

Geography in the News™

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TERRORISM IN UZBEKISTAN

Recent terrorist bombings in Uzbekistan signal a troubling expansion of al Qaeda-related activities. Four days of explosions and suicide bombings in late March occurred near the ancient Silk Road city of Bukhara. This was not a surprise to terrorist watchers, who have documented the global expansion of al Qaeda activities.

Uzbekistan (ooz-BECK-eh-STAN) is very susceptible to terrorist activities for many reasons. Its geographic proximity to Afghanistan and Pakistan leaves it particularly vulnerable to Taliban and al Qaeda fighters who are fleeing the tightening noose of Pakistani and U.S. military search operations. Uzbekistan is also a key partner in the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, allowing the United States to use an old Soviet-built air base near the Afghan border. But in addition to its regional geography, Uzbekistan's history and culture also play roles in its vulnerability.

Uzbekistan has a long and narrow, protracted shape. It shares relatively porous and disputed borders with Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Its irregular border extends more than 3,863 miles (6,221 km.)

through rugged mountains and plains in Central Asia. Because it is in the rainshadow of some of Central Asia's highest mountains, the country's harsh continental climates range from

cold semi-arid mountain valleys in the south to dry steppe plains in the north.

With an area of 172,700 square miles (277,874 sq. km.) and a population of 26 million, Uzbekistan's population density is not exceptionally high. More than two-thirds of the population lives in the mountain valleys and piedmont in the southern half of the country. Eighty percent of the population is Uzbek, six percent is Russian, five percent is Tajik and the remainder is a smattering of regional cultures. Most Uzbeks and Tajiks are Sunni Muslims, while most Russians are of the Eastern Orthodox faith.

The Russian population is a hold-over from the Soviet days when ethnic Russians were sent to territories to serve in administrative and military roles in a process called russification. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Uzbekistan gained its independence. Perhaps half of the Russian population left, but the remainder played a major role in the country's government after independence. The government currently is dominated by former Communists.

Islam Karimov, born in

viet. But he has since been elected by popular Uzbek vote, the last time in 2003 with 92 percent of the ballots.

Many mosques have been restored or rebuilt since independence, and religious literature has proliferated. Karimov's government, however, has been very heavy handed in handling dissidents and political opposition, making it clear that mixing religion and politics will not be tolerated. Conservative Islamic elements particularly have been radicalized by Karimov's brutality. The U.S. State Department recently declared, "Uzbekistan is an authoritarian state with limited civil rights." The country is accused of willful torture and abuse of political prisoners.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a sometimes violent political organization, has operated in the shadows in the past few years. Karimov's government often has cracked down on IMU members and kept its activities under control until recently.

The alliance between Uzbekistan's government and the United States to fight terrorism seems to have rejuvenated the IMU and its

loosely related arms. There is some indication that the organization has been operative in the lawless border region of Pakistan and Afghanistan over the past year. The recent pressure of American and Pakistani military in those sanctuaries may have strengthened IMU in Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan's government officials believe that the recent bombings and other terrorist acts that killed more than 40 in Bukhara and Tashkent are somehow related to this organization. The explosion of a terrorist bomb-making site and the use of suicide bombers resemble the *modi operandi* of al Qaeda-trained terrorists.

And that is Geography in the News™. April 23, 2004. #725.

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Unrest Around Uzbekistan



Uzbekistan of both Uzbek and Russian ancestry, has served as Uzbekistan's president since before independence, having been originally elected president by the Supreme So-