence of outside influence emerged clearly in last February's riots in Dushanbe. Afghan Tajik agents were reported by the republic KGB [redacted] to have been providing organizational support to the Muslim and nationalist organizations in the period before the disturbances but apparently were not directly involved in organizing the protests and the subsequent coup attempt. Agitators from Azerbaijan reportedly helped raise the emotional pitch of the crowds by spreading rumors that Armenian refugees were coming to take their housing. (See appendix B.)

Key Actors and Their Strategies

As Gorbachev's reforms continue to open up and decentralize the Soviet system, the politics of Central Asia and its relationship with Moscow are changing dramatically. Increasingly, Moscow is disengaging from Central Asia: while ready to intervene against gross breaches of the peace, it is essentially relying on the republic regimes to implement economic and political reform, with limited help from the center. The republic regimes are simultaneously attempting to block emerging nationalist and Islamic activist movements and reassure Russian settlers even as they move to establish their own legitimacy by asserting their republic autonomy against Moscow. The key actors—Moscow, the republic regimes, and the grassroots movements—are each attempting to co-opt or contain the region's powerful but inchoate political forces without gradually surrendering to them in the process.

Moscow

Moscow has attempted to defuse potential tensions between Central Asia and the center with modest political compromises, such as raising the status of native languages vis-a-vis Russian, loosening controls on Islam, and lowering requirements for cotton production. The number of officials dispatched directly from Moscow to occupy strategic "overseer" positions in the republic hierarchies has also been significantly reduced.[2] In addition, Moscow reversed its past policy of discouraging regional cooperation in Central Asia—out of fear of Pan-Turkism—and in 1988 approved the joint establishment of a regional planning commission by the five republics.

Most important, perhaps, Gorbachev's reforms have launched changes that have presented the republic regimes with new challenges and opportunities for leadership and reduced Moscow's dominance and involvement in the region. The political reforms have required the republic parties to open debate and risk reasonably open elections. While the republic party machines won handily in all republics, the elections did push the republic leaderships toward portions of the reformist agenda and brought some new forces into the political process. However, Moscow and the republics have left unaddressed the fundamental problems of the region, particularly how to deal with its looming economic crisis, and Moscow has been reducing its absolute level of financial investment in recent years. While this essentially passive strategy limits Moscow's costs and involvement at a time of preoccupation with national reform, it risks greater unrest in the long run if these republic regimes do not deal with the economic challenge, continue to rule in an authoritarian manner, and fail to bring the new political forces into the peaceful mainstream of politics.

Moscow's resources for militarily controlling events in Central Asia are somewhat limited by the region's geographic isolation, the relatively few suitable forces available there, and the demands of trouble spots elsewhere, particularly in the Caucasus. Although it has many forces nationwide that can be deployed to the region by air and, less swiftly, by train, it has limited local capability for quick response and would find it difficult to deal simultaneously with a major disorder elsewhere in the USSR and one or more in Central Asia.

[2] For example, last year Moscow permitted the key position of party "second secretary" to be filled by local officials—still all ethnic Russians—who were not fresh from Moscow but had had substantial local careers in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kirghiziya, and Tajikistan.

Figure 5
Forces in Soviet Central Asia Available To Control Unrest

Figure 6. Interior Ministry troops and police confront Dushanbe demonstrators with riot gear and armored personnel carriers.

Moscow's preferred means for dealing with unrest is to use Interior Ministry (MVD) Internal Troops, which are better trained and equipped for this task than regular ground forces units. Most commonly deployed against civil disturbances are the MVD elite operational and special police units, which are predominately Slavic and consequently more reliable than the MVD local police, which have frequently refused to act against their own ethnic group. We have identified only five MVD special police units in Central Asia—about 300 men each—and one new special police detachment (of similar size) established in Alma-Ata. In each serious disorder to date, Moscow has been forced to fly in Internal Troops from outside the region.

Moreover, when there are crises elsewhere in the USSR—such as during the Dushanbe and Osh riots this year—Moscow must selectively use other forces because there are insufficient numbers of Internal Troops available. Airborne units are Moscow's second choice for controlling unrest because of their mobility and higher level of discipline. Airborne forces from Fergana as well as elements of two other airborne divisions flown in from the western USSR were used to help regain control in Osh. Moscow has also called upon units of the KGB Border Troops to handle unrest in Central Asia, but the number of units available for these duties is limited.

The Soviets generally try to avoid relying on regional motorized rifle or tank forces to quell unrest, although these forces did play minor roles in the Osh crisis. Most of such units are manned at less than 50 percent of authorized strength and require a callup of reservists to be usable. A callup, moreover, presents the dilemma of either using Central Asians, who may be unreliable, or bringing in reservists from outside the region, who may be slow to arrive.

Republic Regimes

The republic regimes are closely identified in the eyes of the populace with Moscow, but in recent months—particularly in the key republics of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan—the leadership and newly elected parliaments have shown a new independence of action and

assertiveness toward Moscow. In general, the Central Asian regimes are attempting to preempt the claim of emerging popular movements to leadership on nationalist and reform issues while attempting to keep intact the police controls and party machines that have maintained them in power in the past.

The top party and government leadership in these republics comprises native politicians, some local Russians, and officials dispatched from Moscow to man key control positions. Heavy industry ministries and major enterprises report directly to Moscow ministries and are largely staffed by technically trained Russian residents. While outsiders have made most of the key decisions, preferential policies begun in the Brezhnev years have increasingly put large numbers of educated natives into positions of real power, especially in light industry, services, and local government. New economic autonomy legislation is allowing republic regimes to challenge central authorities for greater decisionmaking power, and newly elected legislatures have proved considerably more assertive than their rubberstamp predecessors.

Local party organs, usually organized along traditional clan lines, have proved to be successful "machines" in controlling patronage and elective politics. They are accused by the Soviet media of behaving like mafia for engaging in criminal activities and opposing reform. At the worst, some local clans are accused of fomenting ethnic violence as a tactic against higher authorities.

With the emergence of grassroots political rivals, these party regimes have begun to fight for their lives with all the tools inherent in their domination of local institutions. For example, when the Birlik popular front organization defied the authorities to mobilize several large demonstrations in Tashkent in late 1989, the Uzbekistan regime passed a tough law punishing unauthorized assembly, and it recently added another law establishing administrative detention for distributing ethnic hate material. Kazakhstan has followed with similar laws. Activists from Kirghiziya complained [redacted] of regime efforts to impede political organization in that republic, and Uzbek movement groups complain they have been penetrated by provocateurs from the regime's security organs who have disrupted their strategy and cohesion.

The regimes demonstrated their prowess as political machines in the elections to the national congress last year and in the recent republic and local elections. They got obedient voters to the polls at the highest rates in the Union—generally over 90 percent—although these turnouts were partly due to the practice of allowing heads of households to vote for their family members. The Central Asian regimes also elected the highest percentage of party officials—most of whom ran unopposed—and over 90 percent of members elected to the new republic supreme soviets are party members. Nevertheless, about a third of all supreme soviet races had to be decided by runoffs, and the victorious opposition candidates or independent party members—even if small in number—have added a leaven of independent challenge to the formerly pro forma legislative process.

In national politics, the Central Asian regimes formerly could be counted on to support Moscow out of subservience to their central party sponsors and as a trade-off for economic benefits. The Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan parties have passed resolutions criticizing the Lithuanians for establishing separate Communist parties and declarations calling for national unity. In recent months, however, the Central Asians have also begun to challenge Moscow in key areas of national concern. For example, Kazakhstan is attempting to bar the national government from further nuclear testing at Semipalatinsk. The Uzbek, Turkmen, and Tajik supreme soviets have adopted a "declaration of sovereignty" declaring the precedence of republic laws over those of the USSR. The Uzbeks and Turkmens have sucessfully reduced their cotton quotas, and the Uzbeks plan to withhold a third of the 1990 crop for independent sale on the world market.

Grassroots Movements

Nationalists and Islamic Activists. Nationalist and Islamic activist groups are emerging but are not yet strong enough to shape Central Asian politics. The successful demonstrations of 1989 for language, ecological, and religious reform will be difficult to repeat because of moves by local regimes to impose tighter controls on mass political expression and co-optation of many issues by the republic parties. Although they

elected a few important individuals, the independent popular movements captured only a small share of the seats in recent elections—probably because of some combination of party manipulation and their own inexperience. Currently most have barely emerged as organizations and lack compelling issues. They will probably need a long period of development before they will be able to challenge the republic regimes electorally. Meanwhile, the region's social tensions and problems are likely to mount—raising the likelihood of violent disorders, which often lack a clear political focus.

Only Birlik, the Uzbek popular front, has achieved republic-wide representation and can claim hundreds of thousands of supporters. By late last year, however, it had become seriously divided over tactics, and later its moderate wing broke off to form the ERK movement to seek reform by more "constitutional" means. In Kazakhstan informal group activity has been strong, but most of it has centered on narrow ecology and cultural issues or remained on a local scale.

Religious groups are likely to grow in importance, although so far they have, for the most part, been effectively quashed or co-opted by republic regimes. For example, Islam and Democracy, a moderate Islamic reform movement, has been inactive since precipitating the ouster of the former mufti of Central Asia; the new mufti was elected to the new USSR Congress of People's Deputies and seems to have become the principal political voice for moderate Muslims. The powerful potential of militant Islamic forces was dramatically demonstrated in the Dushanbe riots, which were fomented by a coalition of militant Muslims and nationalist groups. [redacted] the Tajik Rastokhez movement, under investigation for its role in the riots, elected 20 legislators in the elections that followed them.

Russian and Nonnative Movements. The 12 million ethnic Europeans and 4 million Muslims from outside the region are now organizing in hopes of forcing Moscow and local regimes to pay more attention to settler welfare. Russians and other Europeans have formed "international movements" in republic capitals modeled on the "intermovements" in the Baltic republics and Moldavia, and chapters of the extremist Russian nationalist organization Pamyat have been rumored in northern Kazakhstan and Tashkent. However, the most effective groups for settler rights may be emerging in ostensibly multiethnic city organizations for neighborhood security or assertion of labor rights (such as the powerful Karaganda miners committee organized during last summer's coal strike in Kazakhstan)

Although these groups are not narrowly nationalistic at present, their potential for adopting militant backlash tactics such as strikes, blockades, and vigilante activity if nativist pressure increases is very high. As the predominant labor force on the railroads and in heavy industry, Russians could try to paralyze economic activity with strikes as they have already done successfully in Moldavia and have tried to do in the Baltic republics. In a situation of extreme disorder, or if independence were declared in republics that lack a preponderant native Muslim majority, such as Kirghiziya and Kazakhstan, European settlers might fight secession from the USSR or, where they are a majority, attempt to secede from the republics themselves. Such actions might in turn provoke mass retaliations and flights of refugees similar to those in Azerbaijan and Armenia

Outlook and Alternative Scenarios

Most Likely Scenario: Major Problems but a Slowly Evolving Political Challenge

The most likely near-term future for Central Asia is one fraught with large-scale interethnic violence but not mass secessionist movements. This judgment is based on the expectation that Moscow will be unable to undertake large-scale projects to address unemployment, health, and ecological problems fuelling the unrest. Interethnic violence probably will run the gamut of riots between outsiders and natives, aggressive mass agitation in the heavily populated oases and republic capital cities, and clashes between native nationalities in the border regions. While the possibility of a separatist "coup" building on large-scale interethnic violence cannot be ruled out, more organized political challenges to Moscow—for example,

republic-wide revolts against the party orchestrated by grassroots political forces, or shifts by some local regimes to a separatist stance—are probably at least two to three years off. At the moment, separatist forces almost certainly would be crushed if they attempted a violent struggle for power.

Unrest probably will continue to be fed by high unemployment—a condition that is likely to persist through the nineties because of slow industrial expansion, the oversaturation of workers in agriculture, and large numbers of youths entering the labor force. Furthermore, while nationalists and Islamic activists will increase the public's awareness of current problems and raise expectations for governmental performance, they also are likely to resist measures to open safety valves such as encouraging native outmigration, birth control, and rapid change of traditional lifestyles.

Despite the scope of the problems, however, Moscow and the republic regimes have assets that can work in favor of stability, particularly the traditionalism of Central Asian political culture and the vested interest in the status quo of the Soviet-trained native elite. In addition, they could take some important short-term measures to enhance their position. Republic autonomy laws and the decline of central party authority are giving republic leaders a chance to claim legitimacy by asserting themselves against Moscow in such politically crucial areas as reducing cotton production. Moscow, for its part, could rekindle hope for benefits from membership in the USSR by implementing, for example, its pilot job-creation scheme in the riot-torn Fergana Valley and completing measures to improve regional irrigation. And—since the Central Asians will insist—Moscow might resume study of more dramatic solutions to the Aral Sea crisis, including the plan to divert northern waters. At the same time, Moscow might hold off gains by nationalists and Islamic militants through a limited opening of the political process and by expanding republic autonomy and maintaining a conciliatory approach to Islam. The new electoral and parliamentary processes—imperfect as they are—have provided a limited but significant infusion of new blood into official politics.

Major Upheaval and Secession

Although less likely, current sporadic disorders could accelerate to a major social upheaval in the next two to three years. The likelihood would be increased by a snowballing secessionist movement or a breakdown of order in the rest of the USSR. Locally, popular unrest could be intensified to a critical level by widespread food shortages, poor performance or brutality by the republic regimes, and a flood of the rural unemployed to the cities. Politically, more charismatic and effective leadership among the slowly emerging popular movements or the currently isolated Muslim militants could quickly multiply their effectiveness in mobilizing the many frustrated elements of Central Asian society

A collapse of the existing order would probably be signaled by simultaneous Fergana-type disturbances across the region or the emergence of a Basmachi-type insurgency force. It is likely Moscow's security forces will be stretched thin meeting crises elsewhere in the USSR and might be unable to mobilize the overwhelming force that would be needed to restore order should unrest break out in many localities simultaneously. With limited help from Moscow, some of the republic regimes could control the capital cities for some time but might lose control of the countryside to insurgent forces or their own local political clans acting as independent warlords

Moscow's response to a mass upheaval or to the threat of separatism would depend to a large degree on where the trouble emerged; many in the elite already see much of the region—particularly its southernmost areas—as an economic liability and political backwater. In areas such as northern Kazakhstan and along Turkmeniya's Caspian coast, Moscow would almost certainly defend the rights of the Russian populations, including their right to secede from a militantly nationalist native regime and remain a part of the USSR. In Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kirghiziya, however, Moscow could come to see the cost of protecting a large Russian presence and maintaining investments as unbearable. While it would certainly

support for a time any republic regime fighting radical Muslim or nationalist insurrection, if the loyalists appeared to be losing, Moscow could be expected to repatriate Russian settlers and abandon its investments. And, because there almost certainly is not a national political consensus in favor of the use of force to resist separatism in Central Asia, if one of these republics were to attempt to secede peacefully under Soviet law with its party regime in agreement, Moscow probably would resist only with economic and legal measures.

A Possible Happy Ending?

If political stability and economic growth were restored at the national level, Moscow could provide real incentives to remain with the union, particularly increased industrial investment. The Central Asians and Moscow would have to relocate a substantial portion of the unemployed rural population inside the region and beyond and, perhaps, mitigate the crisis of the Aral Sea basin with additional supplies of water. Moscow would very likely have to forgo a major part of current cotton production yet continue substantial economic subsidies. To a revived USSR, however, the peace and strategic control of the area would probably be worth the price.

Nevertheless, Moscow will not regain the direct control it held in the region through the mid-1980s, even if no republic actually secedes. The tightly centralized Communist Party no longer exists, and the republic regimes will have to seek legitimacy as representatives of native interests vis-a-vis Moscow. Native assertiveness and weak ecomomic opportunities will substantially reduce the European population in the region. Regional unity, even if limited, will further erode Moscow's influence. And Moscow will also have to share trade and influence with outside powers such as Iran and Turkey.

There is no conceivable scenario that will bring Central Asia prosperity or a high degree of stability given its ethnic divisions, burgeoning population, limited resources, and barriers to economic development. Even such solutions to its problems as industrialization and migration from the countryside are likely to generate their own measure of instability.

Appendix A

Establishment and Decline of the Old Order

Over a 200-year period, the Russian empire conquered large areas of Central Asia from the nomads of the steppes (present-day Kazakhstan and Turkmeniya) and the emirates of the southern oases (present-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan). The process of absorption was largely completed by the 1880s, but, from 1916 to the early 1930s, Central Asians made efforts to throw off Soviet control. A series of uprisings inspired by Islam and aimed at achieving independence culminated in the Basmachi insurrection, which at its peak controlled substantial territory. With all organized opposition stilled by the mid-1930s, the Soviets set up a rigid police-state system directed from Moscow but administered through a native leadership. Cotton growing in large-scale irrigated agriculture came to dominate the regional economy.

In the period through the 1970s, the native elite gained progressively more power at the republic level, and decades of economic development and political integration appeared to lock the Central Asian republics firmly into the Soviet system. On the other hand, the traditional Central Asian way of life continued more or less unchanged in the countryside, where two-thirds of the native population continued to reside.

In the 1980s, apparent stability began to break down. Soviet leaders after Brezhnev attacked the Central Asian regimes for their rampant corruption and general failure to produce results; an anticorruption campaign beginning in 1983 removed all the long-tenured party secretaries and two-thirds of the top leadership. In 1986 Moscow canceled the long-anticipated project to divert river water from Siberia to Central Asia, and—as stagnation in the national economy intensified—its annual investment in the region began to fall. By the mid-1980s, with Central Asia's economic growth slowing and population rapidly growing, Central Asia's long, slow rise in per capita income ended and unemployment began to rise.

The Alma-Ata riots in late 1986 marked the beginning of a new round of unrest in which demonstrations, interethnic conflict, and a number of major riots spread across Central Asia. Paradoxically, however, as Soviet troops have been repeatedly called upon to put down outbreaks of violence, Moscow has lowered its level of dominance over regional politics. In the late 1980s, the leadership of the republics stabilized around a new group of republic party secretaries that had Moscow's confidence and a degree of popular support. Moreover, nationally mandated reforms and elections opened the political process somewhat, and grassroots movements rose to challenge the party monopoly of power.

Appendix B

External Influences on Central Asian Unrest

Other Soviet Regions

The greatest outside influence on Central Asian events is likely to be the movements for change within the USSR itself. Baltic and Azeri popular fronts, by example and by direct technical assistance, have already played a major part in stimulating the rise of independent popular movements in the last two years. Azeri agitators reportedly had a major impact by helping to precipitate a major riot in Dushanbe and lesser disturbances in Frunze.

Afghanistan

Despite a higher overall level of modernization and a more secular outlook than prevails in Afghanistan, Soviet Uzbeks, Turkmens, and especially Tajiks have strong emotional ties to their ethnic brethren across the border, many of whom are descendants of refugees from the anti-Soviet revolt of the 1920s. In recent months, the Afghan Mujahidin commander Masood, an ethnic Tajik, called upon Muslims in the USSR to rise up in sympathy with Azeris and "reach for freedom." Masood's forces last year may have stepped up their organizing efforts among disaffected Soviet Tajiks, which had begun as early as 1979. According to [redacted] these efforts bore fruit during the February riots in Dushanbe when Afghan-influenced groups emerged in the leadership that planned the disorders. Some Mujahidin consider action within the USSR as a means to end Moscow's support for the Kabul regime and to eventually attack the regime within the USSR. There is a particularly receptive audience in Tajikistan—the poorest and most fervently Muslim republic.

Iran

Iranian influence—lacking an organizational base in the USSR—is far less developed than that of the Afghan rebels. Radiobroadcasting into Turkmeniya by the large Turkmen minority in Iran has been the Iranians most successful measure to build influence so far. But potenially Iran could have a still greater impact among the Soviet Tajiks who are culturally and ethnically Iranian. In coming years, more powerful radio transmitters and the opening of the USSR, particularly the relaxation of border controls and the multiparty system, are likely to provide greater openings for Iranian influence to be felt.

Turkey

Although a minor factor to date, Turkey may also emerge as a major influence in the next few years. Many of the Central Asian elite share a general feeling of being part of the Turkish world, and Turkey—as a secular state with a predominately Sunni Muslim population—may have much to offer culturally and as a source of trade and investment in the region. Turkey is expanding its internal contacts within the USSR, and [redacted] the Turkish business community gave money and political support to the Azeri cause during Moscow's military action. Turkey's pro-Western, capitalist orientation and moderate Islamic tendencies may play a constructive role as a counterweight to Muslim extremist influences from Iran and Afghanistan